



CLIFF HANGER

*Compact retirement home
offers magnificent views*

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LAURIE AND LARRY PEARCE'S SUNSHINE FALLS PROPERTY

is narrow, steep and jagged as it tumbles down the cliff to Indian Arm. To occupy it, the couple might as well have lived in a dirigible anchored to the site. But they wanted a house, and they found just the designer to do the job: Kevin Vallely.

"When we went looking for an architect, we had no specific idea in mind for the house," says Laurie. "We asked several architects who are supposedly into open spaces how they'd accommodate the size of the lot, but it was too small to interest many of them. But Kevin (their designer) was so enthusiastic, and we picked up on his enthusiasm. He's very much focused on people living in smaller houses and is ecologically minded."

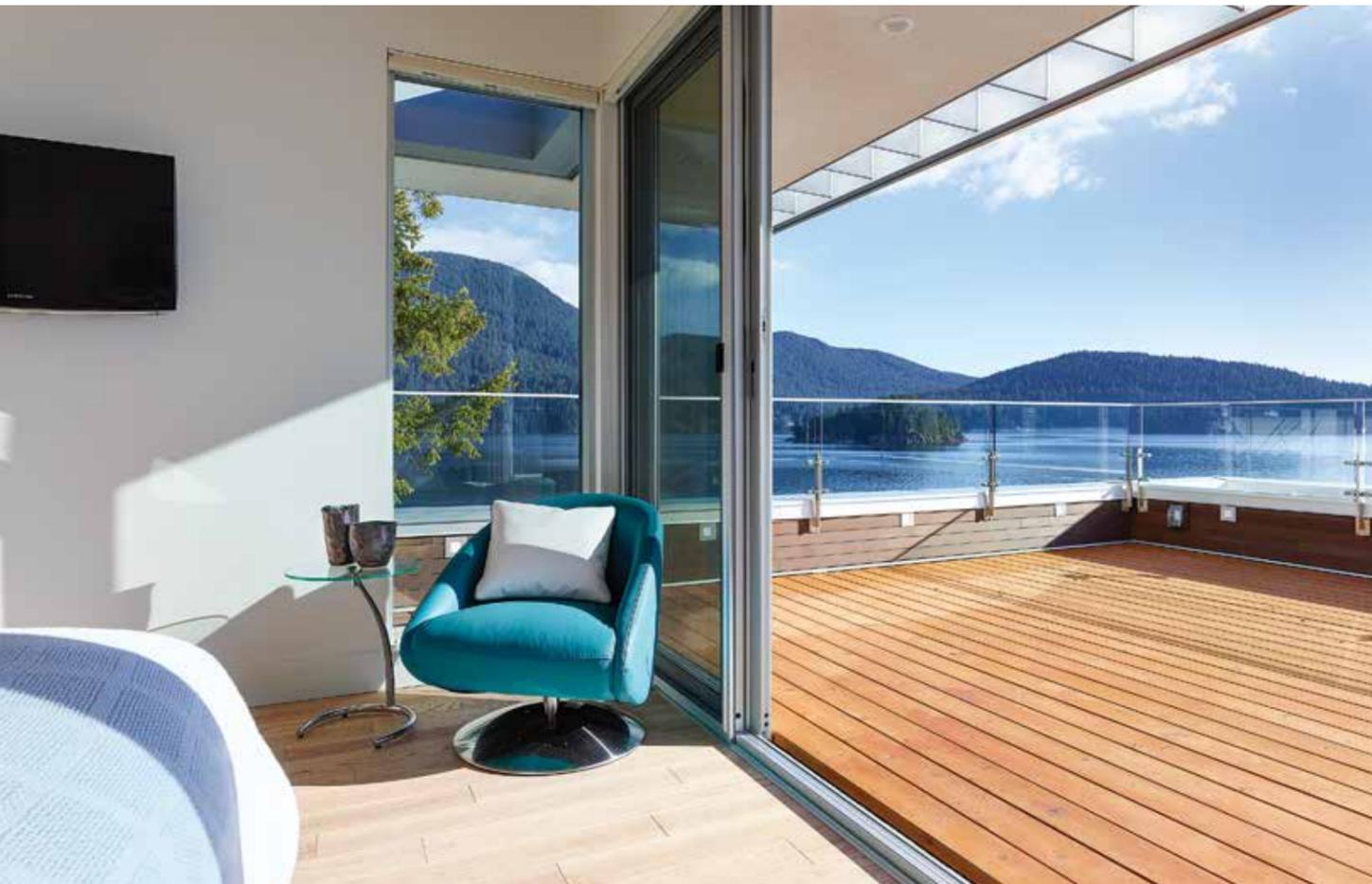
The house had to be small not merely to fit on the 25-foot-wide lot but also because it will be the Pearces' retirement home; in fact, Larry has already retired. "Downsize" was a major word in their vocabulary when they were discussing plans with Vallely: they were then in a sprawling family home of some 4,500 square feet.

"The site sounded compelling and afforded great opportunity," Vallely recalls. "It looks out onto a magical landscape. They wanted something fresh, uncluttered, contemporary, and that's my style: West Coast Contemporary. My heart soared. It was the perfect project. ☺"

The lot is precipitous and constrained, with a usable width of 17 feet and containing a drop of 55 feet within its 98-foot length. "The house makes a very bold expression in a sea of more traditional homes; it stands out," says designer Kevin Vallely. "What I like most is its simple, strong gesture facing out into Indian Arm."



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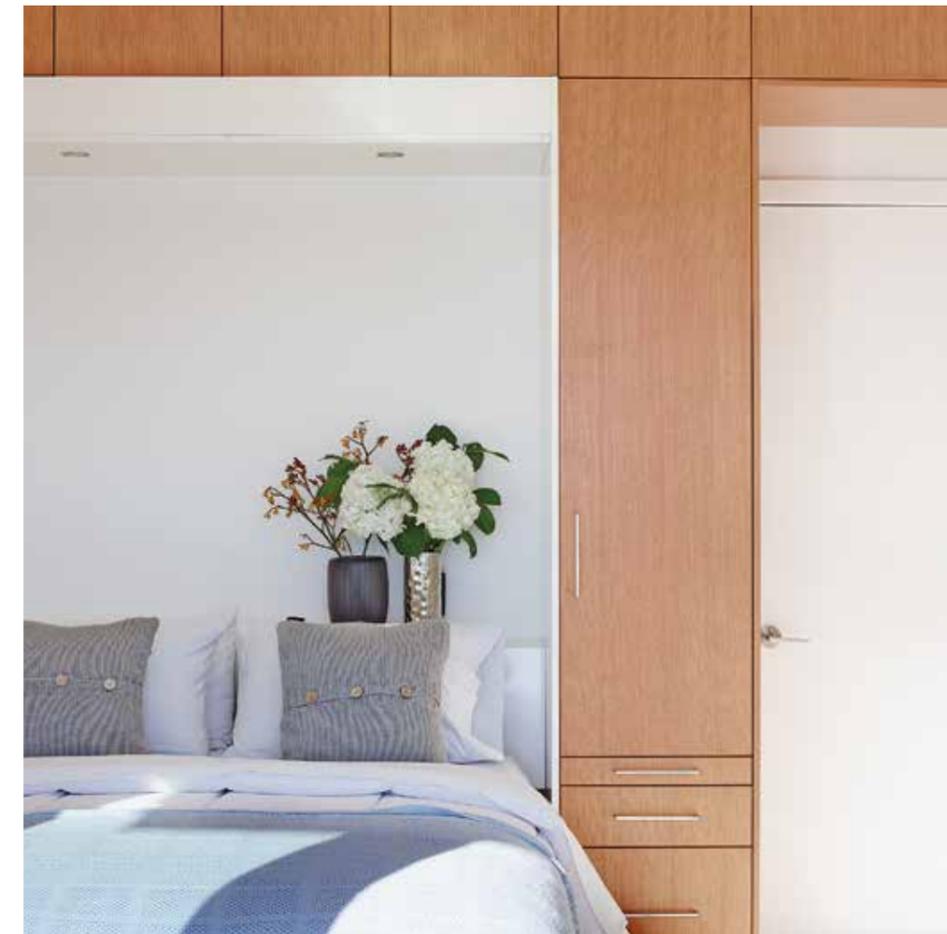
“The site is narrow and steep, and I had two challenges. One was to have the building move down the site effectively. The other was to make the people inside feel like they’re sitting out on the ocean with no one around, to feel a million miles away from Vancouver.”

A third challenge was the high density of residences in the cul-de-sac where the house is built, “shoehorned in between other homes,” as Valley puts it.

“People live right behind us and beside us, and we didn’t want to obstruct their view,” Laurie explains. “These are our friends and neighbours. It was important to have a house that fits into the neighbourhood. Kevin worked hard to reassure them, showing them 3-D drawings at a cocktail party.”

Because of space and height restrictions, Valley also had to get variances from the municipality. “He did a great job pleading our cause,” Laurie says. Because the plans were so carefully presented, “in the end it sailed through,” Valley recounts. “The councillors and mayor saw exactly what I was trying to do.”

Those hurdles negotiated, it was time to build—or, rather, blast. The builders, Econ Group Construction and Development, had to clear approximately 25 feet down and 45 feet into the cliff. “Our neighbours were very sympathetic,” says Laurie. She and Larry had some idea of what the neighbours were going through, because they lived right next door to their new property. ☞



The multipurpose room on the top storey becomes a guest room when the Murphy bed is lowered. Its generous deck offers visitors a sweeping view of Indian Arm. Cabinetry and Murphy beds throughout the home by Cornerstone Kitchens and Design.

“They’re dynamic and very design-sophisticated.”

“For the first nine months we saw very little except drilling and blasting and then forms for the concrete,” Laurie recalls. “In all, it took about a year and a half. There was a lot of work and cooperation to get this build done. There were many challenges for Econ Group, but their niche is modern homes, and they had lots of ideas for how to handle things. And Kevin stayed with the project throughout.”

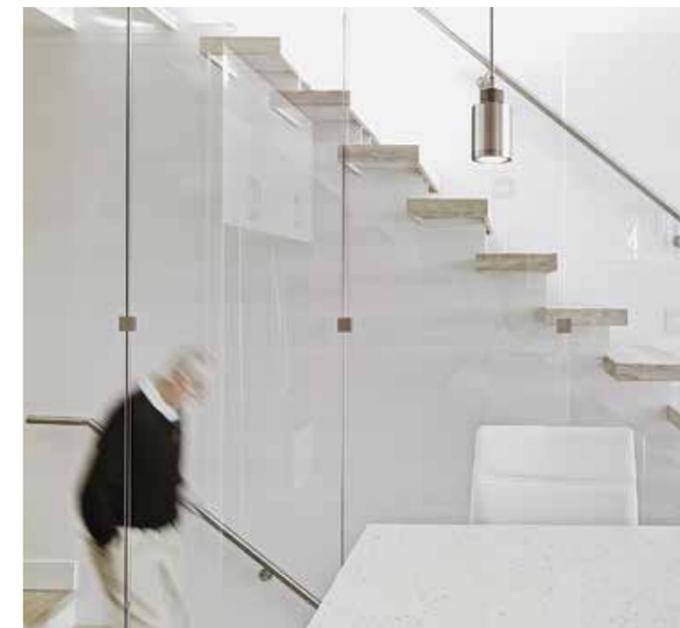
“I’m happy the Econ Group were taken aboard,” Valley says. “They’re dynamic and very design-sophisticated. They’re also experts in Passive House building design. This home is highly energy-efficient, with an EnerGuide rating of 85.” (Natural Resources Canada considers a rating of 80 or higher to be “excellent.”)

Now that the dust has finally settled, it’s evident that the Pearces have a compact but striking house that packs a lot of living into a small space: 1,928 square feet. In consideration for the owners as they age, there’s an elevator connecting all three storeys. Even now, “when I come in with a bunch of groceries, I really appreciate the elevator,” says Larry.

The top storey is level with the road, so it’s no surprise to find a garage (with a 330-bottle wine fridge!) there. The floor also contains a multipurpose room with a deck. It can be used as an office, guest room or entertainment room, its versatility guaranteed with ingenious furnishings such as a Murphy bed and a table that can be folded into the wall for more floor space. Guests are pampered with a bathroom featuring a four-foot-square sunken Japanese tub. 



“We’re used to sprawling everywhere, and now we have to be more conscious of space,” Larry observes. But it’s not really a problem; for instance, “This kitchen is smaller than in our former house, and I was worried that it wouldn’t be able to accommodate what I love doing,” says Laurie. “But now I have a double oven and a 36-inch cooktop that are better than in the other house.” Table and chairs by Calligaris, from Studio Y Design; appliances from Trail Appliances.





The main living floor is one level down. Cantilevered over the lowest floor, it's an open-concept space incorporating living, dining and kitchen areas. A folding NanaWall ensures that the marvellous view is available to all. Tucked behind the kitchen is a powder room, and then a den with a wet bar, small wine fridge and another Murphy bed.

The lowest floor is built almost entirely into the cliff. It features the master bedroom with a covered deck. Along the corridor behind the bedroom is the master bathroom, then a walk-in closet, and then a laundry and storage room.

From every floor, a glorious panorama of hills, sea and sky is visible. "I was very conscious of size and placement of windows when drawing up the plans," Vallely says. "The windows shield the view of neighbouring properties; they just frame the view of Indian Arm. You feel as though there's no one around you."

The view inwards is pleasing, too: contemporary, uncluttered, and open. All the space has been used as efficiently as possible, with every opportunity taken to provide storage.

The Pearces moved in just before Christmas and are still getting accustomed to their new abode and sparer lifestyle.

"I'm very pleasantly surprised by the amount of space and light," says Laurie. "I'm not quite used to it yet, but I'm definitely happy." ☛



The living room (above) has side windows carefully placed to reveal the landscape but not the surrounding buildings. The lowest floor (opposite) burrows into the cliff. Rooms not needing outside light, such as the bathroom, walk-in closet, and laundry room are placed behind the master bedroom, which enjoys the bounteous light. Most furniture in the home is from ScanDesigns.