

# ZIPPER | HOUSE

A SEATTLE ARCHITECT AND A MAGNOLIA  
HOMEOWNER MESH A LAID-BACK  
ENVIRONMENT WITH A BUSY LIFESTYLE.

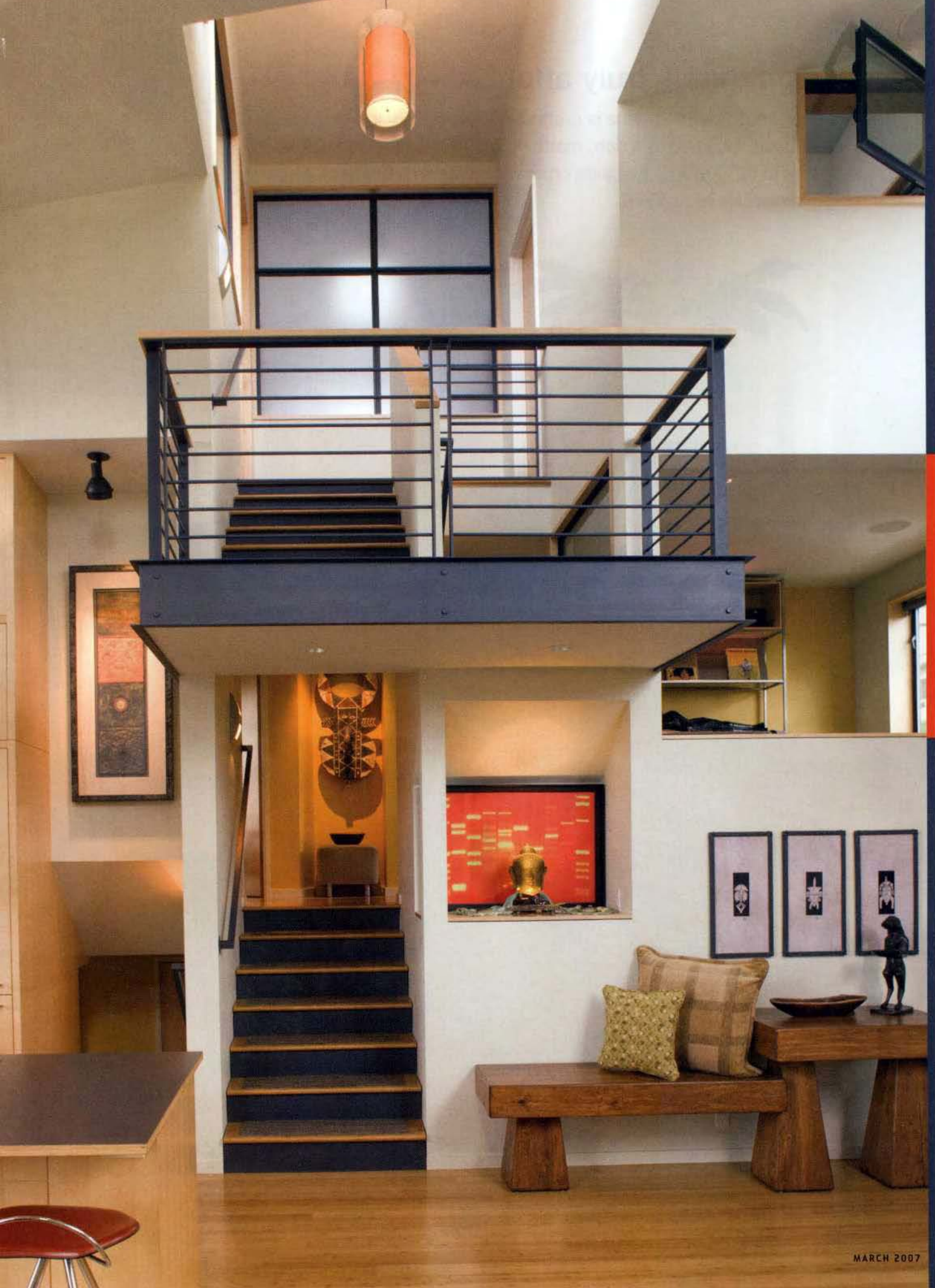
**O**n Christmas Day 2003, Jason Sutton suddenly decided to sell both of his homes—one in Lake Tahoe, the other in San Francisco—and move to Seattle, close to the mountains where he could snowboard as often as he liked. It was an impulse “to shock my system,” the 38-year-old high-tech consultant remembers.

“I had been splitting my time between the two cities. San Francisco was the hub of my professional life, but what I really like to do is head to the slopes,” Sutton explains, leaning on the kitchen counter in his new Magnolia home. In 2005 the former record label executive tore down a 1950s split-level ranch and erected the unique modern dwelling that stands there today. “I couldn’t integrate all the things I loved into one location, so I decided to start over fresh.” Seattle fit the bill. “It had all the high-tech aspects I needed, and the music scene was alive and kicking. Seattle was a smaller city—a little kinder, gentler—and it would be just 45 minutes from keeping my legs in shape.”

Facing Sutton, across the open, lofty living-dining area, a seven-foot fabric panel hangs like a huge speaker grille near the dining table, forming a backdrop for an art glass pendant lamp made by Sutton himself. In the middle of

BY **Peter Sackett**

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **William Wright**





**Men with a plan** Homeowner Jason Sutton (seated, left) presented architect John DeForest (seated, right) with this snapshot of a woodie (above) to show the independent, laid-back vibe he sought in his new home (section, top).

it all is the focal point of his home: a zigzagging staircase that ties together five levels of rooms, and the various aspects of Sutton's life.

Engaging, bright-eyed, and squarely built, Sutton looks like someone you'd enjoy running into at the neighborhood pub. His laid-back demeanor belies a busy lifestyle with tangents that spiral off in multiple directions. When he was working out the details of his move north, he says, "My real life was high-tech sales in the city. I layered that with managing a small record label for electronic music, handling preproduction, licensing, sales—just about every aspect of that business." Sutton, well acquainted with the demands of large creative projects, prepared for his new Seattle home by reviewing the portfolios of 66 architects before selecting John DeForest.

DeForest is a Harvard-trained architect, a quiet, thoughtful man with a trim frame and a thatch of straight black hair. He is known among colleagues and clients for his egoless, intellectual approach to architecture and his empathetic design. Not one to shoot his cuffs as a designer, he instead makes conspicuous display of his ability to listen.

"People get caught up in the perplexities of trying to identify their architectural 'style,'"

says DeForest. "It's my job as a designer to support [my clients] and design a house that is about them, not a style." When it came to the search for an architect, Sutton recalls, "John was the only one who suggested taking a peek at the home with me." Other designers he contacted had offered merely a drive-by.

With DeForest's blessing, Sutton bought the plain, postwar, split-level house near Magnolia Village for the two of them to remodel together. The concepting stage commenced, and again, Sutton was prepared. "I wasn't going to fall on my face with this," says Sutton. "When I'm organized, I'm highly organized. But when I'm not, I'm a train wreck."

DeForest recalls one of their earliest meetings: "He gave me a binder about this thick," he says, forming the largest C he could with his thumb and index finger. Sutton had been compiling the contents for months, clipping images of everything he fathomed might shed light on what his house could look like—from colors and textures to hinges, doors, windows, and light fixtures.

But DeForest was unfazed, and demanded even more. He asked Sutton to provide a review of his previous living spaces and inventories of important furniture and art collections, and to complete an exercise wherein he'd record the minutes of his life over a 24-hour period with a notebook and camera. Sutton gleefully pounced, jotting down his every activity, as well as where it happened, how he felt while doing it—and how it could be better. "I was looking less at the house and more at Jason," explains DeForest. "A lot of architects talk about educating the client, but I believe we need to educate ourselves as professionals a lot more; it's a process, not a formula."

In his binder, Sutton had included a snapshot of a "woodie," the wood-paneled station wagon popularized by surfers in the 1960s



## RESOURCES

**Architect** John DeForest, AIA, DeForest Architects (1106 NW 36th St, Seattle, 206-262-0820; deforestarchitects.com).

**Contractor** Adam Turner, Dovetail Construction (3800 Woodland Park Ave N, Seattle, 206-545-0722, dovetailinc.net).

**Acoustic engineering** (media room) Mark Langford, Intuitive Integration (2125 196th St SW, Lynnwood, 425-771-4343, intuitiveintegration.com).

**Bamboo floors** Crosscut Hardwoods (4100 First Ave S, Seattle, 206-623-0334, emersonhardwood.com).

**Milestone Hybridized Portland Cement** (bathrooms) Artisan Finishes (902 First Ave S, Seattle, 206-340-0830, artisanfinishes.com).

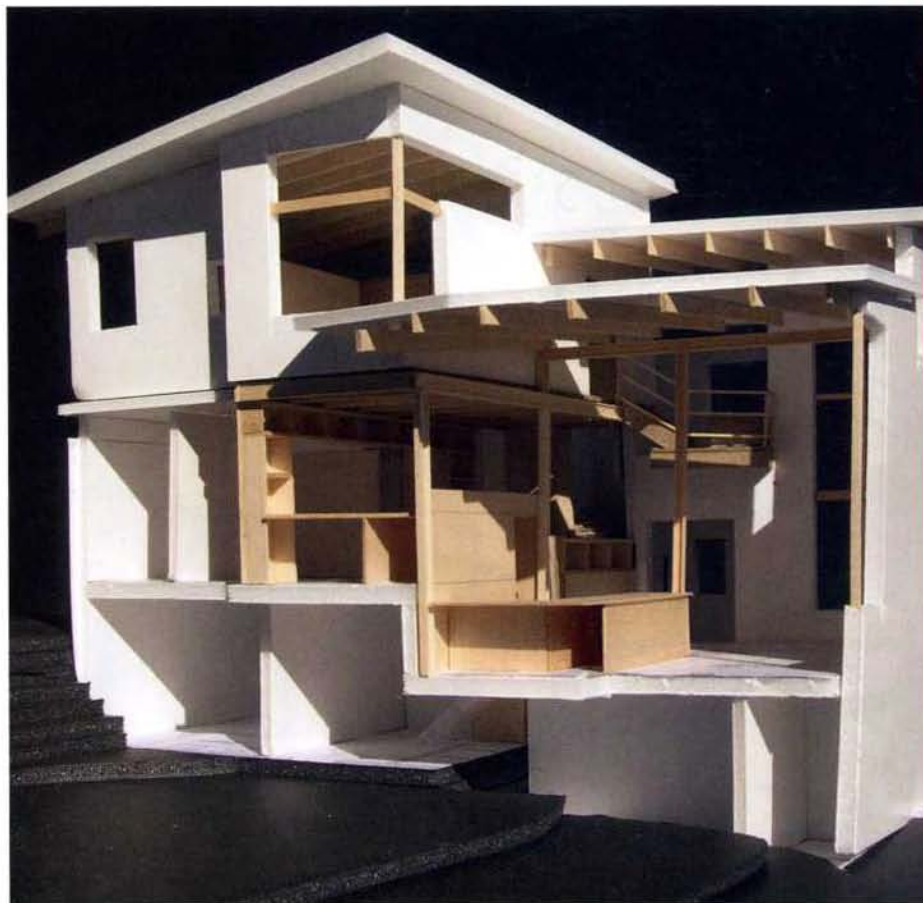
**Light fixtures** Coordinated by Sidney Genette, Genette Beaudette Architectural Lighting (206-467-6484, lightingdesigns.com). **Pendant fixture** (over staircase) Available at Flux Lighting Inc. (3828 Fourth Ave S, Seattle, 206-282-3023, fluxinc.org). **Pendant lamp** (dining room) Executed with assistance from Cliff Goodman, Seattle Glassblowing Studio (2227 Fifth Ave, Seattle, 206-448-2181, seattleglassblowing.com).

**Glassware cabinet** (kitchen) Perforated cold-rolled steel available at McNichols (1221-A 29th St NW, Auburn, 253-939-4747, mcnichols.com); cabinet fabricated by Gem Welding and Fabrication (3031 W Commodore Way, Seattle, 206-283-5883).

**DNA self-portrait** DNA 11 (dna11.com).

**Exterior paint** Benjamin Moore Knoxville Gray. **Interior paint** Benjamin Moore November Rain, Stuart Gold, Green Tint; and C2 Outback and Paprika.

**Step lively** The stepped connection between floors allowed a variety of room heights (study model, top right). Cutouts and translucent dividers (as in the master bath, right) maintain a feeling of openness.



and still widely coveted by collectors for their retro appeal. "The woodie was the most individual car ever made," he explains, "and the surfers who used them were the freest spirits in the world." Slowly lacing his fingers behind his head and reclining, he mused, "I'm a laid-

back cat and I wanted John to know that this house had to roll with that attitude."

DeForest nods, and quickly elaborates. "If I sat down and said 'I want to design a house that looks like that car'—that would be crazy. But if I design with those values, and that kind of person in mind, then there's a good chance for it to come out that way, and it's not just a caricature."

The new house rises from the old foundation as a pair of offset battened boxes, tamped into place on a steep hillside lot. Windows, highlighted with warm patches of horizontal cedar, punch through the gray-green skin of fiber cement siding, providing views in every compass direction. Light floods into two bedrooms, two baths, an office, an exercise room, a den, and a loftlike living-dining area.

"I wanted to live in every part of my house," says Sutton. "Every bit of it needed to have a role and a function that integrated with my lifestyle, with spaces that unfolded themselves to me."

The rooms unfurl from the zigzagging central staircase. DeForest dismissed the modern convention of dividing space as little as possible and strategically staggered each enclosed





room along the stair like boxes from an armature. The solution keeps five levels of dedicated rooms organized and within reach. The spaces reveal themselves in a tidy and colorful cascade of lookouts and switchbacks, each offering its own prospect of the interior and the outdoors. The overall effect minimizes visual congestion and makes it all feel airborne.

The main-floor living area holds a favorite Eames lounge chair and a chunky, stepped alder bench of the owner's design. A nearby alcove contains a supersaturated digital por-

trait of the homeowner's DNA and a small memorial to his cherished dog Bayaka, who passed away last November. It holds his collar. "He was always a consideration in the design process," explains Sutton. "We carpeted the bamboo floors to make it easy for a 10-year-old Rhodesian Ridgeback to get around without slipping. It was important to give him easy access to every part of this house."

In the kitchen, a dense, stacked phalanx of cabinets keeps dishes, utensils, and appliances in easy reach without squandering



**Laid-back cat** Sutton's DJ booth/den (above) overlooks the living area (left), which is filled with cozy textures.

square footage or cluttering countertops. DeForest and Sutton chose vertical-grain maple facing for its silky, placid surface color. A cage of perforated cold-rolled steel, cantilevered from the opposite wall, holds glassware and creates an industrial counterpoint.

When friends fill these spaces, and the mood strikes, Sutton can jog up the first set of stairs to the den, an open-air DJ booth overlooking the living room. On twin turntables, Sutton spins records and thumps out beats while hovering over his guests a half story below. "My DJ friends come over and they're like 'No way' and I'm like 'Yeah way!'" Across the landing is Sutton's crisply appointed home office where he spends 90 percent of his workday. Just beyond the office is a small outdoor deck.

Another flight up is the master suite with wide views to the green ridge of Magnolia and the city beyond. Bisecting the suite is a monumental caramel-hued bamboo headboard, with recesses for books and artwork on the



bedroom side, and heated towel bars on the bathroom side. Surrounding walls and tub are coated with tinted concrete plaster in khaki and gunmetal gray. The effect is open, light-filled, and spalike. Sutton's exercise room is directly across the hall.

"It was nice to start with something plain that had potential," says DeForest, "but old split-level homes have compartmentalized rooms you can't see into. I was really excited about the stepped connection between the floors; it's often left unexplored in residential design. Houses are usually just a series of floors stacked right on top of one another."

In the darkest months of winter, Sutton returns home from the North Cascade slopes

(by the end of January, he had logged 16 days of snowboarding), drops his gear, and crawls into his ground-floor steam room to gently restore his core temperature. Refreshed and relaxed, he may descend to the basement media room to blow off another kind of steam. Low-ceilinged, plasma-screened, and surrounded with flop-ready couches and ear-busting speakers, the media room is a guy's lounge. "I get right down and blow the doors off that sound system," says Sutton. "I just rock out—and I'm not disturbing anyone. That's my getaway, my Zen moment."

"Jason is the kind of person who reinvents himself every couple of years," observes

**The gray lantern** The heroic remodel took roughly 23 months to complete, and the new home glows with possibility.

DeForest. And so, where others might have seen chaos, DeForest detected a unique narrative. He passed an architect's hand over the bumpy, uniquely textured surface of Sutton's life, reading it like braille, and a rich pattern emerged. "Building is what so many clients focus on, but the design process was the most important aspect of this project for me," says Sutton. "I thought of it as a job—my dream job, actually." He grins. "I always said this house was going to make me a better man." ✨