



CALL OF THE MOUNTAINS

On one Massachusetts couple's wishlist? Simple and sustainable



“Energy efficient. Sustainable. Modern. Simple. Elegant.”

As Stowe-based architect Ernie Ruskey remembers, these were some of the adjectives on his clients’ wish list for the house they hoped to build in Stowe. The Concord, Mass., couple fell in love with Stowe after numerous holiday visits with their two young children and finally decided to build their own second home here. “They knew I admired—and had designed—the type of house they were after and we really hit it off,” said Ruskey. “From day one we were on the same page.”

Builder Steve Sisler, a frequent Ruskey collaborator, was also involved from the project’s beginnings.

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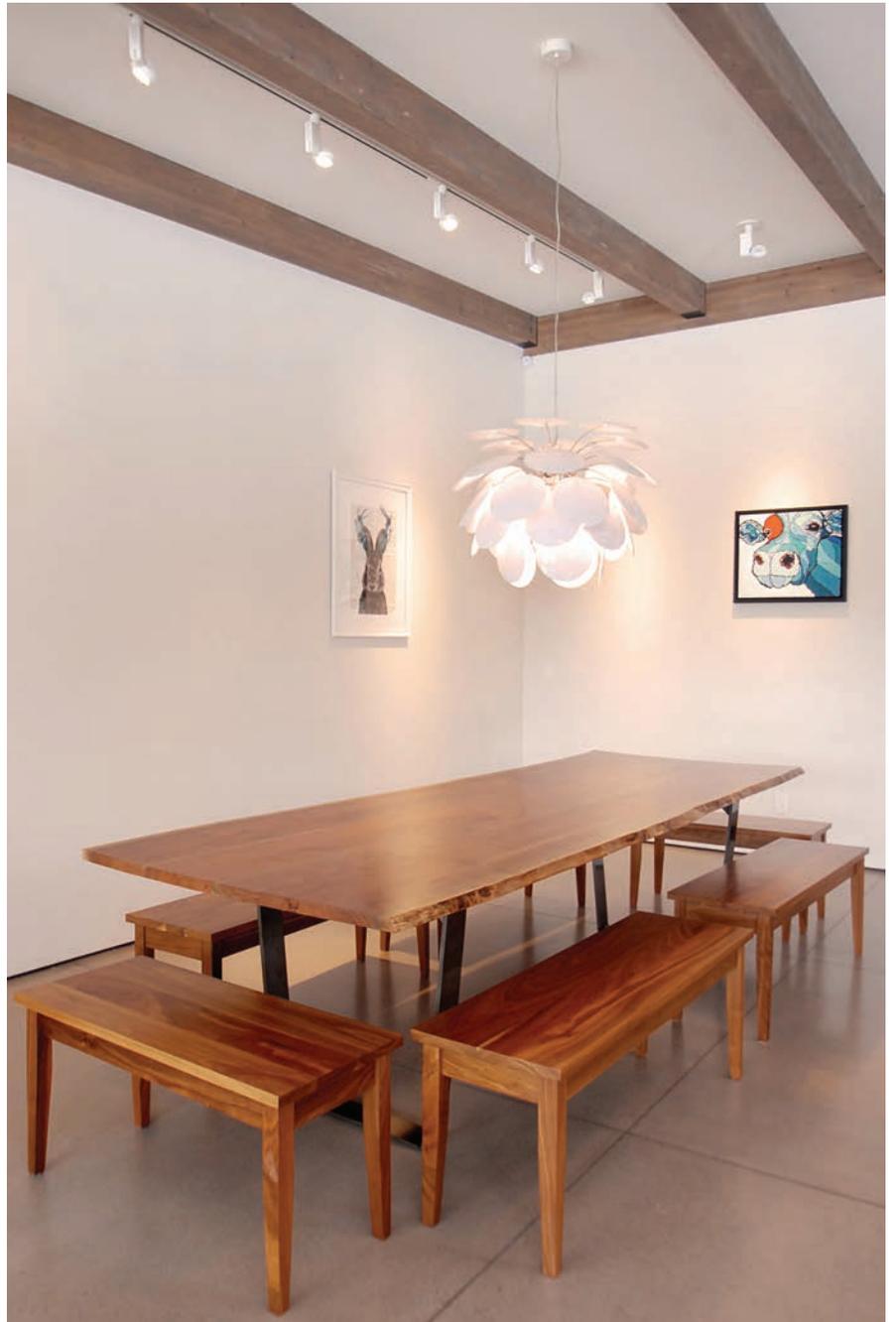
Previous page: To help break up its mass, architect Ernie Ruskey of Tektonika Studio Architects in Stowe tucked this three-story, 4,500-square-foot second home into a mildly sloping, forested lot. Above and right: In their zeal for simplicity, owners chose a muted color palette (grays, browns, and whites) for their interior design and kept furnishings to a minimum. A pillow with a red ski gondola provides a splash of color.

■ open plan



As this open-plan, great room design proves, the team opted for an open and casual living arrangement to accommodate an active and growing family. Maximizing the close and distant views were paramount so the design called for a wall of 12-foot high windows and made sure the Swedish wood-burning stove did not obstruct the views.

■ table for 10



To help fulfill the owners' wish to "bring the outside in," and present a clean, simple aesthetic, they chose a Vermont-sourced, live edge walnut dining table. Concrete floors and a lack of trimwork also lend to the simple look the homeowner's wished to create.





The open, airy kitchen features a splash of color with a painted tempered glass backsplash. The room is anchored by a concrete-topped island surrounded by benches that offer family and guests an informal dining/drinking spot.

■ seamless fit



The Sisler Builders-crafted cabinetry is modern and minimal, as are the concrete countertops and contemporary lighting.



While the master bathroom is also minimally designed, it takes full advantage of the home's dramatic views, thanks to its generously sized window. The double sinks are sleek and seamless and, again, simple.



The main entrance to the house opens onto a massive, open riser, three-story custom built steel-and-wood staircase. A large window allows light to pour into the stairway, filling the interior of the house.





The home features rich wood throughout, but designers opted for a “zero-reveal” approach that eliminated baseboard and other trim to give the house a more modern, clean, unfussy look. A sculpture-like lighting fixture offers a bit of whimsy.

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The owners were excited with their choice of architect and builder. “It was a meeting of the minds from the day we met,” said the wife. “Both Ernie and Steve really understood the kind of cozy but accommodating house we were after. It was so helpful that we all spoke the same language.”

With a sloping, south-facing lot that offers dramatic, nearly unobstructed views of the nearby Worcester Range and more distant southerly peaks of Camel’s Hump and Mount Ellen, locating the house on the 5.3-acre lot was straightforward. “We walked the lot several times with Ernie to make sure we were maximizing our views,” explained the wife. Ruskey also factored in seasonal changes in light and sun when he positioned the home.

Aware that this was going to be the only modern-style house in the neighborhood, the team decided to set it back from the road to help it nestle into the hemlocks and pines near the rear portion of the wooded lot. “It was important to us that our home looked as if it were rooted into the land and landscape as opposed to being merely plopped onto it,” said the wife.

Although the house is large, at three stories and 4,500 square feet, Ruskey took full advantage of the lot’s sloping meadow and built it into the gentle rise. “This helps lessen the mass of the house,” he said, “and makes it more a part of the landscape.” To help the home blend in with its surroundings even more, Ruskey and the owners decided to use locally-sourced wood (especially walnut and ash), stone and other natural, renewable elements.

Because the husband was “very keen” on building as energy efficient a structure as possible, Ruskey and Sisler agreed that the first step was to design a well-insulated and airtight exterior shell. “We wanted to exceed Vermont residential building code requirements and we did just that by choosing high-tech insulation and building as tight a structure as possible,” said Sisler.

Geothermal wells help supply heat and cooling and roof-mounted solar panels supply about a third of the home’s annual electrical demand. “We set out to build a Net Zero house, meaning it could be 100 percent energy independent and self-sufficient.”

The family members are year-round sports enthusiasts, so a large first-floor mudroom, with spacious cubbies for each family member and guests, was a major requirement. “In fact, I’d have been happy if the biggest room in the home was the mudroom,” said the wife. “We have so much stuff and it’s a blessing to put it all away.”

The family also entertains a lot so while

the master bedroom is on the main floor, there are guest rooms on the lower and upper levels along with the children’s rooms, including a bunkroom. “We wanted to keep the bedrooms simple,” said the wife. She laughs as she explains, “I didn’t want to be like Martha Stewart having to clean up for hours and hours after guests left after a weekend visit. So the simpler, the better.”

Because the couple stressed that they wanted an open, casual feel to their home, Ruskey opted for a first-floor great room concept that included contiguous kitchen, dining, and living room areas. A long bank of 12-foot-high, triple-ply windows assured that the great room would offer drop-dead views of the Worcester Range as well as fill the space with available light. The room’s color palette is neutral and muted, with grays and wood tones. “We took our cues from the views and the home’s setting,” said the wife. “We all wanted to bring the outside in.”

The concrete radiant-heated floors complete the clean, simple aesthetic. “We were worried that the concrete floor might look too industrial but we’re happy with the clean, lightly-colored look,” said the wife. Another bonus: the winter sun helps heat up the floors. The kitchen’s concrete countertops and island counter, custom-made by the Montpelier-based design and fabrication company, Anomal, are flanked by a blue tempered glass backsplash—one of the home’s few color accents. “I love the way the lively colored glass ‘pops’ out,” said the wife. Kitchen cabinets were crafted by Sisler Builders’ custom woodworking team.

In keeping with the owners’ desire for an open, light-filled home, Ruskey designed a huge, open-riser, three-story steel supported staircase that greets visitors as soon as they pass through the home’s sturdy, deeply-grained ash side door. A large window allows light to pour in here, lighting up the stairway and the interior of the house. The entrance hall, one of the first things visitors to the house see, features a curved wall, the only such wall in the angular, modern home. “I curved this wall as an inviting aspect; it’s meant to ‘welcome’ visitors to the home,” said Ruskey.

“We love that,” said the wife. “It’s a small detail of Ernie’s that makes such a big difference. It softens everything.”

Sharp-eyed visitors may also notice that there is very little wood framing, trim, or baseboards inside the home. Instead, Ruskey chose a “zero reveal” approach, where drywall butts up right against a doorjamb or floor. The technique gives the home a more modern look—“clean and crisp, without fussiness,” said Sisler—but demands exacting craftsmanship. “There’s no wiggle room with this technique. Because there is no trim used to cover the joins between drywall and jambs, the framing and finishing work has to be

The high tech, energy-efficient home is heated by a closed loop geothermal system, controlled in this state-of-the-art utility room, as well as the wood-stove. Solar panels provide about 70 percent of all the electricity the home uses. Climate control monitor. The sizeable mudroom.



exact. It was a challenge but one that our guys enjoyed.”

While some may say this home is minimally decorated, the owners explain they are taking their time to add pieces. “This is still our second home and we’re in no hurry to fill it up,” said the wife. “We’re still in the ‘less is more’ state of mind. We asked for simple and elegant and we like to think we got exactly that.”

When asked if she has a favorite feature of the house, she answered quickly. “Imagine it’s sunrise. The sun is about to break over the Worcester Range. It creates what I call a siren call; it’s as if the mountains are calling to us. Right after I wake up, I grab a cup of tea and, no matter what time of year it is, I walk out onto the deck and watch the sunrise. It is beautiful, simple, and elegant. Just like our house.” ■