Alpine Alchemy in Colorado

CONTINENTAL INFLUENCES ELEVATE A RETREAT OUTSIDE ASPEN

Architecture by Eric J. Smith, AIA
Interior Design by David Easton
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Interior designer David Easton and his longtime collaborator, architect Eric J. Smith, created a house (above) in a valley just outside Aspen, Colorado, for Steve and Nancy Crown and their five children. "They didn't want a lot of glass," notes Easton. What they did want was something "reminiscent of a home you might see in the French countryside," says Nancy Crown. OPPOSITE: Coffered ceilings, a limestone fireplace and reclaimed-oak floors give texture to a seating area in the great room. Sofa and pillow fabrics, Lee Jofa. Beauvais carpet.

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They may call it Glamour Gulch, but there's more to Aspen than Saab police cruisers and 20,000-square-foot third houses—starting with 300 inches of powder a year. Aspen's four world-class ski areas are operated by the Aspen Skiing Company, which is owned by Henry Crown & Company in Chicago. Henry's grandson Steve Crown is a partner in the family business, and it's safe to assume that he can spend his vacations wherever and however he wants. For two years, Crown, his wife, Nancy, and their five children indulged their passion for downhill skiing at a nondescript house in Snowmass that they bought fully furnished in order to maximize their slope time. Eventually the family decided they wanted to be closer to Aspen proper, and in 1997, after three years spent in a second, equally nondescript house, they found a spectacular ski-in, ski-out location just outside of town below the Maroon Bell mountains and hired a Colorado-based architect to help them build their own home.

Building one's own home is rarely a glitch-free venture, and the Crowns' experience was no exception. "They wanted something that responded to their family, as opposed to something that was about a statement of architecture," says Eric J. Smith, the New York–based architect who succeeded the more conceptually oriented

"You dine at one end and live at the other," Easton says of the great room. "We try to do that often in houses because it makes some logical sense." He designed the dining chairs and the drapery fabric, which is from Lee Jofa. The wing chairs are based on a Colefax & Fowler design.

Coloradoan. Smith was introduced to the Crowns by the interior designer David Easton, whom the couple had brought on board and who for the last two decades has collaborated with Smith on residential projects. This particular project quickly gained momentum. After "a fair amount of photographic imaging," Smith recalls, "we edited it down to something somewhat Alpine, somewhat French country, somewhat Tuscan in feel."

The site offered 360-degree views of the mountains and the valley, but it also posed a few challenges. A relatively small building envelope required the architect to cut retaining walls into the side of the hill. And unlike many Aspen properties, which face the mountains to the south, this one looks north, allowing panoramic down-valley views but limiting the amount of natural light. Smith and Easton spent months siting the house both to capture the most sunlight and to exploit those views. They worked discreet skylights and clerestories into the program and used bay windows in the great room, family/breakfast room and study to grab the valley perspectives. "When you walk in the front door, you step into, for want of better phrasing, the great room and look right out to the view," notes Easton.

His aversion to the term aside, the designer likes to make use of "what in most houses are never used, the living room and dining room," by merging them in one large space, bookended with fireplaces, that affords greater versatility. Another Easton favorite is the traditional American porch. The great room opens to a terrace that wraps around the north side of the

Opposite: Like the finished wood elsewhere, the beams in the family/breakfast room have a natural look, suggesting "the house has been here for a while," says Smith. Beauvais needlepoint carpet. Nineteenth-century French side tables, Amy Perlin Antiques. Sofa and ottoman fabrics, Stark.

Above: Painted oak cabinets and bird-motif tiles imbue the kitchen with warmth. Franke sink. Wolf range, at Abt.com. Right: The media room has an elevated viewing area and an alcove with a games table. Greeff wallcovering.

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The décor's "country kind of feeling" reflects the Aspen aesthetic, says Easton. ABOVE: Niches add drama to the master bedroom. Bedcoverings, Casa del Bianco. End table from Amy Perlin Antiques. Sconce, Nicholas Antiques.

OPPOSITE ABOVE: The loggia. Iron table from Sentimento Antiques. Walters Wicker love seat and chairs. OPPOSITE: The backyard's pergola-covered seating area has a working fireplace. Sutherland lounge chairs. Dining chairs, Janus et Cie.

house and lets the family make the most of the warm months with a loggia off the study and an outdoor dining area off the family/breakfast room. At the east end of the property, a pergola-shaded sitting area overlooks the valley.

Other obstacles were treated as opportunities. Local building codes requiring nonflammable roofing materials led the architect and the designer to the unusual but colorful choice of a clay-tile roof. They selected a combination of Colorado limestone and Kansas fieldstone for the exterior, mixing straw, a traditional binding material, into the mortar for an ageless feel. "When you get onto the basic issue of materials and what looks good out there, everything is textured," explains Easton. Inside they used Colorado oak for all the beams and trimwork, applying different treatments to the wood from room to room. French-plaster walls add warmth, and the floors are clad in wormy oak, stone and terra-cotta tile.

"I knew the wall finishes that David used and the types of needlepoint rugs he liked," says Nancy Crown, whose familiarity with Easton's work ranged from his interiors at Aspen's Little Nell Hotel (a Crown holding) to residences he'd designed for friends and relatives. "I'd never seen a room he'd done that I didn't love. Almost every piece that he chooses for a house, be it a fabric or a wallcovering or a piece of furniture, is considered with respect to historical reference." Here Easton chose an "elegant but livable" mix of antiques and upholstered furniture, reproducing pieces picked up at auction and designing fabrics when he couldn't find exactly what he was looking for. "He's such an artist," declares Nancy Crown. "I have a vivid memory of a meeting one day. My husband wanted a TV across from the bed, and the vaulted ceiling in the bedroom is pitched at five feet, so we were trying to figure that out. David always has colored pencils with him, and he started drawing this armoire. He had a very specific idea of how it should look, and he did the sketch in the colors we'd already selected for the room—and that picture was duplicated exactly."

For all its attention to detail, the house is not fussy. Every room is geared toward comfort and the particular needs of the Crown family. The intimate oak-paneled study serves as a retreat for the couple; a media room downstairs is largely the kids' domain; and the family/breakfast room has become the all-purpose hangout. "The sunlight in that room is extraordinary, and I love the fabrics in there," says Nancy Crown. "It just seems to be the place where we all gather because it's so comfortable."

The family makes extensive use of the house not just during the "ski" season—the three youngest Crowns prefer snowboarding—but throughout the year, particularly in the summer. The eldest Crown child is now 30, but events like the Fourth of July still bring everyone together. "It's such a cozy family house, and yet, because of the great outdoor spaces, it's also terrific for entertaining," says Nancy Crown. "David and Eric are both problem solvers, but they're also visionaries." No surprise, then, that the partners are currently applying their talents to the Crowns' primary residence in Chicago. □