



The whitewashed beams, reclaimed Southern yellow pine floor, and generous scale of the living room evokes classical Swedish elegance and American farmhouse warmth.



# WHERE THE HEART IS

WORLD TRAVELERS TURN TO THEIR MINNESOTA  
ROOTS TO BUILD AN ELEGANT EMPTY NEST

IF YOU COULD BUILD A HOME WHEREVER YOUR HEART DESIRED, WHERE WOULD IT BE? For one empty-nester couple, that question was daunting and took serious consideration. But their roots run deep into the soil of Cannon Falls. And, as luck would have it, a piece of local land—secluded, wooded, and perched high above the Cannon River—would steal their hearts and imaginations. After traveling the world, they decided to build at home.

BY ALECIA STEVENS | PHOTOS BY DANA WHEELOCK  
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This was a couple on a mission. For ten years, she had collected clips of images that spoke to the couple's style. They knew they needed just the right architect and builder to bring their dream to life. They met with Christine Albertsson and Todd Hansen of Albertsson-Hansen Architecture in Minneapolis to discuss the project, agreeing to call them in a few days with a decision. "We walked out of the meeting and looked at each other and said, 'That's it, isn't it?' We drove twenty minutes down the road before we called them back, just so we wouldn't look too ridiculous. They not only had 'pretty pictures' of their work, which everyone does, but they could articulate the process," the wife recalls.

A series of design meetings began in March 2004. A little more than a year later, construction commenced, a fifteen-month process taken on by general contractor River City Builders and Millworks of Nerstrand.

Hansen and his team began with a detailed discussion about lifestyle and preferences. The couple who would live in this house had strong views: It was not to be "grand." No soaring entry with curving stairs. The stairs to the second-floor bedrooms should be tucked away. The home should be comfortable, but use some formal elements such as enameled paneling and as little Sheetrock as possible. It must have a place for everything. Finally, she insisted, "The outside was always to be the main event."

Her preferences for the exterior design of the home were less clear. A few images from her stacks of tear sheets provided clues, but Hansen was the one who brought the exterior to life. Stylistically, the home is a mix. "I didn't need it to be a certain style," the wife recalls. "In fact, I preferred that it look like it was built and added on to over time." The site, the team, and the clients' shared appreciation for American



OPPOSITE PAGE The 1930s-style pantry, painted a surprising apple green, is lined with clever spaces for storing the owner's collection of tabletop and linens. THIS PAGE The ample kitchen holds hideaway nooks for everything from coffee to dog food. Storage in both kitchen and pantry can be accessed with the library ladder that circumnavigates the entire space.



THIS PAGE ABOVE The homeowners wanted a home that was comfortable, but also incorporated formal elements such as enameled paneling. RIGHT Architect Todd Hansen blended American farmhouse with East Coast shingled country house to design the exterior of the striking residence that overlooks the Cannon River. OPPOSITE PAGE Landscape architect Jean Garbarini of Close Landscape Architecture allowed the natural beauty of the site to speak for itself, while adding carefully edited perennials to the property.



PHOTO BY PETER BASTISNELLI KERZE



farmhouse architecture became a starting point, but they were not shy about including the formality of the East Coast shingled country house and the spare aesthetic of classical Swedish interiors. Hansen suggested a stone foundation, reminiscent of the rural barns in the area. One day, the homeowner brought Hansen a photo from her files of a black house. "What do you think of black for the exterior?" she asked. He agreed, visualizing how the dark exterior would blend into the wooded setting and how dramatically it would contrast with the light-filled interior. He recommended a red roof and doors.

Next, the interior architecture began to take form. It was to be elegant and generous, but never over-scaled "just because it could be," says Hansen. "The ceiling is ten feet in only one room; otherwise, they are around nine feet. The view is out, not up." The layout is based on the classic center-hall plan and divided very clearly into public and private areas, delineated by a change in flooring. Public areas are reclaimed Southern yellow pine finished with oil and wax; private areas are ebony-stained maple.

Hansen is especially fond of designing millwork and this project proved to be an unprecedented opportunity to experiment with scale and detail. The whitewashed beams, paneled walls, and wooden ceilings became the

architectural elements that tie the whole design together. At more than 8,000 square feet, the house is large, but never feels cavernous because of the intimacy these details provide.

Although the couple planned to use many of "the houseful of antiques" they had acquired over the years, they discovered that because the architecture is so disciplined, the furnishings and accessories had to follow suit. The subsequent editing process was so challenging, she created a mantra: "Just because we own it doesn't mean it belongs in this house." Only the most complementary pieces remain.

A formidable collector of tabletop, she had more difficulty parting with these pieces, including piles of antique linen tablecloths, stacks of eclectic dishes, a collection of sterling flatware, assorted napkin rings, and sets of teacups. Instead of stuffing these beloved possessions into corners of disorganized drawers, as she had done previously, she requested a pantry, reminiscent of the 1930s, with a sink and ample storage for dishes, silver, and serving pieces, out of view of the main kitchen. She also wanted a place to house her magnificent collection of linens and open display areas for her pottery and crockery.

In the end, these assignments became Hansen's favorite part of the project. Even as a student, he recalls being intrigued by the



PHOTO BY PETER BASTIGNELLI KEITZE



ABOVE The owners' bath pairs white tiles and marble countertops with ebony-stained maple floors. RIGHT A place for everything: A custom glass-front cabinet off the spacious closet holds delicate collectibles. OPPOSITE PAGE Farmhouse and East Coast country influences mingle with serene, whitewashed results in the owners' bedroom.



service areas of historic homes—the working kitchen, the scullery, the laundry room, and the pantries. “Even in an old home, they seemed modern because they were often spare and simple,” he says. The client was especially excited about these rooms, adding personal touches of strong, but stunning color. She sings Hansen’s praises for his creative solutions. “If something is important enough to be in your life, he will design a place for it,” she says.

The kitchen amply demonstrates: There is the “coffee bar,” where all things caffeinated are located. There is the area for the dog’s food. There are display niches for collectible pottery around the perimeter of the room, which is accessed by a library ladder that circumnavigates the entire kitchen and pantry and is artfully stored between the two rooms. Perhaps the crowning touch is the glass-front cabinet with dowels for hanging each of the

perfectly pressed white linen tablecloths.

Spend enough time with the architect, building team, and the homeowners, and it begins to feel like a love-fest, a twenty-six month affair of the heart, all parties contributing their best creative efforts and looking to the others to raise the bar a little higher with each new challenge. The project left an indelible aesthetic mark on everyone involved.

Move-in day was in September 2006, just in time to watch the leaves drop from the trees into the river below, the mark of another passing year. For this couple, who chose to build a final home on land that is so familiar, the ritual of the changing Minnesota seasons could not have been observed in a more meaningful way. They felt right at home. **MH**

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