

unexpected encore

An old cabin makes a comeback with a fresh take on rustic design



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It's not easy to pin a designer label on a house in which weathered barnwood surrounds a mid-century modern spiral staircase, and the decidedly contemporary application of industrial materials contrasts hand-hewn logs. But that's the point exactly, says Harper Welch of Smash Design in Seattle. He and his partner, Marc Clements, intentionally juxtaposed textures and time periods, and mix-matched furnishings and fixtures in this Teton Valley vacation home because that's what happens in a family's cabin through the generations. It's a style they call "modern rustic," and it's defined by its very refusal to be defined. "The incongruity is what makes it interesting," Welch explains. "That story of visual complexity and layering, that's what makes authentic rustic environments, like a big old lodge, so appealing. They didn't happen all at once."

The story of Stan and Ingrid Savage's house began on a homestead in Jackson Hole at the turn of the 20th century in a family other than their own. Like many structures surviving from that time, this one bespoke years of disuse. It was destined for the burn pile. But Kurt Dubbe, a principal with Dubbe-Moulder Architects in Jackson and Driggs, thought the Savages just might be inspired to revive it. "They absolutely fell in love with it, which is interesting, because it had many layers of additions and siding on it. But we were able to peel back enough so they could get a sense of the structure," Dubbe recalls.

Square-hewn logs formed the original core of the one-and-a-half-story building, which was hauled intact over Teton Pass.

It wouldn't make it up the Savage's narrow and winding driveway, though, so builder Dan Pauroso carefully recorded and keyed the position of each piece, then disassembled the cabin. As it came apart, the walls literally shed the past: Pauroso still has the front page of a 1902 *Kansas City Tribune* he pulled from a crack. "They used old newspaper for insulation," he says. "Newspaper and wallpaper—just add another layer every fall. There were probably 15 or 20 layers of wallpaper."

When Pauroso and his HP Woodworking crew reconstructed the building on a newly poured foundation at the top of the hill, they added seven new courses of logs to form a full-sized second floor, now the master bedroom suite. "The joinery on the existing log structure was impeccable; they were very accurate," Pauroso says. "It was done in 1902, so I was pretty amazed at how flat everything sat, and how it went back together."

The new spruce logs had been shipped up from Wyoming already machine-flattened on two sides to match the old wood, but they were missing the telltale gouges of hand-hewn workmanship and the inevitable marks of age. So Pauroso and his crew roughed them up a bit. "Then Tracy Hanson from Stormbusters came in with his secret antiquing finishes and streaked them to look similar to the existing logs. That took weeks," Pauroso recalls.

The Savages were ready to start adding their chapters to the building's story. With the reclaimed cabin at the heart of the house, Dubbe added a single-story kitchen wing, a two-car garage with two bedrooms and a bathroom above, and a sunroom-style den overlooking → page 49

When Jackson Hole architect Kurt Dubbe came across an old square-cut log cabin that was about to be torn down, he planted the seed that grew into Stan and Ingrid Savage's Teton Valley vacation home. The galvanized steel front door (circa 1920) and fanciful porch design animate the entrance like a storybook illustration. Designers Harper Welch and Marc Clements stripped layers of paint off the door to find it had originally been painted to look like wood, a common method of disguising metal fire doors. Woodworkers Betsy and Andy Olerud of Dovetail Design executed Clements' porch design, handpicking each piece of winter-damaged lodgepole pine used in the railing from a stash they discovered in someone's barn in Teton Valley. "They had been drying for years," Andy says with lingering incredulity. "To find all those knees in the woods, to harvest them, would take forever."



Ingrid loves to cook, so she wanted a functional kitchen, but she didn't want to forfeit the lighthearted demeanor that characterizes the house. A completely rebuilt 1950s refrigerator calls to mind old Airstream trailers and the dime-store kitsch of early American highway tourism. The nostalgic mood is enhanced by vintage postcard images of Jackson Hole and Yellowstone decoupage onto steel-framed plywood cabinets reminiscent of the sliding-door storage units Charles and Ray Eames introduced in 1950. The graduated rings of the school-cafeteria ceiling lights subtly mimic the wood rounds set into the concrete floor.

The sense of humor evident throughout the house crops up again where a Victorian chandelier (more recently modified with a globe) meets a diminutive set of antlers in one of the guest bedrooms. The muted colors of the camp-inspired décor make the green of the towering pines outside the windows even more vivid. But for a designer who believes good décor can often be judged by its humor quotient, this room may be a bit too sedate. Welch says he thinks it would have been fun to wrap the twin beds in flokatis, "so they looked like a pair of albino woolly mammoths parked next to each other at the drive-in."



A 1940s Paul Frankle "cubist" sofa upholstered in black pony hide summarizes the "modern rustic" design theme of Stan and Ingrid Savage's Teton Valley house. The surprising contrast of form and material struck the interior designers as "so wrong, it's right," says Welch, owner of Smash Design in Seattle. He and Clements knew it was the perfect piece for a house that didn't take itself too seriously. "We thought, how funny, because what's a sofa like that doing covered in black pony?" Welch explains. Steel bands bolted to a raw cinder-block chimney provide textural contrast to the softness of the aged wood defining the porch-shaped den. The old-fashioned photographer's light in the far corner illuminates the unexpected mix of styles. Branded with a fish, the rugs came from a friend's cattle ranch in Brazil. Ingrid likes to relax here in the afternoon with a book, keeping one eye on the west-facing windows to track the sun until it sinks behind the Big Holes.



this spiral staircase likely came from Paris originally, but the designers spotted it at the Blackman-Cruz Gallery in Los Angeles. "I think that stairwell is among the most amazing objects I've seen in 20 years, and I've done a lot of shopping," Welch says. The sculptural aluminum staircase, which was probably cast sometime in the 1950s or early '60s, connects the two levels of the log cabin. The original rubber stair treads were replaced with leather tiles from Edelman Leather in Connecticut (the owners are friends of the Savages) to match the flooring used throughout the master bedroom suite.

The white-on-white guest bathroom gets a jolt of color from the rodeo-inspired floor. "There's only one place in the world where you can buy vintage linoleum this good, and that's at Secondhand Rose in New York," Welch says.

In the master bathroom, light seeps into the shower from the bedroom through pock-marked worm-wood planks, though practicality dictated covering the walls with glass panels to avoid soaking the bed. The stainless steel tub, porcelain farmhouse sink and diner warming lights aren't what most people would expect to find in a log-cabin bathroom—which is precisely why Clements and Welch chose them. Pairing disparate objects and materials that on the surface don't seem to make sense together actually results in the most provocative décor, Welch explains. That's why he knew a lavishly painted Victorian-era toilet from London with an elevated tank, hand-carved walnut seat and dangling flush-chain would be an amusing counterpoint in a bathroom with an otherwise industrial bent.



Though purposefully spare in presentation, the main-floor rest room is packed with playful innuendo. Clements and Welch don't often order through catalogs, but they made an exception when they discovered a source for prison bathroom fittings. An institutional past is evident in the bare-bones design of the stainless steel toilet. With just a little imagination, wire crosshatching in safety glass on the walls becomes barbed-wire fencing encircling "the yard," and the rough-cut stone sink and walnut stand take on the shape of a guard tower. "I guess it's what you might call Penal Colony Chic," Welch offers by way of explanation.





Clements modeled this guest-wing stair railing on the black-stained, gnarly tree-root furniture popular around the turn of the 20th century among the well-to-do in the Adirondacks. Following Clements' design, the Oleruds let the posture of chokecherry trees dictate the shape. The couple spent many days on cross-country skis "looking at thousands of branches and trying to find the ones with the most character," Andy recalls. They purposefully retained the raw texture of the bark. The walnut treads on the associated staircase were rough-cut from the hand-hewn timbers of an 1830s barn and stained to match the railing. Together Welch and Clements designed the walnut interior doors used throughout the house. The central cross braces were planed smooth on only two sides to retain the natural curve of the branch. Andy says it was an unusual approach, but he enjoyed the challenge. "It just seemed like a great idea, so I was willing to try it."



Twin Irish marble slabs sandwich back-to-back fireplaces between the dining room, located within the original cabin structure, and the den addition. The design team outlined the mass with steel bands so it would appear to be freestanding, like a piece of furniture. “We wanted to be obvious about the fact that the fireplaces were added,” Welch explains. Knowing it would be the focal point of the room, the designers asked the Savages to go look for stone as if it were art. “The reason I like this marble so much is it really reminds me of the aspen trees outside,” Ingrid says. The former surgical lamp illuminates a teak-top conference table designed by Charles Eames in 1958 and manufactured by Herman Miller as part of a line of office furniture called The Aluminum Group. Eliminating thresholds between rooms on the main floor helped unify the original cabin with the additions.

the valley, a total of about 2,500 square feet of living space. Welch and Clements made the suggestion to side each distinct section of the home with a different material to affect the piecemeal way cabins typically grow over time—and to unify the exterior with the interior décor they were planning.

The Savages wanted their retreat to have a comfortable, organic atmosphere in keeping with the mountain environment. And it would have to be low-maintenance since they would visit from their home in the Pacific Northwest only on occasion and usually with a crowd of family and friends. Beyond those specifications, however, they were open to letting the interpretation of “modern rustic” unfold with the verisimilitude of life.

“I like the look of old things, and I find all that mock Western stuff trite,” Ingrid says without apology. “The fact that we could find some old wood and the essence of some history and build on that was appealing to us.”

Although the old cabin became the keystone of the project, the Savages and their team never intended to do a historic reproduction. “We didn’t want to make it into something it wasn’t,” Ingrid explains. So they grounded the building in the past but made careful references to the intervening years, carrying the structure firmly into the present with such modern comforts as hydronically heated floors and an Aga cast-iron radiant-heat range.

Working with her “dear friends Harper and Marc” also appealed to Ingrid, an artist and former arts and antiques dealer. “We see eye-to-eye on so many things,” she says. The result of this creative synergy has become a source of emotional comfort to the entire Savage family. Clements died last year soon after the project ended, and visiting the house can be a cathartic experience for them when his absence seems overwhelming. “I come over here and I just feel his presence around me,” Ingrid says. “It’s like his spirit is in this house.”

By pulling together a medley of interesting but unrelated objects, Welch and Clements not only gave the house a sort of flea-market appeal, they also demonstrated their familiarity with their client, an avid collector of everything from kitschy souvenirs to fine art. In developing the core notion of a rustic interior, the designers intentionally used an inconsistency of styles to create the impression of passing years. Thus, a tubular chrome chaise and a Victorian longhorn bench sit comfortably together, separated by as many as 100 years in origin and aesthetic sensibility, Welch explains. Pairings such as this scattered throughout the house suggest generations of use during which various family members contributed odd possessions they had outgrown or replaced in their primary home. “This house doesn’t feel decorated, even though there’s probably been more thought into the décor than any other house I’ve been in,” Ingrid adds.

For Welch, that’s undoubtedly the greatest compliment of all. “The work we do in interior design is about creating experiences,” he explains. “What is this place supposed to evoke? It’s not about decorating, it’s not about ‘making pretty.’ Our goal here was to amuse you and surprise you and relax you.

“When things are too perfect, it makes for dry surroundings,” he says. “It’s like the phony cowboy that’s so popular in the West. It’s too predictable and has become boring. We were not trying to create a coherent decorating ‘story,’ because that simply doesn’t feel real. History doesn’t happen overnight, and it’s the friction between the new and old, the slick and rough, the fancy and the plain that makes the history we’ve assembled here believable.

“The West has always represented a carefree, casual, nontraditional way of life, one that treats history with moderate respect, but doesn’t want to be tied to it either. We have tried to reflect that disposition in this modern interpretation of the log cabin.” ♦