Thompson and Rose's **EQUIPMENT BUILDING** in rural Washington State demonstrates that there can be elegance in utility.

by Karen D. Stein

The roof of the shop, along the road (site plan below), peaks over the garage wing (left and opposite top) with its drive-through bay (opposite bottom).

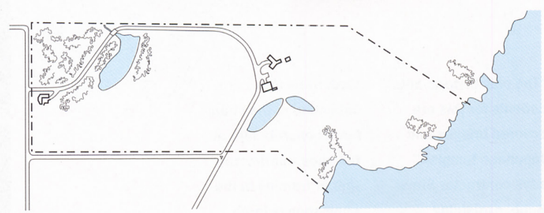
Small projects that evolve slowly are not the favorites of most architects, particularly those who are eager to establish a name. But projects for repeat clients often are. So what are the chances that a series of seemingly disconnected small commissions for the same client will lead to something memorable, if not iconic? Good, according to architects Maryann Thompson and Charles Rose. When they were just starting their Cambridge, Massachusetts–based practice in the early 1990s, like many young architects the duo did what Rose calls "a lot of kitchen jobs" to build their portfolio [see RECORD, June 1997, page 98]. One such remodeling project was for a Boston-area couple, who later hired them to do work for the family on Martha's Vineyard. The architects found their ongoing association ideal because these clients "are interested in ideas and construction," explains Thompson, even if they don't move quickly in architectural matters. "They are focused on incremental change," says Rose. "He, in particular, likes to tinker and tinker and tinker to get things right." Their client concurs. "Frankly, we love architecture and we love the process," he says.

After the couple purchased Straitsview Farm, 125 acres of rolling farmland nestled in San Juan Island, Washington, in 1988, they hired the landscape architect Michael Van Valkenburgh to transform what he recalls as "a residence with passive agriculture" into a working organic farm. Van Valkenburgh's scheme called for the creation of three ponds to collect and store enough water to irrigate 10 acres of farmland. The remainder of the property is intended for cattle grazing and berry picking by other islanders. "The idea is to gradually bring the farm back to life," says its owner.

By the early '90s, the reinvigoration of the property included a plan by Thompson and Rose, who had become the unofficial family architect, to rescue an existing farmhouse near the barn. "We were going to nuke it," jokes the owner of the undistinguished bungalow. Instead, the architects reoriented its main rooms around bay views, adding new windows and ample porches to make it a suitable vacation home. When an equipment-storage shed on the property blew away in a violent storm, the farmers who work the land asked the owners for a new one. The owners decided to "raise the aesthetic bar," they say, by asking Thompson and Rose for "an objet d'art."

The architects worked with Van Valkenburgh to determine an appropriate site for the new 3,700-square-foot shed-cum-barn, locating it along the road and the edge of a meadow, tucked among a sprinkling of giant cedars that thicken into a grove. The building is at its highest along the street, giving it an amplified public presence, and it steps down toward the farm, as if to merge with the landscape.

Placing the structure within the line of trees "enhances the mysterious quality," says Thompson. In fact, the trees give the impression of a veil around the building, with the sunlight dappling over *(text continues)*



SITE PLAN N

Project: *Equipment Building, Straitsview Farm, San Juan Island, Washington*
Designer: *Thompson and Rose Designers—Charles Rose, David Martin, Maryann Thompson, team*
Landscape Designer: *Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates*
Consultants: *B&B Engineered Timber—Ben Brungraber (structural); Giovanni Giustina (craftsman)*
Contractor: *S.B. Inc.—Steve Babb*

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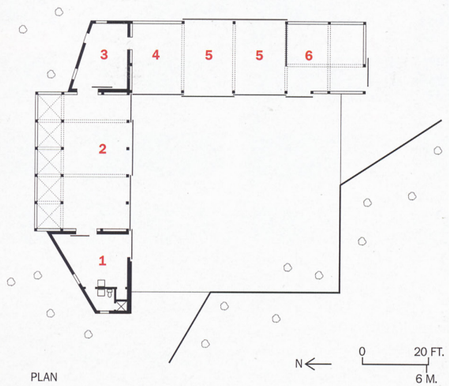

PLAN

The treelike structural exhibitionism of the wood shop (opposite) contrasts with what engineer Ben Brungraber calls the "deforested" truck storage bays (below and left).

1. *Vet's station*
2. *Shop*
3. *Farm office*
4. *Equipment bay*
5. *Drive-through equipment bay*
6. *Storage*

the cedar slats and spotlighting the courtyard between the L-shaped structure and a low wood wall. "The forms are very connected to the topography," says Rose. "The building changes as it reveals itself," offers Thompson. "It's like a sleeping animal emerging from the earth."

To determine the structure of the shed's two wings, a wood shop and a garage, shop drawings went back and forth between Thompson and Rose and their structural engineer, Ben Brungraber. Larch was used for the more dramatic interior of the shop. It came from trees in Idaho that were killed in a forest fire 65 years ago, making it unusually dry, dense, and thus desirable, according to contractor Steve Bobb. In the shop, the architects decided to expose each layer of the structure, as if to glorify the process of construction for those who would eventually work in the 28-foot-wide, 40-foot-long, and 28-foot-high space. Black asphalt-impregnated felt—a building wrap and vapor barrier—shows between the post and infill framing. Even the steel rods, which were used to meet the 90-mile-per-hour wind-load resistance and seismic-zone 4 requirements, were threaded through the forest of beams as additional patterning.

And while there is an air of uniformity to the construction, the reality is more complex. "It was a difficult assembly, but I hope it doesn't look that way," says Bobb, explaining that there are 25 to 30 different types of joints in the space, none of which use nails. "It's exuberant, but structurally rational," observes Rose. "While it looks sculptural, every piece does work."

The structural challenges of the truck-storage bay were different, according to Brungraber. Since the architects refused to use plywood because the panels would interrupt the woven look of both interior and exterior surfaces, steel rods were inserted to bolster the roof. Though the garage is lower than the other wing (its roof peaks at 16 feet, 12 feet lower than the shop's roof), the effect of wind loads was complicated by the two long walls of sliding cedar-slat doors, which had to be reinforced. When the doors are opened, the building is transformed into a wooden frame for the landscape beyond.

The overall effect so intrigued a neighbor that she contrived a reason to get inside. Afterwards she wrote to the architects, commenting that the building "has its own identity, but it fits right in." Says the owner, in response, "Mission accomplished." ■

Sources
Cedar-colored stains: *Cabot*
Locksets: *Schlage*
Hinges: *Stanley*
Downlights: *GE, Halo*
Exterior lights: *Poulsen*