

AN ARCHITECT AND A WRITER WORK TOGETHER TO CREATE THEIR DREAM HOME

simply welcoming





BY RACHEL URQUHART // PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOHN GRUEN



COMFORTABLE SETTING Previous pages, vintage table from Great Barrington Antiques Center; stairwell to kids' wing below David Trubridge pendant light, topographical map of Guatemala, and wall of photographs by Guatemalan artist Luis Gonzalez Palma. The architect's college car, a 1976 BMW; author and architect on the green roof with Elvis and Trixie; and mudroom with ancestor's custom-made leather riding boots, author's rubber work boots, and Louis Poulsen pendant light.

JUST AFTER WE WERE MARRIED, 16 years ago, my husband, John Herrera, and I began hunting for a second home. We were just playing. We had a baby on the way and our combined salaries—that of an architect and a writer—would not have covered the down payment on a tool shed. Our fantasy was this: to find a house where, after a long drive from where we live in Brooklyn, New York, we could simply “pull up and open a beer.” My husband even gave me a '50s-style, wall-mounted, metal bottle opener as an early—a very early—house present.

Fast-forward to 2015, and not only do we live in a pull-up-and-open-a-beer house, we live in one that my husband actually designed himself. True, it's a bit more evolved than its fantasy forebear. We can pull up and sit in geo-thermally controlled comfort, read by solar-powered lights, take showers in rainwater that's been stored in a 1,500-gallon underground cistern, relax on a glorious, green roof covered in a carpet of thyme and lavender or even in a hot-tub under the stars. This is known as “scope-creep” in the parlance of architectural projects that just keep on keeping on—and yet, the guiding spirit that once had us exclaiming over dilapidated motel shacks and mouse-infested, cement-block lean-tos never really left us.

As client and architect, my husband and I were united in the goal of building a simple, modern house; using straightforward materials such as barn wood, concrete, and glass; and erecting a low-profile structure on a secluded, wild site. Though we would occasionally be the only occupants, the rest of the time, we'd have our three children and their friends. We wanted a home that felt cozy enough for two, yet could expand to sleep eight, or even ten people. We wanted it to feel informal, peaceful, and welcoming. We wanted it to have clean, contemporary lines without feeling cold. Above all, we wanted it to be a house that brought the outdoors in at every possible opportunity.





A RURAL LIFE Kitchen and dining area with polished concrete floor, Artimede pendant light, worktable of author's grandfather (playwright and screenwriter Sidney Howard), and IKEA chairs; above, green roof planted with thyme, lavender, orange butterfly weed and stiff aster; left, Queen Anne's lace from the wildflower field; right, living room sofas from Design Within Reach, Wittus Shaker stove, Patricia Urquiola lamp, vintage Frank Gehry cardboard stool, chairs by Eric Trine, and painting attributed to the Australian Aboriginal artist Warren Tjapanangka Williams.



Now, as anyone who's been fortunate enough to build or renovate their own home knows, architect-client relationships can be tricky. From the architect's side, there is the confusion of working with a relative stranger who is unclear as to what they really want, who is constantly changing plans, and who is unrealistic about budget, timing, and quality of construction. As I have heard my husband say many times: "There are three determining factors: money, time, and quality. Most clients can only have two of the three." They can have a quality house that costs less because time is not an issue. They can have a quality house that goes up quickly—though never quickly enough—as long as they are willing to pay more. Or they can sacrifice quality construction for a house that is relatively fast and cheap to build. The choice is not always obvious.

Clients, too, face challenges when working with an architect. It can be difficult to articulate a clear sense of what you want, what you can afford, and what you are willing to compromise on. Building a dream home—thrilling as the end result can be—is a complicated, expensive, and time-consuming endeavor. You will make thousands of decisions about everything from bathrobe hooks to heating systems, so you need to be in the game for the long haul. In other words, the client-architect relationship is a marriage, not a fling.

And, as with any marriage, it isn't always smooth sailing. Yes, there were some wonderful moments throughout our collaboration. When I showed John the high, secluded meadow that I thought would make a perfect site, it was exciting to plan exactly where we thought the house should sit by hacking a rectangle out of a sea of goldenrod that was taller than we were. I would sketch illegibly on napkins while my husband patiently listened to my rambling ideas and then, the following day, presented me with elegant drawings that made sense of what I'd tried to describe. We could visit the project together as often as we wanted, and were often able to make decisions with the contractor on the spot.

We parted ways when it came to the technical stuff. Because John was committed to obtaining a high level of LEED certification—ours ended up being a LEED Gold house—he could talk endlessly about R-values, vapor barriers, Forest Stewardship Council-certified





BEDS AND BATH Child's bedroom with Leucos pendant lights, Andy Warhol poster, hand-painted supermarket signs by artist Michael McKay, vintage beds from Hobnail Antiques, Kantha quilts from One Mercantile in Great Barrington, and suede rag rug from CB2; below, guest bedroom with painting by California artist John Coleman; master bedroom with weathered plate-steel cutting pattern from The Little Store in Great Barrington, Noguchi lamp, and an IKEA headboard enhanced by the author; and opposite page, view from downstairs bathroom.



lumber, and the merits of fiberglass-backed versus cellulose insulation. My thoughts tended to be elsewhere: on reclaiming the landscape, for one thing, and on hundreds of pictures of lights, sofas, off-the-radar designer chairs, and IKEA fill-ins.

We sometimes fought, usually because we were rudely dismissive of one another's suggestions—concepts that we often ended up embracing within hours. We worried a lot about money. And we nearly lost all communication with our youngest son, who hated it so much when we started to discuss “the new house” that he would simply up and leave the room, the house, and (once) even a restaurant where we happened to be having a family meal.

And yet, similar to forgetting the agony of childbirth upon seeing one's newborn for the first time, we have all pretty much forgotten the bad stuff. Our daughter and two sons sit in the hot tub late at night, whispering and laughing. We hold countless dinners and birthday parties in honor of one family member or another. We play backgammon in front of the fire on snowy days. We continue to find new amazements just outside the sliding-screen doors—bursts of color when a new species of wildflower blooms, a stag grazing at the edge of the woods, huge pileated woodpeckers drilling dead trees, a perfect rainbow arcing over the valley after a storm. The house is, literally, a dream come true. And yes, late at night after the three-hour drive from Brooklyn, we pull up and open a beer. ■

