

Calm and quiet Portland architect Eric Schnell is a screaming success. This tall, 44-year-old gay man is a sought-after designer. His luxury houses have appeared in several national magazines—including the current issue of *Beautiful Homes*, published by *Better Homes & Gardens*—and have won an enviable number of professional awards. And he helped save a significant piece of Oregon's architectural history (see sidebar).

All the while, his motivation remains rooted in an intimate understanding of the people who will inhabit his creations.

Schnell grew up on a large cattle ranch in rural North Dakota. He always wanted to design houses and knew a college diploma would be his ticket out of the prairie life that he hated. When he completed his degree in architecture at North Dakota State University, he quickly accepted a friend's invitation to move from icy Fargo to balmy San Diego.

But that was 1982, and an economic recession made his job search difficult. He eventually secured a position designing furniture for a manufacturer of modular office partition systems, a craft in which he had no experience.

"I thought it would be a challenge, and it was," Schnell says. "I had to learn everything about plastic lumber, fabrics, metals and all the parts and pieces that would be going into this, and I had to design how it would be hung off the walls."

He picked up a few design jobs on the side, but the challenge of his day job continued to fade. The time had come to focus full time on his original passion of residential architecture. So he headed to Portland in December 1989, lured by weather that he hoped would pacify the allergies he acquired to San Diego's air pollution.

For the past six years, Schnell has been on the staff of Alan Mascord Design Associates in Northwest Portland, where he prepares the majority of custom home designs and a large number of the stock plans. Custom homes are usually necessary on properties of unusual size or shape, and they typically range in size from 2,000 to 8,000 square feet. At any given time, Schnell juggles a dozen projects in various stages of design, each with unique requirements.

"Often I feel like I'm designing houses for people's stuff and not people," he observes, citing homeowners' growing demand for space to store cars, boats and motorcycles. "Garages are the hardest thing because I want to disguise and downplay them as much as possible, which is difficult to do when the mass is sometimes equal to the rest of the house."

Inside the home, natural light is this architect's central design element. "Living here in Oregon, I know how dark and dreary the winters can be. So, if the sun ever does come out in the winter, I want it to come into the house," Schnell notes.

Other recent trends among new home builders include multiple offices, greater consideration for resale value and open floor plans. Schnell encourages smaller bedrooms and larger common areas in order to bring householders together. On the other hand, he avoids large-volume, two-story spaces that not only are out of human scale but also can lead to sound and privacy issues. And for same-sex couples without children, pets often become a more important design consideration.

Schnell sees himself more as an interpreter of ideas than a dictator of design, and his fluency in translating needs-and-wants into bricks-and-mortar is evident in the numerous awards he received at last year's Northwest Natural Street of Dreams luxury home show.

HOME WORK

In rainy gray Oregon, an award-winning architect sheds light on practical residential design by Timothy Krause

His four-bedroom Montauk House, which sold even before it was open to the public, won six Professional Choice Awards judged by national experts in home design, construction and interior design. Among his accolades were Best of Show, Best Architectural Design and Best Use of Technology.

"This was quite a feat for a house that was the least expensive home in the show—by almost half of the two most expensive homes in the show," he says.

Schnell is even more excited about the challenges he faced in designing his innovative 2003 entry, which sits on a sloping lot that faces north.

"This year's house is very contemporary. I'm curious how people are going to react to it," Schnell says. "If the economy were better, and there were no threats of terrorism or war, I think people would be more open to taking risks. Like in the '50s after World War II, when things seemed to be good and there was lots of building going on. The design of cars, the design of houses, furniture—we made huge leaps, but I think we've regressed since then."

As a gay man, Schnell says he draws on a different sensibility to make clients feel comfortable with all the choices they must make.

"Being gay, we have a sixth sense about certain things that really helps me in my profession. I'm not tied down to all of the stereotypical role-playing of the straight male," he explains. "A lot of my clients are women, and I think they can relate to me a little bit more because I am gay. Whether they know it or not is not important, but I think I give them a sense of confidence that they may or may not have in a straight male." □

Features Editor TIMOTHY KRAUSE can be reached at tim@justout.com.

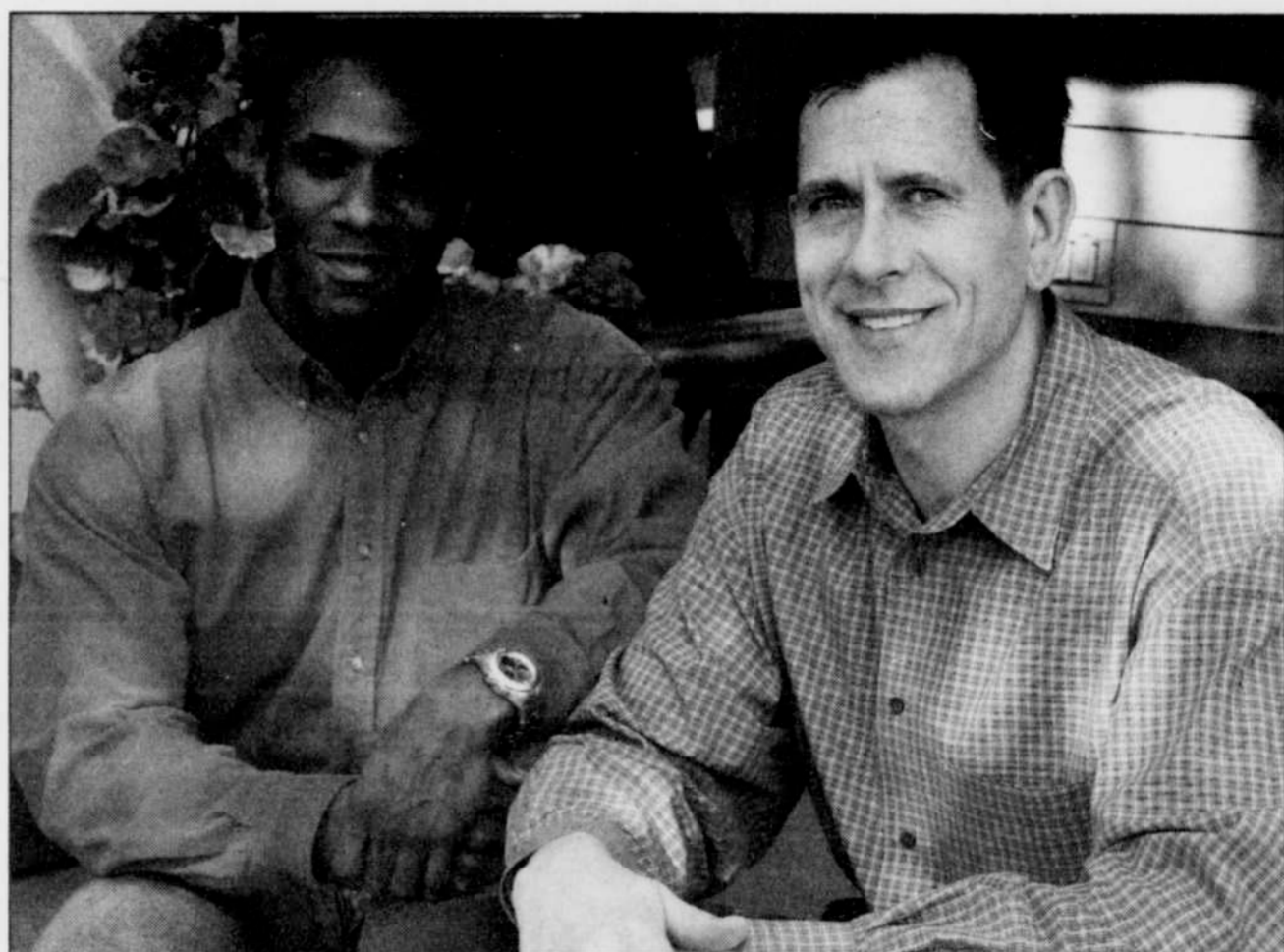


PHOTO BY MARTY DAVIS

Architect Eric Schnell (right, with partner Judge Kemp) designed his Northeast Alberta house, which will be featured in a publication by *Better Homes & Gardens*.



Turn-of-the-20th-century East Coast beach houses inspired the look of this award-winning Lake Oswego residence designed by Schnell.

HIS OLD HOUSE

As soft-spoken as he is, Eric Schnell can make his voice heard when he wants to. And such was the case when he spoke up to save the Gordon House, a Frank Lloyd Wright home that was nearly lost to the wrecking ball.

Built in 1963, it was one of the last of the legendary architect's "Usonian" homes to be built and was the only house he designed in Oregon. When its original owners passed away, the structure and its 22 acres were sold in 2000 to a couple who were planning to demolish the landmark to make way for construction. Schnell, contacted by the builder to design the new home, immediately recognized the lot as the location of the historical house designed by one of his professional role models.

"I told them that I was going to stop them," Schnell says, "and I contacted everybody I could possibly think of that would be interested in saving this house."

His phone soon started ringing, and Schnell's one-man effort gained a momentum of its own. With only hours to spare before a demolition permit was issued, a deal was struck with the national Frank Lloyd Wright Conservancy,



PHOTO BY PHIL AB OLCHE

Schnell helped save the Gordon House, the only home Frank Lloyd Wright designed in Oregon which assumed ownership of the structure and moved it off the property.

The Gordon House has been rebuilt on the site of the Oregon Garden in Silverton and, thanks in no small part to Schnell, is now open to the public. □