

# A Small Yet Spacious Stunner

story by Christy Heitger  
photos by Will Austin



# A cozy, modern hideaway that borrows from the outdoors

**W**hen husband and wife architect team Ray and Mary Johnston of Seattle, Wash., set out to design and build a vacation home on their 11-acre property in Twisp, Wash., they envisioned a small but spacious abode. Nestled in Methow Valley just east of the Cascade Mountains, their property boasts big, beautiful pine and aspen trees, a large meadow rich with wildlife and easy access to stunning mountains, sparkling rivers, scenic ski trails, rugged bike trails and refreshing swimming holes.

“We didn’t feel we needed a big cabin in order to enjoy the countryside,” says Ray. “But at the same time, we wanted to design the place in such a way that when you’re sitting inside, you feel as if you’re borrowing space from the outside.”

To achieve this feeling, the Johnstons put in a glass wall in the great room, which looks out onto the wood-deck veranda and the spectacular mountains and valleys beyond.

## Expansive Coziness

The dramatic wall of glass is just one of many distinctive features of the home, which is sided in western red cedar. The footprint of the cabin is only 860 square feet (plus a 400-square-foot loft). However, the Johnston’s modern design – which includes an open floor plan; high ceilings; non-uniform spacing between windows, columns and joists; and a ceiling plane with exposed joists – creates a unique feeling of expansive coziness.

The cozy feeling is due, in part, to distinctive interior decorating choices. For example, they chose bamboo plywood for the walls because of its warm and wonderful texture that Ray likens to grass cloth. In addition, they chose warm flooring throughout the cabin – stained concrete with radiant heat on the entry floor and gray felt carpet tiles over tongue-and-groove decking in the loft.

And yet even with the cozy design choices, the cabin doesn’t feel cramped because of the Johnstons’ spacious design choices. Their ceilings are high, and the columns are tall. Natural light abounds, and nearly everywhere you stand in the house, there’s a dynamite view of the landscape.

## An Experimental Masterpiece

Ray admits that he and his wife’s cabin design was a bit of an experiment.

“Modern pieces of architecture tend to be white, rigid, uniform patterns with windows evenly spaced apart,” says Ray. “Mary and I wanted to play around a bit with modern roots.”

The couple thought it would be interesting to space



When Ray and Mary Johnston planned their getaway, they designed it “in such a way that when you’re sitting inside, you feel as if you’re borrowing space from the outside.”



**Top right:** A steel mesh screen shields the porch from the summer sun when it's high in the sky.

**Above:** The loft offers a great view of activities below and of the valley beyond.



apart columns by 8 feet, then 12 feet, then 16 feet, to give a rhythmic progression to the columns. They did the same with the windows but using a different progression.

“It’s almost like a musical score, where each instrument has a different place and a different purpose,” explains Ray, in a way only an architect can.

The Johnstons didn’t stop there. In fact, most of the details they incorporated into the home are unexpected. For instance, the loft’s stainless steel railings with a fir cap add a rich texture to the home while the wire mesh between the railings offers a more subtle, textured lens to the outside world.

“Looking through the mesh is like gazing through gauze,” says Ray. “So when you’re up in the loft looking out to the valley, you can either see the clarity of what’s beyond, or you can view a softer, modulated version of it through the wire mesh.”

### Playing with Space

The Johnstons sleep on the main floor, though they don’t have a master bedroom, per se. Instead, they chose to maximize space by building what they call a “bed cabinet” in an alcove off the living room that is 10 feet wide by 8 feet deep with built-in dresser cabinets along one side of the width; the area remaining is 8x8 feet – just big enough for a queen-sized bed.

The bedroom can be closed off with sliding barn doors, but usually the doors are left open to extend the living room space.

“When we’re lying in bed, we have a great view of the sky, pine trees, valley and mountains,” says Ray. “It’s a pretty nice space to wake up in!”

### The Hosts with the Most Outdoor Fun

Ray and Mary frequently entertain at the cabin – and they don’t let a few feet of snow halt the festivities;

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in fact, the fluffy flakes add to the fun. One year when there was 4 feet of snow on the ground, the family hosted a New Year's party that will forever be remembered as the year "roof kayaking" was born.

The garage roof is sloped, with the low part just a few feet off the ground, and when there is an abundance of snow, it forms a pile that connects the snow from the ground to the snow on the roof. This snow pile makes it possible for folks to walk up onto the upper end slope of the garage roof.

"With so much snow to play in, we were using everything we could think of as a sled," recalls Ray. "One of our daughter's adventurous friends carried our whitewater kayak up to the top of the garage roof and rode it all the way down."

The family loves hosting gatherings in warmer months as well. The Johnston's daughter Mona had a small college reunion party over one Labor Day weekend, which was a big hit.

"We pitched tents on the meadow, cooked out, served beer and wine," says Ray. "Everyone had a great time."

## A Cabin for All Seasons

Ray and Mary try to make it to the cabin two or three times a month, year-round, which makes sense given that the area offers a sport for every season.

On hot summer days, the family goes canoeing or kayaking (sans snow). Or they'll take the dogs – small Munsterlander pointers named Rita and Gusti – and jump in the river or nearby lake.

When the temperatures cool a bit, the family explores the many miles of hiking and biking trails in the valley. They also hunt for upland game birds such as quail and blue grouse.

In the winter, when the area receives an average of ➡

**About the kitchen:** The two tiny contemporary crystal chandeliers above the table are low-voltage lights mounted on a light bar. The lights are 5 inches by 5 inches, and when the sun hits them they sparkle, casting little rainbows on the walls. The kitchen cabinets, made of fir, have no doors – in keeping with the cabin's contemporary style.



**Top:** The Johnstons' cabin, sided in western red cedar, is aglow with interior lighting and the flames of the firepit. Year round, the firepit is a popular gathering spot after a day spent outdoors.

**Bottom:** Indoors, the cabin is warmed by radiant heat and a wood stove (far corner).



3 feet of snow, the Johnstons spend most of the daylight hours on the 200 kilometers of cross-country ski trails that surround them. They also go sledding, snowshoeing and backcountry skiing (which is a hybrid between cross-country and downhill skiing).

“We can ski right off the valley floor into the hills. Out our back door we hike up the hill, stop at the top to rest, eat lunch and soak in the view,” says Ray. “Then we ski down. It makes for an exhilarating afternoon!”

After a long day of playing in the powder, the family often unwinds by gathering around a roaring fire in the outdoor fire pit. Inside, they stay warm thanks to their wood stove and the radiant heat.

“In the dead of winter, it might be 10 degrees below,” says Ray. “But when the afternoon sun streams into the cabin, we’re comfortable in short sleeves.”

## The Great Escape

The Johnstons have found an additional perk to life at the cabin – an extended warm season. During the late spring and early fall, it may be 50 degrees and rainy in Seattle but 70 and sunny at the cabin, which is located 3 1/2 hours northeast of Seattle.

Still, no matter the weather, the family loves cabin life. “The moment we arrive on the property and see the breathtaking view between the aspens we feel at home,” says Ray. “Being up here makes us look at and appreciate the outdoors in a different way.”

*Frequent contributor Christy Heitger has never invented a thrilling cabin sport like roof kayaking – unless you count the time she dove into the lake after her cell phone, which was really more chilling than thrilling.*

**Resource:** Western Red Cedar, [www.realcedar.org](http://www.realcedar.org).

