

ELLE DECOR – November 2009

Interior Design by Madeline Stuart/ Architecture by David Lake of Lake/Flato

Styled by Stephen Pappas/ Photographed by Dominique Vorillon

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Peek Performance

High in the Teton Range, Interior Designer Madeline Stuart crafts a modern take on rustic style.

Take a drive through any of the residential communities scattered across the base of the Teton Mountains of Wyoming and one thing becomes clear—this is rustic country. The vast majority of homes here make some sort of nod to the archetypal log cabin of American mythology. The references are enlarged and often highly abstracted, of course, because the iconic homestead of yesteryear doesn't lend itself naturally to five-car garages and high-speed internet access. Nevertheless, raw-timber logs and antler chandeliers continue to proliferate in the 21st century. The rough-and-tumble look is more than a fashion—it has become by consensus the definition of Rocky Mountain vernacular, the one ostensibly true style salute to the West.

“That’s the decorative tradition in places like this – Molesworth furniture and predictable plaid,” laments Los Angeles-based interior designer Madeline Stuart. “Mercifully, my clients were willing to explore something different.” In fact, Kelly and George Davis turned to Stuart precisely because they were seeking something different for the getaway they bought to share with their two teenage children. Says Stuart, “We wanted to promote the idea that you can establish your own Jackson Hole aesthetic without having to resort to hoary gimmicks.”

Before Stuart could conjure her vision of cozy modernism for the L.A.-based family, however, major architectural flaws in the existing early-1970s house had to be redressed. The rooms were laid out in curious nonperpendicular angles, and, stranger still, vertical slot windows seemed to conspire against the enjoyment of the site’s ravishing views of the Teton Range and the Snake River 200 feet below.

“My first response was, ‘Scrap it!’” recalls architect David Lake of the San Antonio, Texas, firm Lake/Flato. “The geometries were completely bizarre. It’s as if the architect only had 45-degree drafting angles at his disposal.” But because the Davises were eager to make use of the home as a holiday destination while their children were still in high school, the idea of total demolition was abandoned in favor of strategic interventions.

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Lake and his team reorganized the flow and layout of the dining and bedroom wings and replace the entire center section with a new double-height entry and living room, featuring a library mezzanine above and a classic inglenook below. “It was a minimum intrusion with maximum effect,” Lake explains. “We managed to squeeze a lot into this one architectural gesture, and we restored the big public area to its rightful position as the heart of the house.”

For Stuart the challenge was as much a matter of softening as clarifying: “We set out to create a highly textured haven of warm, fuzzy materials set against a modern background of planked wood, polished concrete, blackened steel, and bronze.” The reinvented living room, now enveloped in walls of glass, juts out past the plane of the original structure, giving it the effect of a tree house hovering in the purple mountains majesty of the Jackson Hole landscape. Stuart orchestrated a symphony of luxurious monochromatic materials rather than busy patterns and prints that might distract from the feature presentation. “We stayed away from anything fussy,” she says. “We combined leather, suede, hair-on-hide, sheared lamb, curly lamb, goatskin, rabbit, elk skin, antelope, and sheepskin throughout. Then we blended all those happy hides with mohair and cashmere to create an incredibly warm and sybaritic atmosphere.”

Stuart’s furnishings wander freely across the periods and continents. Her mix includes signature pieces by Paul McCobb, T. H. Robsjohn-Gibbings, Milo Baughman, Hans Wegner, Brazilian master Sergio Rodrigues, and contemporary glass wizard Alison Berger. The works of these disparate designers are rarely found in the same room, yet for all the polyglot brio of Stuart’s assemblage, the mood is remarkably subtle.

“The last thing we wanted to do was provoke anyone’s sensibilities with ironic juxtapositions of far-flung styles. Kelly was committed to the idea of modern furniture used in easy, earthy ways,” says the designer. “We combined extraordinary objects—like the bronze table by Philip and Kelvin LaVerne in the inglenook—with sympathetic pieces that have no particular pedigree. Our main concern was for everything to feel comfortable together and comfortable in this house.”

That dictum apparently extended to the alliance between architect and designer — a relationship that, historically, has been fraught with competition and enmity. For Kelly Davis, the beauty of the place was no less remarkable than the joyous collaborative spirit in which it was executed. “David and Madeline are an incredible team,” she says. “They both treated the project with such care and kindness. Anyone would be smart to hire them together,” she raves. “This is a fun family retreat that is filled with laughter, and that enthusiasm stated from the very beginning of the renovation. I’m sure I’m forgetting something, but I can’t recall a bad day on this project.”