

A Spectacular Home ON A DRAMATIC SITE



A LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT AND HER ARCHITECT HUSBAND DESIGN
A DREAM HOME FOR HER PARENTS, DEDICATED SKIERS WHO LOVED
BEING SURROUNDED BY THE WHITE MOUNTAIN NATIONAL FOREST.

BY DEBBIE KANE | PHOTOGRAPHY BY GREG PREMURU

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THE LAND that Cynthia Astrachan and her late husband, Ed, chose for building their dream home seemed, at first glance, to be anything but ideal. A narrow, heavily wooded lot, without road access and hugging a hillside in the White Mountains, it was overlooked by many prospective buyers. But not by the Astrachans, avid skiers and hikers as well as longtime northern New Hampshire residents.

“Ed always wanted to live in a house where the inside felt like the outside,” Cynthia says. “The opportunity to buy this land presented itself and then everything else came together.”

Even more serendipitous: their daughter, Zoe Astrachan, is a landscape architect; her husband and business partner, Andrew Dunbar, is an architect. Partners and founders of INTERSTICE Architects—an architectural firm based in San Francisco, California—the couple were eager to design Ed and Cynthia’s new home. The result is a contemporary home that blends seamlessly with its natural surroundings; utilizes energy-efficient materials and technology; and features modern conveniences that make it an easy, comfortable place to live.

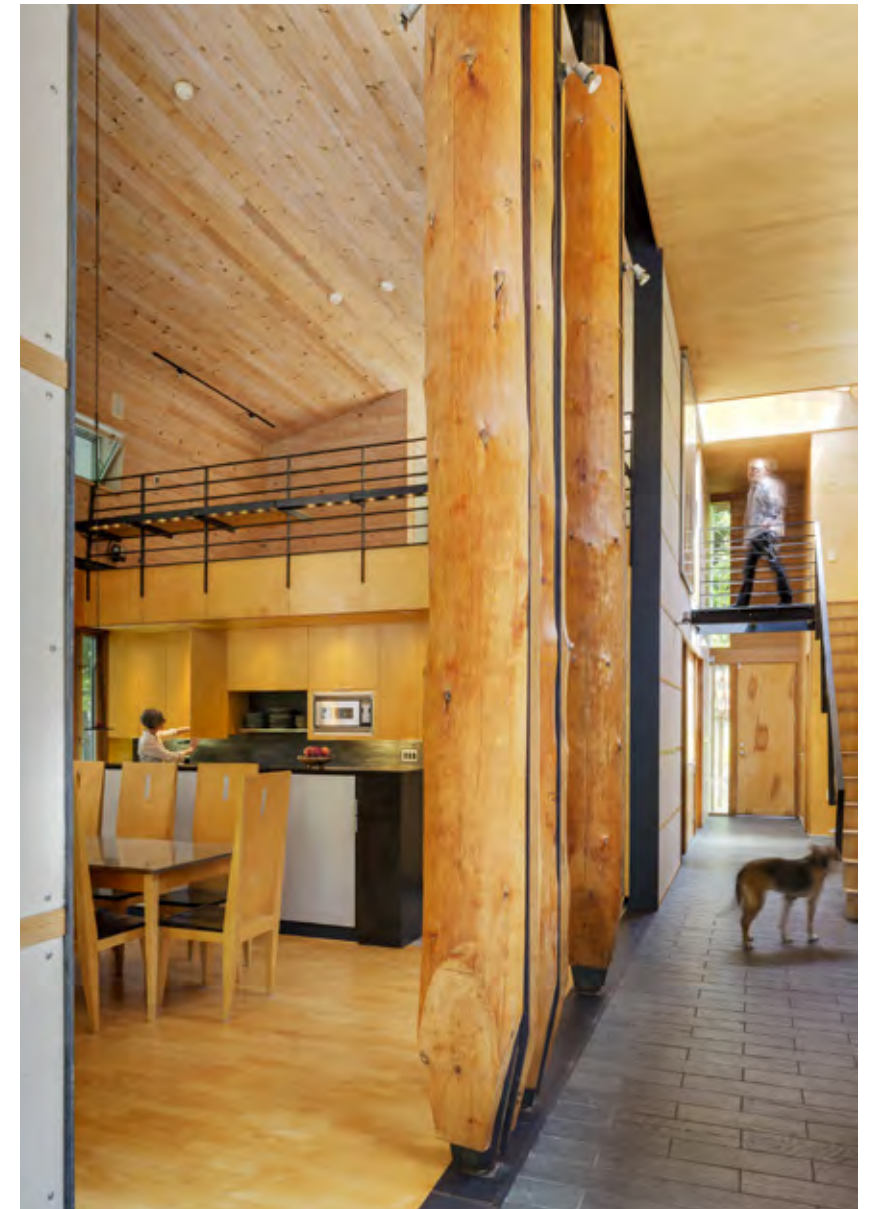
Anchoring the house to the landscape

Ed and Cynthia wanted a simple, well-organized home that brought the outdoors inside year-round. “We always enjoyed the outdoors—skiing, biking and hiking,” Cynthia says. “We wanted the house to be durable so you could wear your ski boots in the hallway without damaging anything.”

Dunbar and Zoe kept these considerations in mind as well as the site’s wooded location. “We wanted to marry vernacular and contemporary architecture, and use materials that honored New England mountain architecture,” Zoe says.

Ed, a former educator-turned-builder, tackled construction on the new home (“He told me, ‘I’ll build what you draw,’” Dunbar says). Maurice Page—a carpenter from Berlin—worked closely with Ed throughout construction, framing the house and doing the finish work. “I really wanted to work on his house because it was so unique,” Page says.

Surrounded on three sides by the White Mountain National Forest, with views of the mountains and Saco River, the two-thousand-square-foot, two-level home is intimate yet spacious. The Astrachans were interested in using all-natural



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materials; there are no painted or stained walls inside and no carpeting because of the radiant-heated floors. Dunbar suggested low-maintenance building materials—plywood, concrete, tin, Vermont slate and knotty pine—that evoked local landmarks, such as woodsheds, barns and mountain lodges.

Dunbar designed a tin roof as a sheltering element that extends over the front of the home; the overhang provides passive solar energy that helps heat the house in the winter and keeps the space cooler in summer. Scaled tin panels cover the north and east sides of the house, accented by natural concrete and wood walls, which provide tight insulation. A wraparound deck, accessed

by all ground-floor rooms, overlooks the mountains on one side, the river on another and a row of birch trees planted alongside the house. Floor-to-ceiling windows open into the roof framing in back of the home. “The windows let in lots of light, help solar warmth, and allow views of the changing trees during the seasons,” Dunbar says.

The home’s landscaping is simple, capitalizing on its woodland setting. Trees were preserved as much as possible, including the birches on the north side of the home and a patch of mountain laurel. Shade-friendly perennials include hydrangea, hostas and lilies; a bright patch of ferns helps bring the forest’s edge to the east side of the home.

Weaving in and out

Inside, a twenty-four-foot, two-story internal hall of concrete panels and exposed plywood separates the home’s primary living quarters from a studio, workshop and garage, spaces where Ed kept tools as well as outdoor gear.

Paved with slate, the breezeway is another element that brings the outside in: the space runs from outside the home directly through the house. “Ed and I used to joke that we should put snow all along the slate walkway so we could just ski all the way through the house,” Cynthia says.

Off the hall are a linen closet and laundry room. High ceilings and windows provide light as well as cross-



ventilation and ever-present outside views. A staircase along one wall leads to an upstairs loft space, connected via a glass walkway. Each stair, constructed of butcher block, is secured to the wall and reinforced with steel, creating a floating affect that’s also sculptural.

The living room, dining room and kitchen share a dramatic, high-ceiling space, anchored by a twenty-five-foot-high hearth wall constructed of slate and steel. Complementing the home’s passive heating and radiant in-floor hydronic system, the hearth frames a wood stove and wood storage on one side, and houses an interior barbecue and shelving accessed via the kitchen. A long, vertical opening in the hearth acts as a

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rack—was often a gathering place during parties. A maple dining room set, designed by Dunbar, echoes the shape of the home’s vertical windows.

Windows dominate the north side of the living room, where Cynthia and Ed often entertained friends and family. Interior lights are mounted on walls, eliminating the need for additional lamps or electrical outlets, and making it easier to move furniture. “I had a favorite place to sit in the living room, looking toward the opposite wall, which is all glass,” Cynthia says. “You can see the big trees, eighty feet tall from top to bottom. It is always amazing and inspiring.”

Other rooms are minimalistic, designed with convenience in mind. Both the master bedroom suite, located on the first floor, and the upstairs loft have built-in beds as well as benches integrated into railings for seating. Walk-in closets between the master bedroom and bath minimize closet space. Because the home is far from a main road or other residences, Cynthia and Ed eschewed window treatments, so the woodland views are ever-present in the sleeping spaces, even the master bath.

Although Cynthia moved out of the mountain house last year, its current owner, Brian Otis, is equally enthralled with its construction. Like the Astrachans, Otis is an outdoor enthusiast who enjoys the home’s relationship with the woods and appreciates its design and craftsmanship. “The house is well thought out,” he says. “It’s fun, interesting and warm. It’s a great place to live.”

RESOURCES

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