THERE'S SOMETHING MAGICAL ABOUT THIS PLACE . . .

WILSON RESIDENCE

LOCATION: NEAHKAHNIE, OREGON **ARCHITECT:** TOM BENDER

THE NEW ASIAN HOME
KENDRA LANGETEIG
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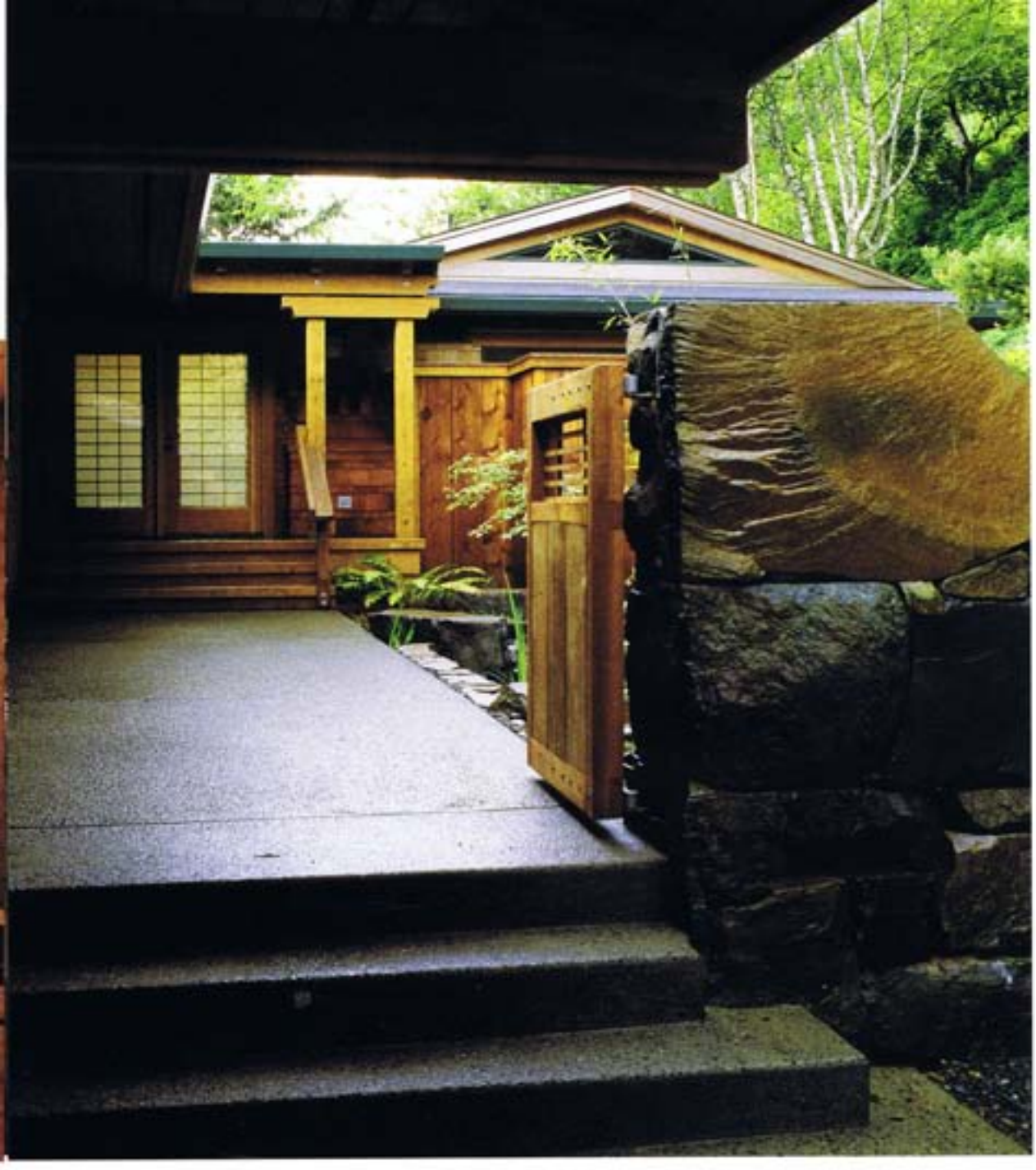
ABOVE: The low-key décor of the living room contributes to the pervasive calmness of the home.

ABOVE RIGHT: The water garden sets the initial mood of tranquility for the home.

As a peaceful retreat from their busy lives in Portland, Oregon, Dr. Reed and Christina Wilson purchased an ocean-front home with stunning views of the Pacific Ocean on the side of Neahkahnie Mountain. Perfect as it sounds, the Wilsons were uncomfortable in the home. "The footprint didn't feel right," explains Tina. Aware of neighbor Tom Bender's special expertise in handling design problems, the Wilsons requested a consultation. The Reeds were delighted when Bender agreed to take on their home renovation project. "Tom doesn't just build houses," says Tina. "He's very selective and looks for opportunities to build a unique house in a sacred place." In fact, Tom Bender's statement on his Web site encourages prospective clients whose project does *not* have "unusual possibilities" to look elsewhere.

After a careful analysis of the Wilson home, Tom reported the bad news: the structure was deteriorated to the extent that, sadly, demolition was more cost-effective than needed renovation. The good news was the opportunity to take more powerful advantage of the site to connect



LEFT: The basalt rocks at the gate are the same kind of rock found in the crashing surf below the house.

FACING ABOVE: A madrone driftwood log from the San Juan Islands supports the skylight at the home's entrance.

FACING BELOW: *Prayer flags* is a sculpture by Reed Wilson.

FACING FAR RIGHT: Natural materials vitally connect the home with its environment.

with the mountain, the ocean, and the rhythms of nature. It would seem that a house located in such a beautiful natural setting would provide its owners infinite well-being. However, as Bender points out, "Having a beautiful site to start with does not guarantee positive benefits." In this case the original house didn't work well functionally or beneficially to connect with the spectacular energy of the site.

Once the house was deconstructed and recycled (cedar siding and cabinets were donated to the Fire Mountain School), and only the leveled lot remained, the Wilsons "fell in love" with the property. Reed Wilson describes the dramatic location: "It's a steep property, a sixty-degree angle up the mountain and 250 feet down toward the ocean, with Oswald West State Park to the north, and ocean to the west and south." For the redesign of their home, the Wilsons envisioned a one-story house "laid on the property," in contrast to the original two-story footprint.

The simple L-shaped cedar-shingled structure Bender designed for his clients settles comfortably and securely into the natural setting. "It's amazing how the house fits perfectly on the lot," says Tina. To create a stronger connection to the waves crashing on the rocks below, Bender relocated the front deck they had anticipated in the design. "The most powerful view is downward to the rocks, and a deck would have blocked connection with that energy," explains Bender. The home enjoys

unobstructed ocean views through seventeen windows, ten of which are floor-to-ceiling height. So much visual exposure and open structure in a different plan might create a sense of vulnerability. However, Tina claims that even with hundred-mile-an-hour winds, the house has a "very safe feeling." Bender explains the paradox: "Designing for views is design based on 'aesthetics,' a surface-based approach resulting from a materialistic culture. A deeper approach, based on meaning and connection to energy, gives a deep reconnection with the rest of creation, and nurtures us with the energetic linkages."

More than a snug sanctuary with enchanting views, the retirement home Bender designed for the Wilsons is "total magic," according to Reed Wilson. "As a neurologist, I don't believe too much in the non-scientific," explains Reed from his Portland home. "But there's something magical about this house, something immeasurable about it." That "something" would appear to be *qi* energy at work in a marvelous, health-enhancing way. "Everyone is in awe who visits this house," Reed continues. "It's not palatial, it's a nice house in a nice location—part of the magic, of course, is in the location, but it's more than that. I can't put my finger on it. I've been there hundreds of times . . . never had a bad time, never a bad memory. . . . Tom is a magician." A near-death survivor who visited the Wilson home confirmed that mystical aura Reed describes.

"She could see the energy," says Bender. "It made her cry."

Asked to explain how he brings the magic of feng shui into his design practice, Bender comments, "There are many levels of working with energy. Clarity and strength of intention are primary. Work with your intuitive qi-based consciousness, not just your rational mind. Work with an open heart, with a sense of awe toward the complexly simple beauty that creation has manifested in each particular place." Above all, Bender advises to be "in tune with the particular interweavings of life on the site."

Bender finds the intense natural power at the Wilson property and surrounding Neahkahnie area (where his own home is also located) overpowering at times. With thirty-foot waves continually beating on the rock cliffs of the mountain during a storm, whole houses vibrate, and the mountain "resonates like a bell." To ground the Wilson home in the midst of this almost supernatural power, Bender carefully oriented the structure: "The quiet peaceful garden side with yin energy gives relief and balance to the male [yang] energy of the ocean to the west and south."

Natural materials vitally connect the home with its environment. Rock from the region is used for the fireplace, entrance gate, and retaining walls in the garden. The basalt rocks at the gate are the kind of rocks

LEFT: The dining room flows from the main living space and expands to an open deck for outdoor entertainment.

RIGHT: The light emanating from the richly resonant woods of this corridor seems almost palpable.

one finds in the crashing surf below the house. The reverence for simple natural materials that Bender shares with the Japanese is expressed in his consistent use of untreated native cedar for the exterior. The center post that supports the skylight at the entrance is a madrone driftwood log from the San Juan Islands salvaged from the Neahkahnie beach. *Shoji*-themed doors and windows bring the soothing effects of natural light into the interior.

Asked whether he had any other tricks up his sleeve, Bender says, "Pay careful attention to *every* problem you have to solve in the design, and find a solution that effortlessly fills all the needs, not just the primary one." The Wilson house is a prime example. After the initial house plan was drawn up, the Wilsons decided they wanted to add a studio above the garage. To meet height restrictions, Bender's design solution was to lower the level of the entire house. By dropping the living room floor two feet, the study and the dining room gained ocean views across the living room. Sitting steps were created along two sides. Lowering the house level required the construction of a stone retaining wall. That wall inspired the creation of the Japanese water garden at the home's entrance that now seems inevitable to the design. This garden sets the peaceful tone for the experience as you enter the gate of the Wilson home.