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Destinations

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# Mountain Mansion

BY DANA W. TODD

From its earliest beginnings at the turn of the 20th century, Lake Toxaway, in western North Carolina, has been known as an exclusive retreat for influential titans of U.S. industry.

Industrialists such as the Rockefeller family, Henry Ford, Harvey Firestone, and Thomas Edison retreated there to rest and discuss business matters in the “Switzerland of America.” When Lake Toxaway’s dam burst in 1916 and destroyed the lake, the area died to new development and vacationers no longer consistently visited the area.

In 1960, a group of investors formed Lake Toxaway Company and rebuilt and refilled the lake, which is

fed by several flowing mountain streams including Toxaway River. Today, Lake Toxaway, nestled among several mountains that are part of the southern Blue Ridge Mountains, is a picturesque and secluded place that remains known for its exclusivity and high quality, controlled development. It is in this secret enclave that architect Rand Soellner of HOME ARCHITECTS® designed a “home away from home” for a family who craved a heritage home they could pass down to their children and grandchildren. The log and timber mansion perches on the side of a mountain and provides views of Lake Toxaway.

As a heritage home, Soellner knew the house he designed must use materials that could survive over time in a highland climate that receives 100 to 200 inches

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All of the features are worked into a design Soellner calls “timeless elegance,” a fitting aesthetic for a heritage home.



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of precipitation each year and sometimes winds that reach 100 mph or more. He chose raw materials that would endure with as little maintenance as possible, while keeping the family's budget in mind. The roof, for example, mimics the slate tiles of an old Bavarian rooftop but with much less weight while matching slate's inherent longevity. Soellner chose acid-washed aerated concrete tiles to deliver an aging appearance, matching the rooftops he photographed several years ago in old towns in Southern Germany.

On the remainder of the house's exterior, Soellner incorporated both local grey granite and tan Tennessee sandstone, for which he hand-designed a specific look for the stone mason to implement.

"We take rock detailing seriously," Soellner says. "Rock work looks best when the hand of man is evident in its organization."

Large rock masonry also clads the sloping column piers that support huge rear porches and a porte-cochere on the front of the lodge style home. The slope is a

nod to the home's architectural style, which Soellner pegs as "muscular" Arts and Crafts. Colored concrete pavers and thick flagstone provide a substantive driveway to the porte-cochere, which is the largest in western North Carolina, according to Soellner.

"It is the size of a small church and even feels like one with its double dormers," he says. "Four to six cars can fit under it, which is perfect for entertaining in this Alpine rainforest climate."

Soellner also paid close attention to the sitting of the house, using specific compass

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“I think Mr. Wright would approve,” says Soellner, who in the past worked for one of Frank Lloyd Wright’s apprentices, architect Nils Schweizer. “The views become art framed by the architecture.”

points provided by the surveyor to orient the house toward views of Lake Toxaway, about a mile away. This orientation enables the view to be framed by glass windows no matter where the homeowner walks.

Working with the neighbors and using Google Earth, he located and removed a handful of view-blocking trees and vegetation to provide optimum views for the homeowners. By working with the land, Soellner was able to address the street, mountains, and lake, fitting the home into the landscape while providing the best views possible in all directions.

Inside the house, the views aren’t the only breathtaking feature. Massive timbers

and “muscular” architectural features appear inside, too, in the form of wooden ceiling beams, large timber railings, grand truss guard rails, sliding barn doors, and to-the-ceiling stone fireplaces. Heart pine floors warm the spaces even further. Their dull satin varnish, a finish that is more scratch resistant than polyurethane, is a rich counterpoint to glossy, gleaming granite countertops. All of the features are worked into a design Soellner calls “timeless elegance,” a fitting aesthetic for a heritage home.

“We purposefully exclude things such as colors and shapes that people can use to date a design to a specific era,” he says.

Soellner also prepared features behind the walls to provide “aging in place” capabilities the family can call into use later if needed, such as reinforced areas that can accommodate handrails and a wheelchair friendly shower entrance. These features are standard in the firm’s designs and add an unexpected benefit in a home that is anticipated to house many different generations, perhaps even at one time.

There’s not much that’s rustic about this showstopper mountain lodge, but don’t be fooled by its expansive elegance. It is a warm and richly comforting environment to call home. 