

# Simple Gifts

BY KATE O'CONNOR  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY TODD CRAWFORD

"'Tis the gift to be simple, 'tis the gift to be free, 'tis the gift to come down where we ought to be," proclaims the old Shaker song — and the sentiment resonates for those who long to find a more peaceful, uncomplicated way of life. That desire is the impetus for many who come to the mountains of Western North Carolina — and Mike and Jo Ray are no exception. Standing in the sun-drenched great room of their home near Mars Hill, one suspects that they've succeeded.



The narrowness of the Ray house invites natural illumination from all sides. Pale pine ceilings and floors add rustic warmth, but maintain the sense of lightness. In keeping with the clean, orderly space, the television—inset parallel to the fireplace—is at perfect viewing height, but can be easily concealed when not in use.

“They wanted it to be simple, but not cold or über-modern. The materials needed to be real. They wanted it to have heart.”



Recycled celadon glass tiles complement the elegant lines of handcrafted maple kitchen cabinets by Madison County woodworker Dennis Crawford. The custom concrete countertops are by Mandala Design.



Sleek leather Parsons chairs flank a custom dining table by Julie Allen. The quarter-sawn sycamore was locally harvested and milled.



A warm neutral palette and streamlined furnishings keep the focus on the panoramic views. The Rays chose to forgo window treatments, further integrating the outdoors with the home's interiors.

For the Rays, the transition went beyond trading their historic 1800s home in Mount Pleasant, outside Charleston, for the rolling pastureland of Madison County. It meant rethinking their aesthetic approach to home design — and how it would best serve them.

“Originally, being in the Asheville area, we thought we’d want it done in Arts & Crafts style,” Jo recalls. “But considering the beauty of the property, we wanted to be able to enjoy the view in every room. We came to the conclusion that a more modern, open layout was what we were really looking for and would be most suited to our lifestyle.”

For Duncan McPherson of Samsel Architects, the setting informed the styling of the structure. “We looked at the surrounding landscape and determined that a farmhouse is what historically would have been built there,” explains McPherson. “That was the launching point, but they wanted something without ornamentation and decoration, something more streamlined. We wanted to create a sympathetic structure that matched our clients’ needs.”

The solution was a narrow structure — 20 feet across — that presented the opportunity to capture daylight on both sides of the house (three sides in some rooms). A series of large windows in the main living area is perfectly aligned, giving the home a feeling of lightness and transparency. A large screened porch, terrace and covered front porch further extend that connectivity with the outdoors.

The staggered, single-gable roof is covered with seamed metal — a nod to the farmhouse vernacular. Vertically laid composite cement board used on the exterior recalls the wood siding on older buildings, but is extremely low maintenance. “It feels appropriate without mimicking what would traditionally have been there,” says McPherson. “It’s not an alien object dropped in on the terrain. It’s about listening to the landscape and blending.”



Inspired by the rolling pastures of Madison County, Duncan McPherson of Samsel Architects envisioned a modern interpretation of a farmhouse. "The simplicity of the roof forms and floor plan layout give it that modern edge," he observes, "but it still feels very comfortable in the surroundings."



The entry foyer of the home combines functions, serving as a both transitional space and library. The custom fiber-art wall hanging by Barbara Zaretsky catches the cross breeze, adding a sense of movement.

Creating consistency between the interior and exterior spaces was a priority for the Rays, so interior designer Traci Kearns of Alchemy Design Studio was brought in to help coordinate the effort. "The Rays didn't want an extravagant space — that's part of why I really connected with this project," says Kearns. "They wanted it to be simple, but not cold or über-modern. The materials needed to be real. They wanted it to have heart."

To add a warm finish to the interiors, the design team

chose to wrap the space in light woods. Local white-pine ceiling and trim, maple flooring and ponderosa-pine window frames all exhibit the meticulous craftsmanship of the builders, Blue Ridge Energy Systems. Custom maple cabinetry by Madison County craftsman Dennis Crawford completes the setting. To keep the profile clean, McPherson cleverly tucked the television into a shuttered niche beside the fireplace and concealed the electronics in cabinets on the side of the chimney breast. ("Jo absolutely

did not want a TV mounted over the fireplace," notes Mike.)

Kearns selected a palette of warm neutrals for the appointments in this uncluttered space. "There's an abundance of natural light. It allowed us to go a bit darker with the furnishings for contrast, knowing that it wouldn't feel heavy or oppressive," she observes. Strategically placed handcrafted elements such as the quarter-sawn sycamore dining table by Julie Allen and a custom fiber-art hanging by Barbara Zaretsky in the entry foyer add charm and flair.

All of which contributes to the sense of calm and order that prevails. "We love the flow and circulation of the rooms — the integration of the indoor and outdoor spaces," says Mike. "The light, the views, the ventilation, the fresh air!"

Jo nods in agreement. "I enjoy the sound of the rain on the roof," she says. "In so many ways, this house has met our hopes." What a gift that is. □

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