



At Home IN MARS HILL

Story by Tina M. Wolfe | Photos by Meherdil Irani

Upon entering Mike and Jo Ray's Mars Hill farmhouse one is struck by the harmonious flow of light and energy. From the colors and materials to the site placement and design, this understated, modern-day homestead is a long-awaited respite for the couple. They bought the nine acres of rolling pastures and woodlands in 2007 as part of their retirement plan.

Having lived in urban settings in Mount Pleasant, South Carolina, and in a condominium in downtown Asheville during the building process, Mike and Jo were looking for a home that worked with their new life here in the mountains. "We wanted simplicity and an uncluttered feel to our home," Jo says. The Rays contracted Samsel Architects because of the company's environmental and clean, modern designs.

"(Their home) was a particularly fun project to work on because it was a scale of house and style of living that I could relate to," says Duncan McPherson, an LEED-accredited architect with Samsel. "The land and views are beautiful, so designing a house that reacted to those elements was important. We also felt a sense of responsibility to create a house that felt like it belonged on the site and would be timeless in its style."

Utilizing natural colors on the exterior, the home does not distract from its surroundings. Two red rocking chairs and a matching swing are reflective of the couple's no-stress lifestyle. Long and narrow, the home offers an open living and kitchen area to the right and the master suite, laundry room and a small office to the left that can be conveniently closed off for privacy. Mike and Jo wanted their day-to-day living on one level, so a guest quarters is tucked away downstairs with its own access to a stone paver patio and garden area.

The kitchen, dining, and living areas welcome daylight on three sides with peaceful southern views to the pastures. Built-ins anchor the far wall and hide the electronics. "I didn't want a big TV competing with the views," says Jo with a laugh.

Working with designer Traci Kearns of Alchemy Design, Jo chose interior colors and materials that blend with the light wood species and the natural light. "We wanted a look that was not too styled or forced and also visually quiet," says Traci. "The



grayish tones of the walls in the main space have a connection to the exterior—it is an easy transition from inside to out and, while we wanted some color, we also wanted your eye to move past the walls and connect with the landscape."

Jo and Mike sought out local artisans for the interior. From a locally harvested sycamore tree, woodworker Julie Allen created a beautiful dining table that serves as the focal piece in the room.

The darker gray fabric of the couches is accented nicely by a metal and wood

coffee table made by Julie and metal artist Kelly Prestwood.

To divide the living and sleeping quarters, Duncan created a wall of floor-to-ceiling bookshelves in the stairwell where Jo's basket and pottery collections are displayed along with couple's personal library. A three-piece Barbara Zaretsky wall hanging adds color and interest. By using frosted glass and windows in the rooms of the hallway, this small hall becomes spacious. Large double doors lead to the master suite with walk-in closets.

To accommodate their many cats, cork flooring was used in the laundry and a special space was designed for their litter box. Such thoughtful details and the built-in desk in the office are things the Rays appreciate. "Working with Duncan and Traci was wonderful," says Mike. "They listened and created a space we love."

The home also boasts several green features including active and passive solar attributes with expansion capabilities, an airtight envelope created with spray foam insulation, heat pump water heater, Energy Star appliances, two 2,500-gallon cisterns for water for the landscape and plumbing, dual-flush toilets, heat exchange/recovery ventilator, a destratification fan, and low VOC paints on both interior and exterior surfaces.

Most of the wood is locally sourced and recycled tiles were also used. The couple installed drought resistant landscaping and Duncan created a barn-style gardening shed directly under the screened porch with sliding doors at the front and back of the house for easy access.

"I think it will be one of those homes that we will visit many years from now and it will still feel as good as it does today," says Traci. After a lifetime of city living, the Rays are enjoying an uncomplicated country life in a house that makes it easy.

