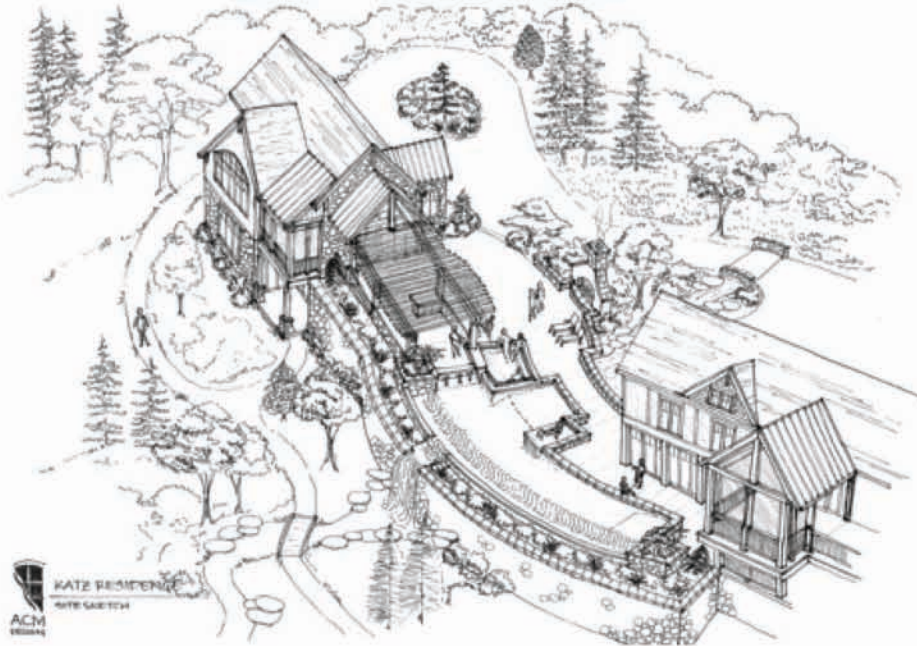


Miami Beach Meets the Mountains

Serious luxury calls for serious collaboration. An Asheville architect and South Florida interior designer “make it work.”

BY MELANIE MCGEE BIANCHI



SKETCH BY ACM DESIGN

Marcus Katz says he was happy with the moosehead. But then he got turned on to the work of designer Steven G., and what was a traditionally appointed (albeit 10,000-square-foot) mountain lodge evolved into a light-drenched mega-retreat with a dramatic poolside waterfall and a crush of other luxury accoutrements. When construction is complete in May, this summer dream house will feature a full, sunken spa including — wait for it — a pedicure station.

Shortly after Katz, a semi-retired education financier, and his wife Pearl Baker Katz found their “lodge” in an exclusive neighborhood near Biltmore Park, they were wowed by an Interiors by Steven G. project near their permanent home on Fisher Island in Miami Beach. “So we flew them up here to take a look at the house, and they came back and said, ‘Well, the house has very good bones,’” recalls Marcus. “They literally meant just the bones.”

Take a hike, taxidermy.

Eventually Molly Silverstein, an associate designer of the posh-interiors kingpin, was brought on board to outfit the rapidly morphing estate. By that time, Asheville architect Amy Conner-Murphy had already joined the team, bringing a keen eye to the logistical dilemmas of the grand-scale renovation. She confirms that the house’s traditional-rustic exterior (primarily comprised of Virginia fieldstone and heavy pebble-dash stucco) is the only thing left untouched — although even that has been updated with a new heavy-timber front-entry porch and a new front door, among other additions.

“Initially we were going to redo only a few areas, but one thing led to another, and in the end our clients decided to take everything back to the studs,” she says. The whole interior became wider, lighter and more open, original windows and French doors torn away and replaced with bi-fold wood and aluminum Weiland doors — majestically understated glass portals that are particularly coveted for rooms with a view. Conner-Murphy estimates that the property faces an almost 200-degree vista, and says of the main glassed-in space: “Over a length of about 150 feet, there might be a total of 10 feet that remained solid wall. The rest is glass to

absorb the mountain view into the interior spaces."

The spa will be sectioned off for various administrations of exercise and pampering, including steam shower and massage. A large outdoor living area with an infinity-edge pool, flagstone pool deck, a 450-foot-long waterfall feature with a 15-foot drop, and an outdoor bar facing the view will connect the main structure to a luxurious, open-plan guesthouse that Conner-Murphy's firm built from the ground up. Designed like an upscale hotel suite, it includes a large stone fireplace and smart-glass windows in the shower/bath area.

Having to successfully meld extensive renovation with adjacent new construction was one of the project's prime hurdles, says Conner-Murphy, who was selected by the Katzes via a video interview while the couple was on a cruise. "Those are two very different processes," she notes.

"From a creature-comfort standpoint, there's everything you could ever want here" — including Silverstein's use of sumptuous, wow-moment materials such as semi-precious stones and intricately patterned carpeting.

"But the actual mechanics of transforming the house are not as sexy as choosing beautiful slabs of granite or selecting finishes," adds Conner-Murphy. She offers examples of such "structural acrobatics," including embedding a large steel-beam structure into the wall to accommodate the gigantic Weiland doors, and having to lighten up an existing stair-and-bridge feature by replacing wood with steel and glass. "The technical part was a huge undertaking, very challenging," she says. "This is the stuff that no one ever sees."

Also simultaneously invisible and indispensable is the ongoing relationship between all the main players, including owners who've been relatively hands-on in their involvement. (Originally from Atlanta, Katz says he's felt attached to WNC since his first post-college job selling property at Beech Mountain.)

"Molly comes from a very large design firm while my firm is a small one, and we had to figure out how to work with one another and support one another to make our styles blend smoothly," says Conner-Murphy. Sharing a female viewpoint helped. But besides her and Silverstein, builder Will Walker of Mountain Custom Homes, landscape architect Greg Cloos and separate designers in the areas of landscaping, lighting and upscale-pool construction are all part of the team fleshing out the ultraluxe, and still evolving, final vision.

"There's a period of time in every project where all of the design personalities tend to be strong-willed," says Conner-Murphy.

"Everyone has to figure out what their strengths are and how they should best come together for the end result.

"When you hit that stride, that's when it starts to work. We have gotten to that place, and all the challenges up to this point have been worth it."

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