



Arts columnist

The front view of the Wabi-Sabi House on Bartlett, developed by Carol Isaak Barden and designed by the Seattle firm Olson Sundberg Kundig Allen Architects. Rick Sundberg will speak at the MFAH Brown Auditorium today.

DON GLENTZER: FOR THE CHRONICLE



▶ PLAY | ◀ BACK | NEXT ▶

May 19, 2008, 6:07PM

Wabi-sabi makes its mark on Houston

By LISA GRAY
Copyright 2008 Houston Chronicle

Carol Isaak Barden, a Houston developer, was nervous. Normally, in a first interview with an architect, the client is in the driver's seat — the person who'll say yes or no. But this time around, she, the client, was courting the architect.

Barden had built 12 very modern white-stucco houses in Houston, designed by architects such as Allen Bianchi and the firm Strasser Ragni. This time around, she wanted to try something different — still modern, but warmer and more natural-seeming, more like buildings she'd admired in Asia and her native Washington state.

She aimed for Olson Sundberg Kundig Allen Architects, a Seattle firm that made its name designing houses for the gazillionaires who erupted from Microsoft and Starbucks. And in fall 2007, she met with partner Rick Sundberg, whose résumé includes high-profile projects such as Seattle University's School of Law and a much-praised re-thinking of that city's Frye Art Museum. At this stage in his career, Sundberg is picky about the projects he accepts.

With that in mind, Barden pitched "The Wabi-Sabi House," an Asian-influenced three-bedroom, three-bath, to be built in a neighborhood near Rice University. Barden, who styles herself a "couture" builder, is no piker: The two Francois de Menil townhouses she recently completed went on the market for \$1 million each. But to Sundberg, used to dot-com wealth, her proposal to build something less than 4,000 square feet sounded like restraint. And restraint interested him.

Wabi-sabi: He was in.

Buddhism and the builder

Wabi-sabi, the classical Japanese worldview, grew out of the Buddhist conception of life: Everything is imperfect; everything is impermanent; and everything is incomplete. Roughly translated, "wabi" means humble; and "sabi" denotes the passage of time. A cracked bamboo vase; a tea cup, ever so slightly lop-sided; jeans worn until they're soft and faded: If you sit still, pay attention and appreciate them, all can be very wabi-sabi.

That exquisite level of refinement — the stuff of ikebana and haiku — is fashionable in certain American circles now, but it seems at odds with hustling Houston. Restraint is not our strong suit. Japanese interiors look empty to us; we're not used to paring down. Imperfection, impermanence and incompleteness seem less like subjects of meditation than grounds for a lawsuit.

But we're also a big, broad city, with room for different points of view — and, arguably, more need for homes that are refuges from all that bustle. The almost-finished Wabi-Sabi House, at 2316 Bartlett, makes a good case for the calming pleasures of wood, stone and light.

The countertops match a smooth black stone that Barden picked up on a hike; the carpet, a gray one. The floors are dark, hard ipe, a Brazilian wood that requires little maintenance. The stairwell will be screened with dark-stained stalks of bamboo. The carefully placed windows offer green, leafy views — including a large pecan tree that Barden was careful to preserve — but don't let in much of the hot Texas sun, so different from Seattle's dim gray light.

However peaceful, the house is hardly a monastery. The kitchen includes a wine fridge and a flat-screen TV. The deck with the big pecan tree boasts an outdoor kitchen, and the big upstairs closets have room for serious shoe collections. The place may be restrained, but that restraint is imperfect and incomplete. Such is life.

More wabi-sabi

Outside, the house is clad in cypress, which will age gracefully, in a very wabi-sabi way. But otherwise, the house evokes Seattle more than Japan. The dramatic front wall tilts outward, toward the street — a nervy modern styling that Sundberg hadn't been sure Barden would go for. After all, she had to find a buyer for the house.

But Barden liked the tilting wall. She wanted the house to be "quietly assertive," not invisible. Enough people have been seriously interested that she's planning to build more wabi-sabi houses. She won't talk about the price of this one because she's in negotiations with a prospective buyer.

Sundberg is mulling over new approaches, wondering whether he can talk Barden into putting the bedrooms downstairs, so that the upstairs living room would enjoy a treetop view. If he takes her next project, it'll probably mean turning down bigger, better-paying projects. But working with Barden, he says, is "fun." And by saying no sometimes, he can make room for the things he loves: a concept that is very wabi-sabi.

lisa.gray@chron.com

RESOURCES

LECTURE BY RICK SUNDBERG

"Shared Visions, Separate Voices" a lecture by Rick Sundberg on the widely different styles of the architects at Olson Sundberg Kundig Allen Architects. Book signing to follow.

- **When:** 7 tonight
- **Where:** Brown Auditorium, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 1001 Bissonnet
- **Cost:** Free
- **Details:** 713-639-7360, www.oskaarchitects.com and carolisaakbarden.com