



# THE HEART OF THE MATTER

A modern aerie in the Willamette Valley  
makes the most of its dramatic site and captures  
the spirit of those who reside within.

WRITTEN BY CHRISTINE DEORIO  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY ERIC STAUDENMAIER

**Architecture:** Christopher Kempel, Rockefeller Kempel Architects **Interior Design:** Alana Homesley, Alana Homesley Interior Design  
**Home Builder:** Mike Cowan, Cowan Construction, LLC **Landscape Architecture:** Brian Bainson, Quatrefoil Inc.





MW Design Workshop created a stainless steel-clad pivot door for the entry of this home by architect Christopher Kempel in Oregon's Willamette Valley. Designer Alana Homesley furnished the space with a vintage Khotan rug from Galerie Shabab in New York and a custom walnut bench upholstered in Jerry Pair Leather hide.

Cinematic” might be the best way to describe one of architect Christopher Kempel’s earliest glimpses of the forested 30-acre site overlooking the Willamette Valley where his bi-coastal clients planned to build a new house. “I’ll never forget this because it was snowing,” he recalls of a visit to the existing home. “There was a long ribbon window, and the scene it framed—the contrast of the snow against the Douglas-fir trunks—was gorgeous. If there was a classic way to describe a forest view, this was it.”

Seduced by the locale, Kempel directed his energies toward creating a dwelling that would maximize its twin vistas—of the forest in one direction and the river flowing through the valley in the other. Capturing the latter was a must for the family, who were arriving in Oregon by way of Florida. “One thing I have found after always being near water is that it’s an escape for me,” the wife, a California native, says. “I need that sense of relief, and I felt that having this vast mileage to look at would provide it.” The architect decided on an L-shaped plan that allowed for both.

“The design was rooted in the challenge that we were moving this family from Florida to the Pacific Northwest,” notes Kempel. His solution riffs on classic midcentury modern California homes, “whose DNA is based on inviting the outdoors in,” he adds. Each of the home’s wings—one holds everyday living spaces; the other guest accommodations, a gym and an office—allow light to penetrate through floor-to-ceiling windows. Joining the wings is a two-and-a-half-story glass tower that contains the home’s main staircase, a monumental wood-and-steel sculptural form that wraps around a central bookcase stack.

But it couldn’t just be a house of glass. “We wanted the structure to feel grounded, so the entire basement level is cast-in-place architectural concrete,” Kempel says. Raw steel was used for the exposed posts supporting the entrance canopy and glass-walled dining room and the living room’s bookcases and rhythmic colonnade. Washougal stone covers the fireplaces and cedar warms the walls—“because it was important for the house to feel natural in the woods and for the materials to be locally sourced,” says the architect.

To emphasize a cocoon-like quality, Kempel created inviting nooks, from window seats in the

living room and office to perches on the staircase’s landings. “These aren’t just an architectural design,” notes designer Alana Homesley. “They’re placed according to how the homeowners really live.” The wife confirms this: “I often find my girls on the daybed when they want to be connected to the rest of the family but still have a quiet place to read.”

Homesley provided similar opportunities for connection in the living room, where distinct seating areas allow the family to keep close while reading, piano-playing and puzzling. The furnishings—a mix of industrial-farmhouse, midcentury and soft-modern pieces—reflect the straightforward lines and unadulterated natural materials found throughout. There’s distressed leather on the coffee table, cotton velvet on a sofa and an elm-branch base on an ebonized-wood credenza, “which has such a beautiful open grain, you can see the texture,” says the designer. Metal and stone side tables incorporate additional tactile sensations, and touches of shearling “keep it light,” she says, “in case it’s raining outside.”

The home’s palette is a neutral one with crisp white walls and natural woods for the flooring and cabinetry, many of which were chosen by designer Martha Williams of Design Line Studio. To that soothing backdrop, Homesley added shades inspired by the surroundings on sunny days to act as leaveners. In the primary bedroom, a peacock-green upholstered headboard pops against light walls, and in the study, a pair of Hans Wegner’s Papa Bear chairs are upholstered in “the color of the sky through the clerestory when the clouds break,” Homesley says.

Such dedication to the details is evident outdoors as well. The windows that general contractor Mike Cowan and his team installed perfectly align with the cedar siding’s horizontal grooves, while the Japanese maples that landscape architect Brian Bainnson established are intended as living sculptures, with their forms and seasonal changes a way to play off the geometry of the house.

“The rigor of this house is relentless,” Kempel admits. “But in our pursuit of perfection, there was an unexpected moment: When the forms were stripped off the cast-concrete walls, a scar was revealed. We fretted over it, but because so much of the house is perfected and machined, it ended up being a source of character. It’s a reminder that the beauty of a natural material is that it has its own life and limits”—a noble value to ponder in a home that embodies many. ■





**Above:** An abstract artwork by Harry Gundersen and a Mansour Modern rug add color to the stair landing's materials palette of walnut, cedar and steel. The home's impressive array of thermally efficient aluminum windows is by Marlin Windows, sourced through Portland Millwork.

**Left:** The Great Plains cotton blend on the chairs from Modernica in Los Angeles echoes the sky seen through the study's clerestory, while the black Edelman leather on the custom sofa serves as a grounding element. Complementing the seating's midcentury vibes is a Helios chandelier from Holly Hunt in Los Angeles. For organic touches, there are a Shiir carpet and a Goby Walnut slab on the coffee table.



“THE DESIGN WAS  
**ROOTED IN THE  
CHALLENGE** THAT  
WE WERE MOVING  
THIS FAMILY FROM  
SUNNY FLORIDA  
TO THE **PACIFIC  
NORTHWEST.**”

—CHRISTOPHER KEMPEL



Housed in a glass volume, the dining room boasts 270-degree views of the forest and valley and easy access to the outdoors. To keep the focus on the surroundings, the furnishings—including the clients' existing benches recovered in a Great Plains fabric, BDDW chairs, a custom live-edge tabletop by Goby Walnut and Rocky Mountain Hardware's Linear chandelier—are minimal yet dramatic.





**Above:** To take in the vista of the valley in the primary bathroom, Kempel positioned the freestanding Victoria + Albert tub with Waterworks fixtures at the floor-to-ceiling windows.

**Left:** Homesley dressed the bed in the primary bedroom in Matouk linens and upholstered the frame and headboard in a Rogers & Goffigon fabric. The latter move introduces a softer feel that references the deep green hues found around the property. For nighttime light, there are a pair of Kevin Reilly Collection fixtures. The artwork is by Todd Hido.