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HOME/REAL ESTATE

ARCHITECT IN A KIT

Renowned architect Jim Cutler teams with packaged-home purveyor Lindal



STEVE RINGMAN / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Cutler reviews drawings with fellow architects Hiro Kurozumi and Bruce Anderson.

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Seattle Times staff reporter

Outside of architecture circles, the name Jim Cutler might not be megaprofile, but one of his clients certainly is. Technobillionaire Bill Gates.

In the late 1980s, Microsoft's co-founder initiated a worldwide architectural competition to design his 40,000-

square-foot Medina manse. Some 23 architects were invited to apply.

In the end, just two were left standing: Cutler, a little-known Bainbridge Island architect, and Peter Bohlin, nationally renowned from Pennsylvania. Together they won, and the wood, glass and stone Xanadu they designed for Gates on the shore of Lake Washington has been hailed ever since as a pinnacle of Northwest regional design.



CUTLER ANDERSON ARCHITECTS

A sketch of a design architect Jim Cutler did for Lindal Cedar Homes.

Now Cutler is partnering again, this time with Seattle-based Lindal Cedar Homes, to offer a kit home, predesigned by an “A list” architect, adaptable to the owners’ needs and built on their own land. Even more unusual, Cutler will position each home on its lot – in fact, he insists on it – providing the service that makes custom homes shout “custom.”

“When we go to a piece of land, we study it really carefully so the most beautiful aspects of land are revealed as you move through it,” says the architect.

Like the Gates house, the two floor plans designed for Lindal, the nation’s largest manufacturer of packaged post-and-beam homes, will have the Cutler touch: lots of wood and glass and exposed construction detail that says, in an understated way, of course, Northwest natural deluxe, honest and straightforward.

But instead of waiting in line to have Cutler and his crew



STEVE RINGMAN / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Jim Cutler, who helped design Bill Gates’ Medina home, works out of his Bainbridge Island office.

at Cutler Anderson Architects on Bainbridge Island design an individual house, the general public can buy a precut one beginning next month and potentially see it completed by late summer. “What we bring to six or eight or 10 people a year we can bring to 50,” he estimates.

Cutler, 54, says one of his goals is to make residential design better.

“There’s an incredible amount of just endlessly bad work being done out there,” he says. “If we play our cards right, this will

be financially successful, and if it is, what is that going to tell all of (Lindal’s) competitors?”

“The more people who jump into fitting a building well to the site and designing materials, the better off we are. It goes back to the romantic idea of changing the world.”

For their part, buyers will get an architect-designed, site-specific home for markedly less than they’d pay if they hired him – or most architects, for that matter. How much less? Cutler declined to reveal his fees, but local architects say a custom house commonly costs \$400 or more a square foot to build (including architect’s fees but minus land costs).

Turn-key costs for Cutler’s Lindal home designs will depend on the quality of the finishing materials, such as cabinetry and lighting, that homeowners select. But in general, they should come in around \$200 a square foot, excluding land, says Jeff Caden, Lindal’s vice president of marketing.

Lindal is calling Cutler’s two floor plans the Reflection Home Series. Each consists of a central core and two highly flexible wings. They can contain bedrooms or a garage or other space. They can shrink or grow. They can be positioned at various angles off the core. It all depends on what the buyers want and the topography of their land.

As a result, the homes can be as small as 1,500 square feet or expand to about 4,000. That puts the finished price in the range of \$300,000 to \$800,000 plus the cost of the lot. They’re designed for a quarter-acre.

The first prototype is under construction near St. Louis; none has been sold here yet.

Founded in 1945, Lindal Cedar Homes is one of perhaps 100 packaged-home purveyors. Over the years, it’s offered hundreds of home designs, many with a sort of A-frame ski chalet look. All are built of kiln-dried Western red cedar and bear a lifetime structural warranty.

While Lindal has employed architects before, Caden considers hiring a top-tier practitioner a bold move.

“We’re the first ones to utilize world-class architecture and combine it with building-system manufacturing,” he says. “It’s an exciting project from that point of view.”

And Cutler, whose other recent projects include the national award-winning Maple Valley Library; the Federal Office Building in Portland, Ore.; and private residences in New York, Spain and Tennessee, isn’t the only one on Lindal’s radar.

The company soon will announce that architect-designer Michael Graves will design homes for it. Graves, best known to the general public through his houseware designs for Target, already has whipped up a space-adding home "pavilion" for Target that's being manufactured by Lindal.

Caden says hiring Cutler is an attempt to lure younger customers with cutting-edge design. Today's typical Lindal buyer is an older baby-boomer who's buying a smaller second home or a preretirement home.

Most are built in the suburban rings around major cities in the Northwest, Northeast and Midwest. The homes are sold through 150 independent dealers nationwide. (Information about them and Lindal's array of home designs is available at www.lindal.com or 1-888-4lindal.)

This is the first time Cutler has signed on to mass-produce his work, but not his first foray into manufactured housing.

The University of Pennsylvania undergrad and architecture graduate "got paid \$2.10 an hour to work in a mobile-home factory at the end of my freshman year in collage. Stan Urbanski Mobile Homes. We built one and a half houses a day," he recalls rather fondly.

The architect considers it too early to know whether his foray into mass construction will be successful. He will say, however, that, "We'll stick with Lindal as long as both they or we think it's productive."

The "we" in this case refers to the others in his firm instrumental in the Lindal connection. They include his architect partner Bruce Anderson and Hiro Kurozumi, an architect on their staff.

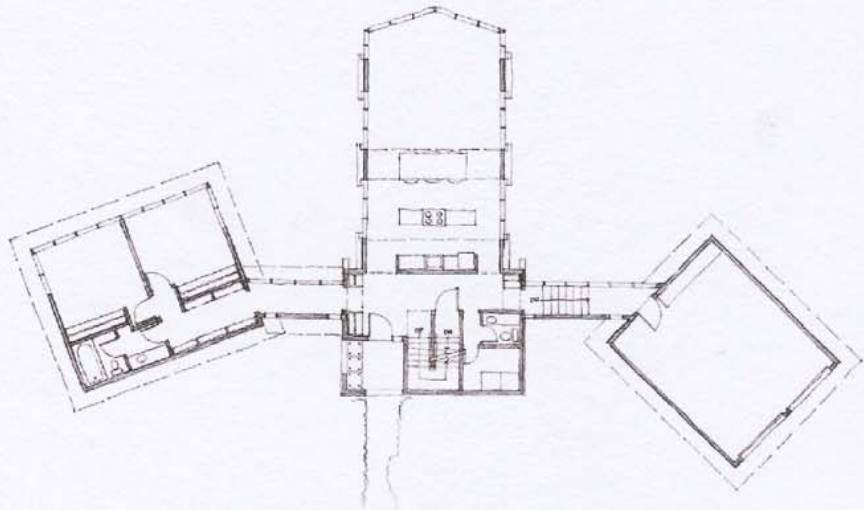
Peter Bohlin, with whom Cutler collaborated on the Gates house, lauds his friend's Lindal partnership.

"Jim is both sensitive to the nature of materials and the nature of architecture and the landscape," Bohlin opines. "I think it's great he's done these houses for Lindal because it's good to share those perceptions with a greater audience, and particularly people who might not hire architects."



ART GRICE

This stone-and-wood Cutler-designed home, while not for Lindal, is representative of his work.



CUTLER ANDERSON ARCHITECTS

The floor plan for one of two houses Jim Cutler has designed for Lindal Cedar Homes.