

SEPTEMBER-OCTOBER 2001

OREGON HOME

fix masters

Two Pearl District
retailers remodel a
one-time B & B into
a family home

22 most
common
Audio & Video Mistakes

backwoods
modern
High style on
the Salmon River

Advertising section
SAVE
ENERGY
SAVE
NOW
Special

\$3.50





Backwoods modern

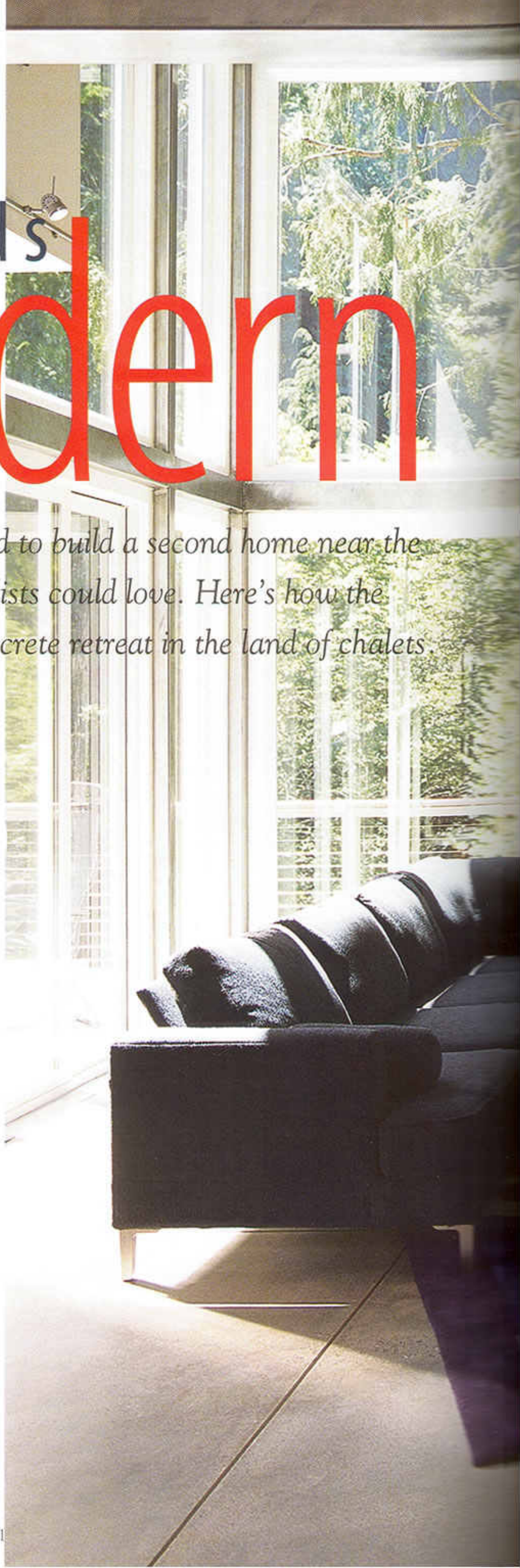
When Pamela and Michael Gordon decided to build a second home near the Salmon River, they wanted spaces minimalists could love. Here's how the former New Yorkers got their steel-and-concrete retreat in the land of chalets.

focus your gaze on the interior of Pamela and Michael Gordon's newly built 2,500-square-foot weekend retreat, and the setting could easily be a modernistic penthouse loft in Manhattan's industrial-meets-artsy Tribeca neighborhood. Combining simplicity and sophistication in equal measure, the house features exposed polished-steel beams, a glass-smooth ash-colored concrete floor and sleek furnishings reminiscent of the work of abstract artists Henry Moore and Wassily Kandinsky.

Just outside the home's expansive windows, however, is a view that's as radically different from the Big Apple's skyline as you can get. In place of bustling Broadway traffic, the crystalline, rock-strewn Salmon River whispers past the back deck. In place of skyscrapers, a heavily wooded mountain rises above the opposite side of the river. "It's an incredible mountain," says Pamela. "It's so wild—and about three quarters of the way up there's a rocky ledge with a single tree on it. It looks so majestic; only the goats are missing."

Far from creating an aesthetic clash, the clean-lined, modernistic architecture and the rustic locale—a lush, backcountry valley on the shoulder of Mt. Hood—reinforce each other's sense of serenity. As if to echo the Gordons' architectural sensibilities, in fact, the flawlessly straight, pillar-like conifers that surround the house are themselves masterpieces of minimalism.

Pamela and Michael Gordon's new second home (above) follows the footprint of a 1935 house that stood on the site, an amazing 15 feet from the Salmon River. "You energize a room when you angle something in it," says Pamela, about the placement of the custom Della Robbia wool rug. "It took me four weekends to get the exact angle right. Its placement counteracts all the straight lines in the house." The Gordons found the red Rossi di Albizzate chair in Milan, during a trip to commemorate their 40th wedding anniversary. Exposed steel beams and a concrete floor lay the foundation for the home's minimalist look.





BY DAVID SHARP
PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID PAPA ZIAN

With nature as their closest neighbor, the Gordons—life-long urbanites who relocated to Portland 11 years ago from the New York City area—are quickly learning Outward-Bound-style lessons seldom taught on Manhattan subway platforms. “Antlers are everywhere around here, and I had no idea that deer drop them every year,” says Pamela, the creative director at Meier & Frank. She jokingly refers to their new spread as Green Acres, a reference to the 1960s TV sitcom about a New York City couple who relocate to the country.

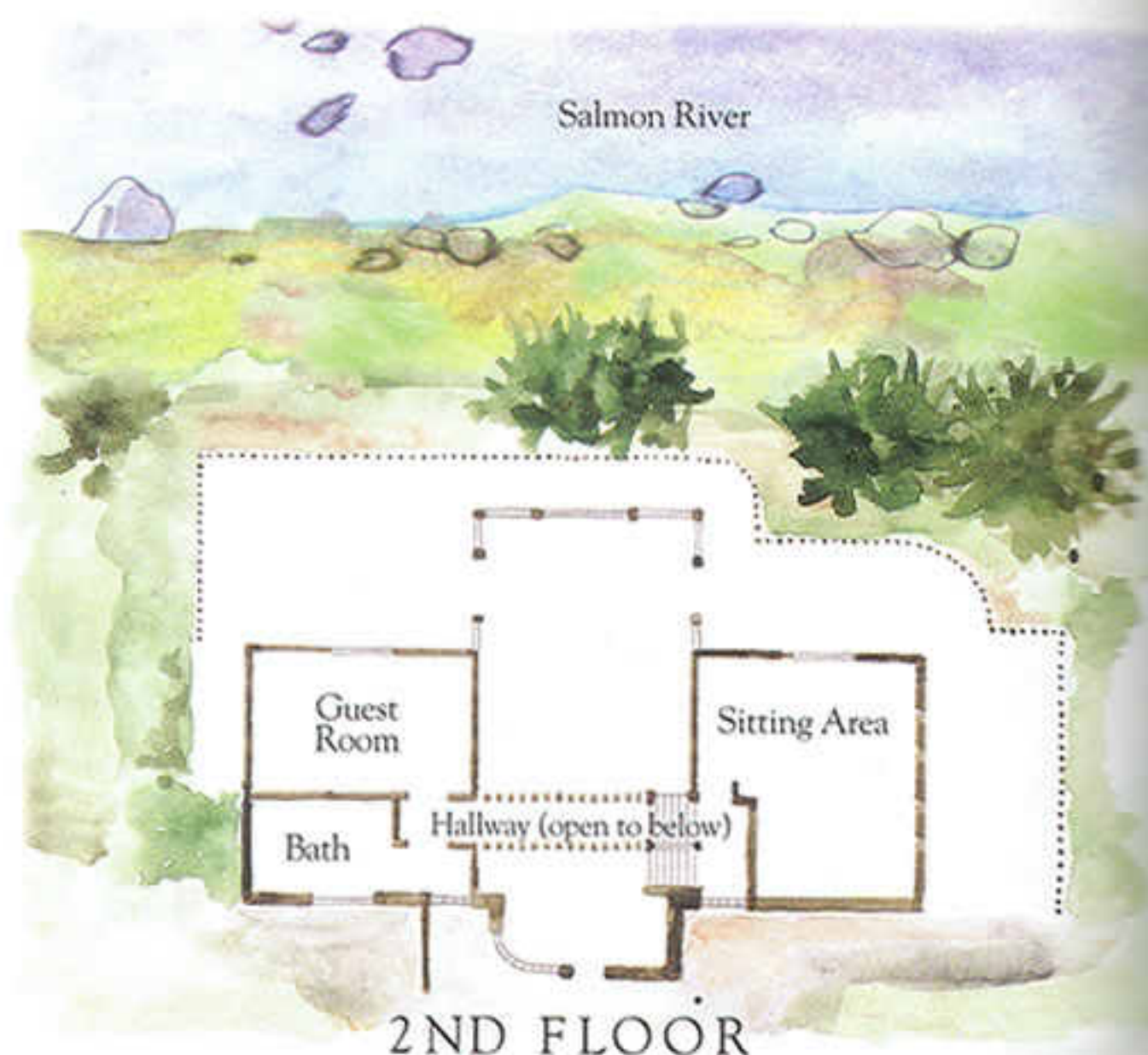
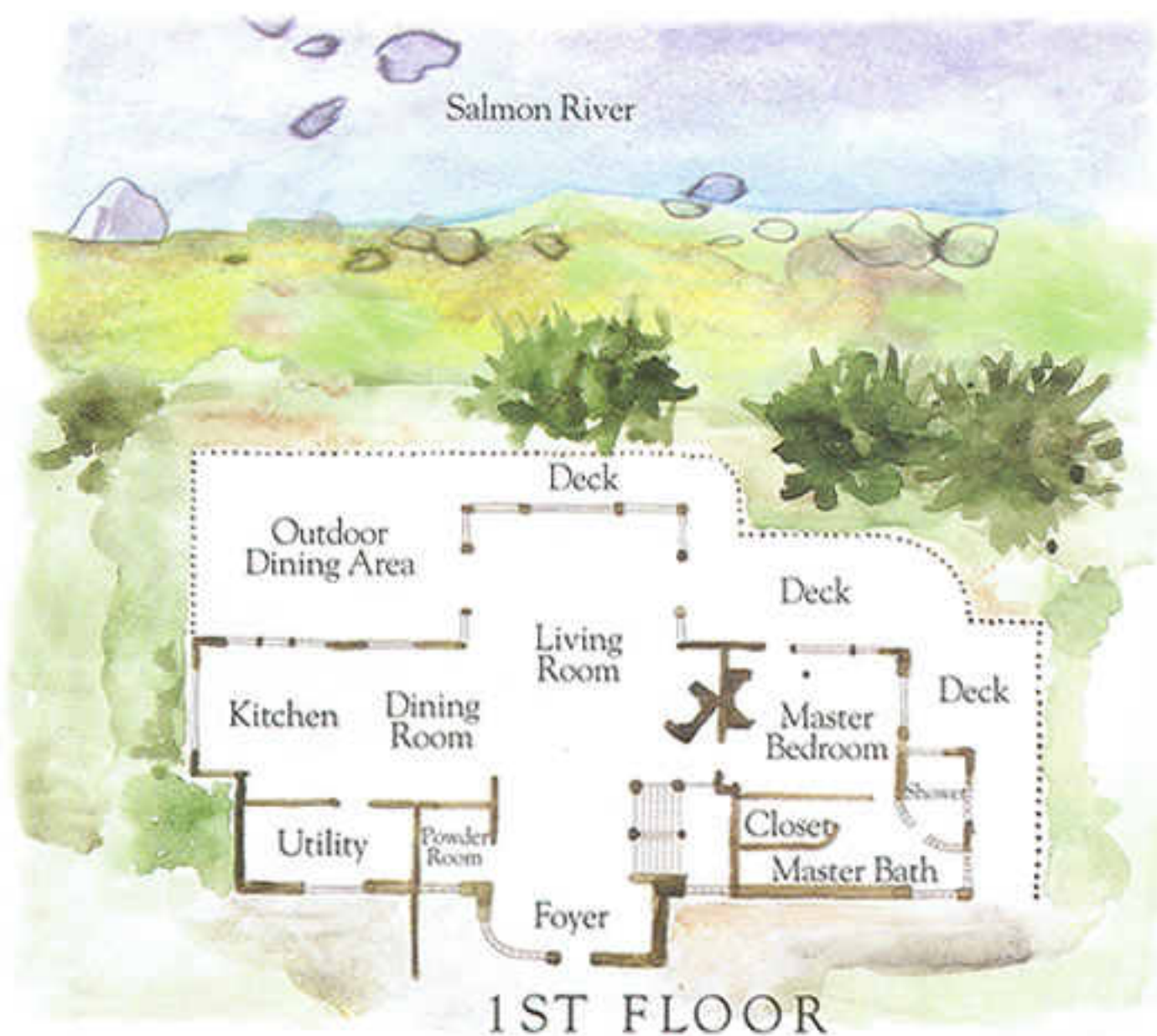
Michael, a self-employed bearing importer, comes inside carrying a geode that he dug up while puttering in the yard. Cut in half and polished on one end to reveal a bejeweled pattern of minerals, the goose-egg-size rock—also known as a thunderegg, Oregon’s state rock—is clearly a relic from a previous owner of the land. Michael looks as enchanted as a child who’s found an Easter egg.

That’s hardly the first surprise that the Gordons have encountered since deciding in 1998 to build this weekend retreat. Not all the earlier discoveries were as welcome as this ersatz diamond in the rough, however. For nearly two years, the Gordons weathered an array of unforeseen construction-related dilemmas that in some cases slowed down the home’s progress and ratcheted up the cost—dilemmas stemming in part from



“Michael and I love the industrial look,” says Pamela, with Michael on their minimalist single-tread staircase. “If we could have built a house out of scaffolding, we would have.”

FLOORPLAN





The Gordons' foyer is a study of concrete and polished steel—until your eyes fall on this folk art mirror and bench, which Pamela found at Sweetwater Farm in the Pearl District. "I wanted a little fun, a little funkiness, in the foyer," she says. "A lot of people are frightened of color, but I love color. Sometimes you need to spike a room with color."



"We have a lot of artwork—canvases and sculpture—in our Portland condo, but in this house, the environment is the artwork," says Pamela, of the few walls that aren't punched with windows to frame magnificent views of the Salmon River and state-owned forest beyond it. Fire engine red Aristocrat cabinets are from Kitchen Showcase. The etched-glass and brushed aluminum De Padova table is another purchase from Italy. The Gordons paired it with six Panton chairs from Full Upright Position in the Pearl District.



the difficulty of building a modernistic house in a region better known for traditional log cabins.

But thanks to their own determination to hold fast to their vision, and to the skill of Welches-based contractor David Eldredge of David R. Eldredge Construction Company, who was equally determined to turn that vision into a reality, the home—designed by Michel Druelle, a Mukilteo, Wash. designer—came together this summer. The couple unhesitatingly agree that the final result more than makes up for the obstacles they encountered along the way. “It’s a magnificent place,” says Michael, peering up at the precipice in his backyard.

The inspiration for the Gordons’ weekend retreat sprang from Michael’s love of gardening. As happy as they are with their West Hills condo, which offers a postcard-perfect view of Portland’s skyline, its one drawback is the absence of land where Michael can putter and plant—activities he enjoyed doing when the couple lived in suburban New York. “With condo living, you have bylaws and neighbors,” says Michael. “I wanted a place I could call my own.”

Alerted to the rough-hewn charm of the area by friends who owned property there, the Gordons started looking at real estate several years ago. The area’s close proximity to Portland—just an hour from downtown—also matched their need for a getaway not too far from their principal residence. “We didn’t want to have to drive three or four hours to get there,” says Pamela.

They were intrigued by a piece of wooded property located along the Salmon River, but ultimately decided not to purchase it because river-protection rules required new construction to sit at least 100 feet away from the water. That distance would’ve prevented the Gordons from taking full advantage of the river’s beauty.

Soon afterward, an adjacent parcel with an old cabin came on the market. The house was too ramshackle to refurbish, but it had one invaluable asset: it was located within fly-casting distance of the river. The same rules that prohibited additional houses from popping up along the river’s edge grandfathered in existing houses—as well as new houses built atop an existing home’s footprint.

With trees and ferns sprouting with abandon from the soil, the 4.8-acre site

more than satisfied Michael’s desire for a lush garden plot. As he started picturing where his plants might go, Pamela began imagining the sort of house that would reflect their mutual love of modern architecture and decor. “I didn’t want anything that was remotely traditional,” says Pamela. “I love contemporary design and its contrast to nature.”

In a region sprinkled with log chalets that sometimes resemble oversize Swiss cuckoo clocks, the Gordons envisioned a house as honest and uncomplicated as one of the water-smoothed rocks in the Salmon River that bisects the property. In particular, they wanted expansive windows that provided generous views of the river and mountain. Steel beams were required to hold such massive windows in place. Rather than bury the beams behind drywall, the Gordons chose to leave the beams exposed to showcase the home’s shimmering stainless-steel skeleton.

Pamela and Michael’s wish list of structural features also included a single, clean roofline, a large deck, high ceilings, an open floorplan, and—as the home’s centerpiece—a poured concrete floor with radiant heat. “Concrete is a very sexy material,” says Pamela. “It’s honest and simple but still sleek.”

Building a minimalist house in the backwoods of Clackamas County posed more than a few difficulties—the first of which was appeasing the design police. In keeping with building ordinances, the Gordons had to have their plans approved by a local review board created to minimize the environmental and visual impact of development on area rivers.

Fortunately, the contractor they chose, Eldredge, was immensely helpful in demystifying the review process for the Gordons. Moreover, the home’s simple, modernistic exterior worked in its favor, because the green-gray outer walls and chalet-style, single-roofline profile melt unobtrusively into the surrounding woods—thereby easily satisfying the local review board. “There’s nothing that stands out to make the fish nervous,” deadpans Michael.

Before the Gordons could start building the house, they had to remove the existing cabin. They considered letting the local fire department burn it down for practice, but that option would’ve put



Two of the Gordons' favorite design elements—texture and rough edges—come together in the staircase that leads to the guestroom and bath, and a loft that overlooks the living room.

the nearby tall trees at risk. So instead, they paid for the house to be dismantled by Architectural Recovery Inc., a Portland-based salvager that donated the pieces—everything from a white claw-foot tub with nickel fixtures to a Worthy Works furnace to knotty pine kitchen cabinets—to the Rebuilding Center, a Portland nonprofit that resells the house parts at below-market rates to low-income homeowners.

Putting up a new house where the old one once stood turned out to be more of a challenge than anyone initially suspected. The first dilemma occurred the minute they broke ground. Eldredge's alert bulldozer operator noticed that the site contained oddly disturbed dirt. Digging farther, the crew discovered a jury-

rigged culvert that a previous owner had built of enormous fallen logs and stones. The culvert's function was to divert runoff away from the original home.

Since the improvised drainage system sat where part of the new house would go, Eldredge and his team first had to truck in considerable backfill before the foundation work could even begin. "The amount of landfill they used was about the size of Rhode Island," says Michael.

Despite the home's simplistic design, there was nothing simple about assembling a residence out of modernistic building materials such as glass, steel and concrete. For instance, the Gordons and Eldredge had to come up with a Plan B when a window-company salesperson who put in a successful bid on the

maximize the minimalism

For all their architectural simplicity, minimalist vacation homes aren't necessarily simple to build—especially in regions where the local house styles veer more toward log cabins and Swiss-style chalets. Here's how to play up the minimalism while reducing the construction-related complexities:

Hire an architect who shares your vision. Despite the importance they placed on the home's design, the Gordons decided against hiring an architect. Pamela reasoned that her strong visual sense—together with the help of an architectural designer who could draw up a blueprint—would suffice.

In retrospect, she wishes she'd brought an architect on board. "While I fancy myself as somewhat of a designer, an architect could've really carried and interpreted our vision for the house," she says.

Work with a respected builder who understands local concerns. Because he's based in Welches, contractor David Eldredge is well-versed in the design guidelines put in place to lessen the visual impact of development on the Salmon and Sandy rivers. As a result, he's had plenty of practice at navigating houseplans through the local review process. "Having someone local help you is an advantage to a potential homeowner," he says.

Stay in regular contact with your builder. Eldredge made himself readily available to the Gordons whenever they had questions or concerns. And since Michael runs his own business and has more control over his time than Pamela, he was the point person whenever Eldredge had to get in touch with them. "But when it came to making design decisions, I'd usually pass the phone to Pamela," he says.

Find a builder with a track record for creating cutting-edge architecture. Typically, contractors who specialize in one-of-a-kind projects attract subcontractors who can rise to new construction challenges as well. "I don't like building the same house over and over," says Eldredge. "I like the challenge of custom homes, which is primarily what we do."

—D.S.

