

# PACIFIC NORTHWEST

*Fall Home Design*



## PLAYING WITH SPACES

- **Downtown:** Celebrating creativity, flat out
- **West Seattle:** A respite framed in nature
- **Bainbridge Island:** The elegance of efficiency
- **Queen Anne:** Made to work
- **Mercer Island:** The good family life
- **Wallingford:** With elbow grease, reborn



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**DURING THE DAY**, light filters through the wood slats of the exterior stairway, which does double-duty as a courtyard wall. Following the European tradition, the first few risers were built of stone to discourage rot.

**FROM THE FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT** doors looking in, the main space opens up. The integral-color concrete floors are heated. The painting on the eggplant-color wall is of Pirzio-Biroli's grandmother; the bronze sculpture study (far corner) by Theodore Roszak. In the foreground: a black leather day bed by Zannotta (at Inform), the Reflecting Bench by John Wells (at Objex). On the floor is a hand-spun, hand-woven Persian tribal rug (from Driscoll Robbins).



## LA DOLCE CONTEMPORANEO

- On Mercer Island, two Italian architects create the good life on the family compound

**L**IKE MANY, I romanticize the daily Italian way of being.

I envision leisurely lunches of fresh mozzarella and vine-ripened tomatoes, wine from the local vineyard, olives from a neighbor's grove. In my mind, it's a peaceful life lived on land that's been in the family for generations. Surely, no one works. They're too busy making beautiful food, beautiful homes, beautiful babies.

Inspired by films, books, magazine articles and memories of personal trips, many of us dream about how gracious life could be . . . if only we were there. While life — and homes — in Italy are indeed wonderful, architects Lucia Pirzio-Biroli and Michele >



**BY DESIGN**, each area of the home has simple, rugged finishes. This view is from the living area into the kitchen. The painting over the day bed is by artist David Chell.





**AT NIGHT**, the home of architects Lucia Pirzio-Biroli and Michele Marquardt glows. In the summer, the gravel-filled courtyard is an outdoor room; in winter, a source of interior light. The double doors were salvaged from a Frank Lloyd Wright house demolition. The exterior is black asphalt shingle (typically used for roofing) with contrasting panels of integral-color, cement-based stucco. The Owen Roberts Group was the general contractor; the couple, here with dogs Zeus and Della Street, did much of the finish work.



## LA DOLCE CONTEMPORANEO



**THE SPACIOUS STUDIO** soars to 14 feet at its highest point, and looks out over both the front and back garden. The 120 linear feet of bookcase (as well as all office casework) was built by Ahrenius Manufacturing. Overhead, a small loft overlooks the studio.

Marquardi are proof that wonderful isn't necessarily about a specific place. Rather, it's about taking the time to thoughtfully define how you want to live. It's also about taking grateful advantage of the gifts of dual culture and family support.

Without a doubt, the couple has put a great deal of thought into how they approach life, build their careers and stay connected to community. Today, that process has manifested itself in a graciously compact home and professional studio space built on land that's been in Pirzio-Biroli's family since 1954.

Back then, the roads on Mercer Island were dirt and deer outnumbered people. Since that time, much has happened on the island and on the acre site: Over 15 years, the family built a home, a home in which Pirzio-Biroli's mother still lives. Her brother and his family have a place on the other side of the property. The third and newest addition sits in the center of it all. (Or, as Pirzio-Biroli likes to joke: "We built a house right in my mother's driveway.")

From early on, Pirzio-Biroli was encouraged to think about science (her father was a physician) as well as art and natural beauty (her mother is an art historian and a botanist). In 1989, Pirzio-Biroli took a break from graduate



**AT THE BASE** of the interior stairway is a window with a slab of cast-glass salvaged from a renovation of the Frank Furness-designed library at the University of Pennsylvania. On the post is a wood sculpture from Senegal; in the window, "Pezzato" by artist Fulvio Bianconi.



**WHEN IS A HALL**, not just a hall? When it's used to house the television, the ironing board (behind the blue door) and art, as well as act as a passageway from the bedrooms to the office studio. The pigmented-stain-on-wood form was inspired by painter Piet Mondrian (executed by Ahrenius Manufacturing). Art on the ledge: to the left, a print by Valery McEvoy; in the center, an engraving by Italian artist G.B. Piranesi; on the right, an antique Japanese print, artist unknown.

school to work at an architecture firm in Italy. While there, she met Marquardi, who grew up in the same place her father had grown up in — the Friuli region northeast of Venice. "The grappa capitol of the world," Marquardi says with a laugh.

It was a personal, professional and philosophical match.

The couple stayed in Italy, working together on residential projects and design competitions. In 1994, they moved to Mercer Island where Studio Ectypos, the couple's architectural design firm, was formed.

At first, building a practice took priority over building a home. As a result, the couple lived in her parents' house until last year. Given the amount of time they had to plan their own space, they were careful not to "over-think" the layout. "When a house is too programmed, it diminishes its spontaneity," says Marquardi. "We believe in simple, open spaces that naturally lead you from one place to another."

To that end, the pair made sure each area of the 1,800-square-foot, two-level layout could be used in several ways. For instance, the hallway doubles as a media/reading room, the studio houses their personal library and the courtyard is a second living room in the summer. By intention, each of the two bedrooms is on the small side.

They also spent significant time thinking about the philosophical underpinnings of the home. This included choosing a name for the project that would express their design intentions. They decided on "Firmitas" (or soli-

darity), one of the three principles of architecture as defined by the ancient Roman architect Vitruvius. "Our house is solid, it tells it like it is, there are no hidden messages and yet somehow that is where the magic is," says Pirzio-Biroli. "It is simple, authentic, compact and fun."

The couple believes their connection to the archaic architecture of Europe and to Mercer Island was critical to the final outcome. "Even though this is a new house, it has a history in the site, in the form," Pirzio-Biroli says.

At its most basic, their home is organized around a traditional courtyard space similar to those found in the farm houses of Friuli. "The relationship and scale of the spaces are similar, but the language in which the story is told is contemporary," she says. "We used details that reflect the intent of those old farm houses, but we expressed them in an entirely different language."

That "different language" is apparent in the mix of traditional and non-traditional materials: Massive concrete walls and a cement-based stucco chimney interact comfortably with more transient materials such as wood decking, black asphalt shingles and composition cement board.

One of the biggest challenges was protecting the surrounding landscape. For more than 45 years, Pirzio-Biroli's mother nurtured a garden densely packed with rare specimens. In the end, only two trees had to be removed, both of which were unhealthy. Several large rhododendrons and one Japanese pine were relocated. "The house >



needed to be on par with the garden, not overwhelm it," says Pirzio-Biroli.

Most importantly, the couple wanted a home (and a professional studio) that was approachable. "Socially, coming here has been a little surprising," says Marquardi. "In Italy, we have a tendency to ring the doorbell and visit somebody. Here, it's like setting an appointment. You say, 'In three weeks, we'll get together.' I like people to just stop by."

To help create a contemporary, informal interior that would support their drop-by intentions, the pair consulted with Seattle's Vivid Design Group on furniture and art placement. The Vivid team also helped them set priorities for future purchases. During the process, one of the firm's principals, Kris von Oy, died in an accident. Given the couple's close friendship with von Oy, the sudden loss reinforced their commitment to live each

day to the fullest.

As could be expected, the pair brings this intensity and sense of purpose to each project they accept. Still, it would be a mistake to think they don't have a sense of humor about the whole thing.

Take, for instance, their building-permit story. When chided by a city employee for not maximizing the value of their lot by building a megahouse with a master suite, walk-in closet and luxurious bath (an opinion apparently shared by the appraiser who took points off their construction loan for the same reason), they were far from displeased.

"Our response was, 'Good'! People need to build houses that resonate with them, otherwise they'll always be building to the lowest common denominator," says Pirzio-Biroli. Both architects believe many are convinced they have to build with resale, rather than their own needs and desires, in mind.

In a not-so-subtle way, the experience reinforced their belief that thoughtful architecture is a force for social good. "Sure, we're idealistic. We know corridors with neon lighting promote violence. We believe good spaces make for happier people," she says. "To that end, we don't want to limit our work to one area. We believe architecture exists from an urban-landscape scale, to residential, down to the detail of a chair."

But like most people the world over, they believe a house is a place of memory. "Right now, it's new and — like any new relationship — we're still discovering its complexities," says Pirzio-Biroli. "In time, it will acquire the patina of familiarity and become a home." P

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**DESIGNED TO BE BUILT** in stages, the home lacks the fourth courtyard "wall." When the budget allows, the front door (and corresponding side wall) will "wrap around" the chimney base (and add 300 square feet). To the far left, an exterior stairway leads to the stucco space.