

FROM THE ARCHIVES

# A Traditional Waterfront Residence in Vancouver is a Streamlined Sanctuary

Artist Martha Sturdy's five-acre island retreat doubles as a design  
laboratory and dramatic getaway

By Peter Haldeman

Photography by Laurie Black

Artist Martha Sturdy.

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In Japan recently to attend Tokyo Designers Week, Martha Sturdy kept a close watch on the installation of the two-ton, 17-foot-high log sculpture she had created for the event. But the Canadian artist, who travels to the Far East every year, was equally preoccupied with the visuals of that kinetic city, from the engineering feats of the Imperial Palace to the dimensions of the tuna for sale at the fish market ("one-and-a-half by three feet, like hunks of beef," she says). Size matters to Sturdy, a lot: Everything she makes, including jewelry, furniture, home accessories, and artwork, is at once pared down to a bare essence and scaled up for a bold presence. Her wide-ranging brand, distributed through Baker furniture stores and showrooms in the States, has led to comparisons with another busy overachiever—Martha Stewart. But Martha Sturdy is a

product of art school (Emily Carr University of Art + Design in Vancouver) rather than Wall Street: "I need to be physically involved and hands-on to be happy," she insists.

Like American Martha, Canadian Martha owns several homes that double as design laboratories. There's the concrete-and-glass aerie in Vancouver, overlooking British Columbia's Strait of Georgia, a showcase for Sturdy's sculptural furniture and accessories of brass, steel, and synthetic resin. She has a 250-acre farm in the village of Pemberton, near Whistler, where she's building a sculpture park. And her latest acquisition, Preston Island, is a tiny, pine-dense refuge some 20 miles northwest of Vancouver, where the summer rays and winter rains put the outdoor furniture she designs to the test. "My husband didn't want to buy the island," she admits. "But a place that has a rock called the Birthing Rock because seals have their babies on it—I just said, This is magical."

Lacking a freshwater source, the island remained uninhabited—"except by outlaws," Sturdy says—until the middle of the last century. Its most recent tenants built a two-story cottage (equipped with a generator and a water desalination unit) on the shoreline out of timber and roughly chiseled granite. "This created a bit of a conflict," she says, "because my husband is a lumber wholesaler and loves wood and I'm a minimalist and love stone." They managed to meet halfway: Sturdy ripped out yards of homey wainscoting, but replaced the wall-to-wall carpeting with oak instead of her cherished concrete. The new stainless-steel kitchen was a unanimous choice.

The streamlined interiors of the otherwise traditional house are as bracing as a dunk in the Pacific. Between them the couple has six grown children and ten grandchildren, and Sturdy furnished the bedrooms with utilitarian bunk beds—and

originally planned to outfit all the rooms in durable black leather. "But the past couple of years I've become very keen on white," she reveals. "I said, Okay, let's do white, and I don't care if we use different shades, because I think that makes a more interesting collage." White leather chairs and sofas now mingle coolly with snowy resin tables and black-and-white "wall sculptures"—the designer's abstract works of resin on steel (resin, an oil-based compound, being Martha Sturdy's "Good Thing"). "What I love about resin is that it can be three-dimensional and any color," she says. "When you have leather or wood, it's just a surface, but with resin the color goes right through the material, so if you scratch it you can sand it and it looks new again."

Outside the house, on a wood deck and a sheltered granite terrace, resin-and-steel pieces overlook the blue sweep of Howe Sound. Monolithic stone benches are sited around the island as judiciously as statuary. They're not just decorative, though. In addition to the usual complement of waterfront activities at hand—swimming, sailing, fishing, clam digging—Sturdy's unspoiled sanctuary offers more contemplative pleasures. Watching otters crack open oysters on their chests, for instance, or simply witnessing a storm rumble in. "Last summer there was a meteor shower," the designer reports. "I stayed up until two in the morning and lay on my back on the terrace and saw shooting stars going in every direction. So you can see why I like the place. It makes you appreciate everything. It makes you slow down."

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