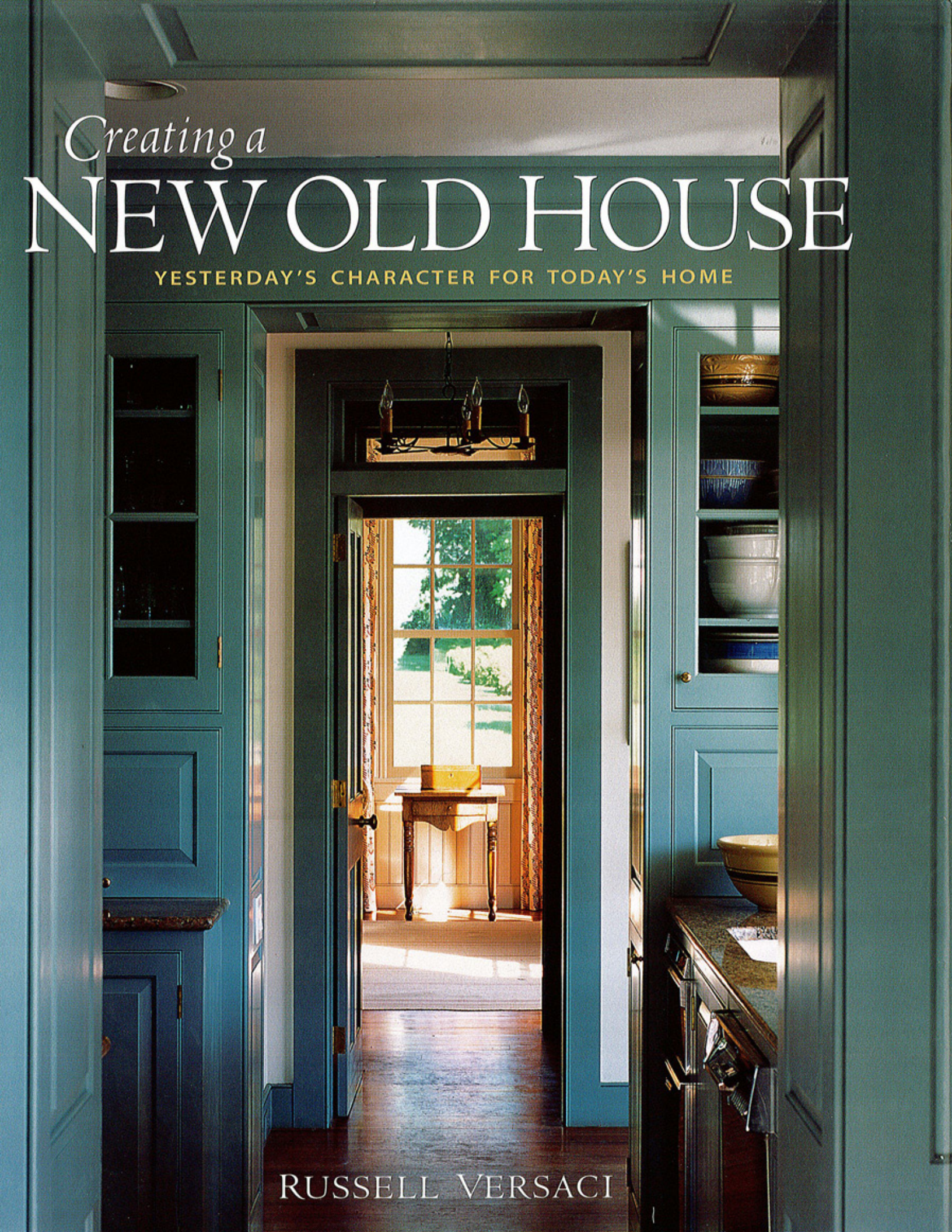


Creating a NEW OLD HOUSE

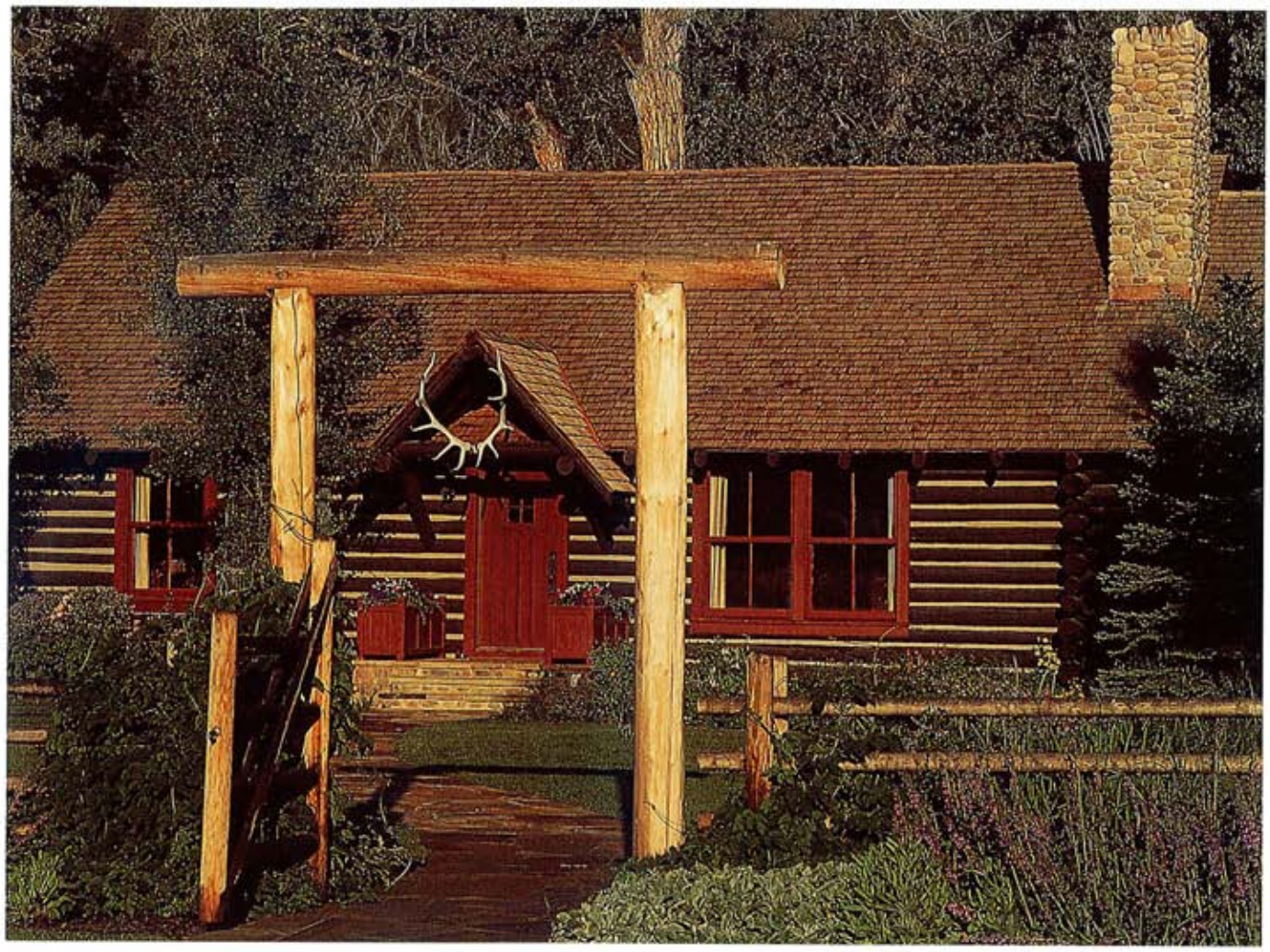
YESTERDAY'S CHARACTER FOR TODAY'S HOME

RUSSELL VERSACI

RIVER HOUSE
IN BIG SKY COUNTRY

This old cattle ranch is found in the hills of western Montana, where ranching has been a way of life since Midwesterners settled the high plains in the 1860s. The ranch was a ramshackle legacy of buildings from the turn of the last century that included a plain ranch-style house along with calving sheds, a few log barns, a tin wagon shed, and smaller outbuildings.

Outbuildings on the old ranch were reconstructed for new uses. The old ice-house was redesigned to store fishing tackle, and the reconstructed horse barn, located beyond the farm bell, now houses a game room and bunk house.



The ranch house, seen through the classic western gallows gate, is a notched log cabin in the Rocky Mountain rustic style. The cabin is one and a half stories, with the traditional low eaves and simple shingled gable roof typical of the style.

Although the place was time worn, the homeowner saw promise in the forlorn-looking property and asked architects Bill Curtis and Russell Windham to coax the motley group of buildings into a working ranch, while preserving its Montana roots. The existing ranch house was an unremarkable log structure, dating back to the late 1890s with little more than an empty shell worth saving. But the place was perfectly located next to a world-class trout stream. Bill and Russell rebuilt the entire house from the ground up to create a more authentic version of the pioneer log cabins that were built here by ranchers in the late nineteenth century. The trick was to turn a plain house into a period cabin fitted out with historic details that improved on the original design, without becoming theatrical, and that made the ranch house look and feel genuine and vintage.

The architects began by studying the character of the houses in surrounding valleys and the building traditions that shaped them, so that their new design would fit in with the old local ranch architecture of the area. Their inspiration came from the local vernacular of simple log ranch houses and barns built before 1900, along with images of the Rocky Mountain lodges of our national parks.

The reconstructed cabin uses the traditional details of notched log construction, like crossed corners and overhanging log roof rafters. The architectural details, coupled with the up-to-date structural and mechanical systems, make the rebuilt house both functional and *Built for the Ages*.

Inside the ranch, new finishes are rendered to look old. Artisans used painted finishes and distressing techniques to make the rebuilt house look tarnished by wear, *Creating the Patina of Age* without crossing the line into cowboy kitsch. The new old house is successful because it avoids clichés and is just plain comfortable, like a well-worn pair of jeans.

BUILDING WITH LOGS

The western ranchers imported their basic knowledge of log construction from the frontier east, where pioneers who settled the Appalachian Mountains of Virginia, Kentucky, and Tennessee mastered

The connected row of double-hung windows dates the porch to the turn of the twentieth century, while the crossed log corners match the original cabin.

hallmarks of style

ROCKY MOUNTAIN RANCH

he cattle ranch has a long history in western Montana, a place that has provided abundant pastureland for beef cattle since the 1860s, when Midwestern ranchers migrated to the mountain valleys.

With vast forests for timber, the new settlers built almost every structure they needed with logs—houses, barns, work sheds, and fences. Thus the houses they built were four square and simple in plan, dictated by stacking logs to form straight-line boxes. When the house was enlarged, as family needs grew, another log box was added on, extending the length of the house in a telescoping plan.

On the earliest nineteenth-century houses, the roof was made of split logs or rough wood planks that ran from the roof peak to the eaves. These rough roofing boards were later covered with split shingles to make the roof more weather tight. At the turn of the twentieth century, metal roofs were favored when the material was made available with the advent of railroads.

The low 7-ft., 6-in. ceilings of the living room make the space feel intimate, like a one-room cabin. White plaster panels on the ceiling brighten the log room. The fireplace is made of blocks of Colorado moss rock, which fit together precisely and leave the natural weathered faces and moss patches exposed.

log building a century earlier. Early ranch houses are distinguished by the way in which the logs are stacked and finished. Most houses were built with peeled logs left round, though some were built with logs squared on four sides with an ax.

The most distinctive feature of log house construction is the corner joint, where the logs cross each other. This joint varies from simple log construction, where squared-log ends are stacked like bricks and spiked together to elaborate dovetail joints made of interlocking Vs that hold without fasteners. On this new old house, the corner joints are saddle notched and crowned. To make this unusual joint, the builder notches a round pocket, or saddle, out of the end of each of the logs to form a perfect seat for the log stacked above it. The ends of each of the logs are left overlong so that they stick out at the corners, a technique called crowning.

The space between the logs is usually chinked, or filled in with materials, to make the joint airtight. Traditional chinking was done with small stones, brush, or even torn hopsacks and shredded old blankets. The exterior joint was mortared closed with mud paste, a durable mortar made of lime and sand. On the inside, a small sapling was wedged between each of the logs to make a more pleasing-looking interior finish, a traditional technique that the architects used for this new old house.

A BLEND OF OLD AND NEW PARTS

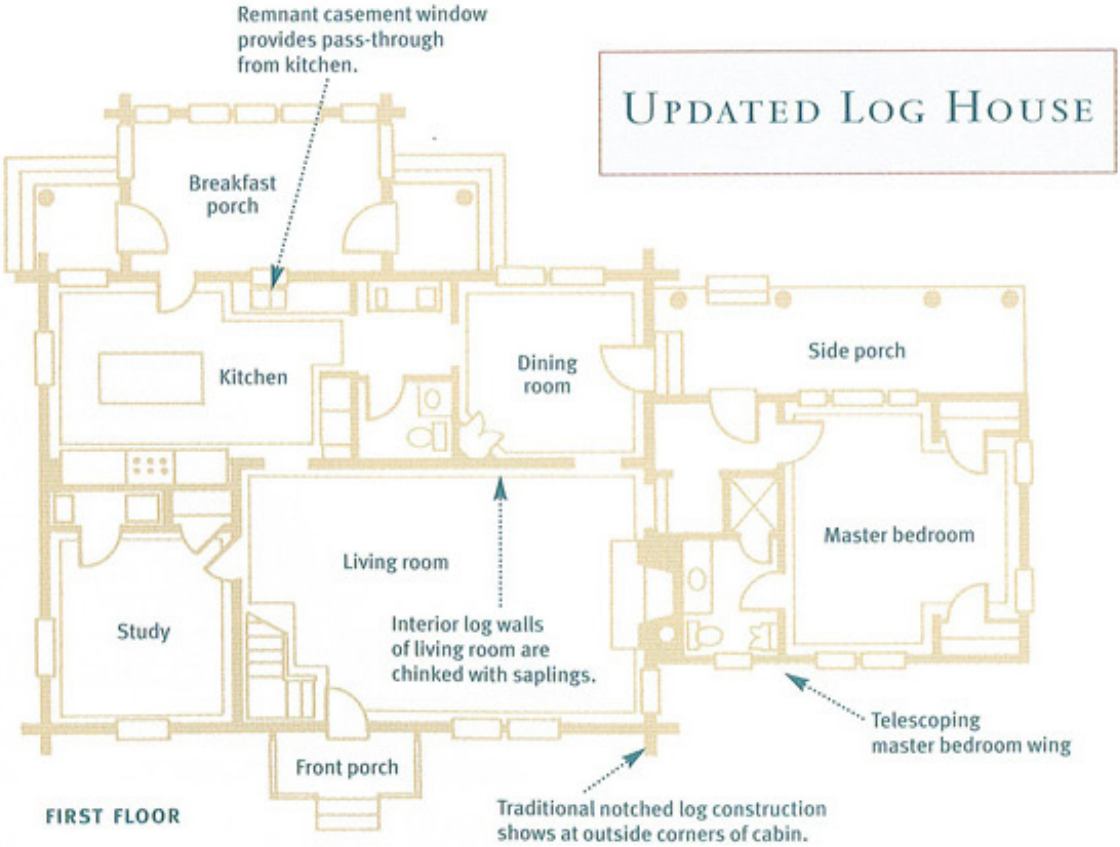
A rack of antlers, a symbol of old-fashioned pioneer traditions in the Rocky Mountains, is mounted above the front door as a welcoming gesture. The single-story ranch house is built of logs of lodgepole pine, which were probably harvested from the nearby mountainside. Like many late-nineteenth-century settlers' cabins in the high valley, the log walls are notched and crossed at the corners.

A new foundation under the house provides a firm footing and basement space, which *Incorporates the Modern Conveniences* of heating, electricity, and water supply. The old peeled logs stack on top of new foundation walls, covered with smooth river stones that were pulled from the stream bed behind the house. A stout stone chimney is built of the same stones, which have been tumbled round by the river. Because the building materials were drawn from the nearby landscape, the house feels like a part of the setting and complements the land.

The restored logs are stained with a solid brown pigment that makes the walls look brand new, highlighted by the bright white chinking of the fresh mortar. And the new split cedar shingles on the roof have not yet weathered to their dusty gray patina. But time and weather will soften the raw new look to *Create the Patina of Age* by bleaching the colors and by staining the mortar with character.

A Telescoping Cabin Plan

A small bedroom wing, added to the ranch house in the 1950s by previous owners, telescopes off one end of the main cabin, in the same way that log houses were extended historically. A new breakfast room porch was added to the river side of the



The rustic open staircase inside the front door is made of hand-hewn timbers and thick plank treads supported by a log bracket.

house, enclosed on three sides by a band of sash windows that can be opened to the sounds and scents of the water. Built of logs and river stones that duplicate the original cabin, this small addition fits naturally with the traditional architecture of the place but adds a new type of indoor–outdoor room that was unknown in the pioneer days.

A PERSUASIVE PATINA

Architects and artisans worked together to *Create the Patina of Age* on the interiors. The illusion of age begins at the front door, where the living room persuades visitors that the cabin is at least a century old. The designers blended faux finishes and antique building materials into the rebuilt house for the look of an old mountain lodge.

The amber wood walls of the living room feel like those of an old fishing cabin, hung with artwork

The walls were painted and then ragged with a smoky stain to make them look faded by time.

and memorabilia collected over a lifetime. Four walls are lined with half-round peeled logs that have been stained and varnished to create a mellow color. Log beams crisscross the low ceiling between panels of textured plaster and seem to compress the room, making it cozy. The floors are made of salvaged oak resawn into wide floorboards of random widths.

Mountain Lodge Finishes

An open staircase made of hewn timbers fills the inside corner of the living room. The stair carriage is made of stout beams and wood plank treads that have been hand-finished with an adz, a hoe-like ax with a curved blade, for a rustic effect. Each of the handrail pickets is a slat of hewn wood with the bark edges left on. These textured finishes are blackened and stained to a caramel color to turn the new wood into a convincing antique, an aging technique that can be applied to any woodwork.

At the far end of the living room, architects Bill and Russell created a craggy stone fireplace made of Colorado ledgestone, which was inspired by the style of early national park lodges. Many of the stones are covered with moss and lichen, left on at the quarry, which is sometimes called moss rock. Stacked in a dry-laid pattern, without any visible mortar joints, the rough-block stonework looks finely tailored. The mason's art shows in the subtle fitting of one stone to the next and in the massive lintel that spans across the fireplace. In early mountain cabins, these hefty stone fireplaces were often

Walls in the dining room are horizontal 1x8 flush boards painted celery white to contrast with the dark-stained beadboard ceiling. The palette of finishes is simple and rustic, but Crafted with Natural Materials *that make the room feel tailored.*

Barns and Outbuildings

Most of the calving sheds on the original cattle ranch were torn down, but the wagon shed was rebuilt. The new ranch compound includes the renovated old horse barn and the old blacksmith's shop, now used to house equipment.

A working western cattle ranch would not be complete without a full complement of barns and outbuildings. Among the existing buildings on the ranch that were saved, the old blacksmith's shop and horse barn have been restored. The horse barn, built at the turn of the last century, is a classic western-style two-story barn made of hewn logs with a timber-frame hayloft above the ground-floor horse stalls. But the barn has been refitted as a game room and guest quarters with a homespun cowboy character.

Top right: ***The hewn timber rafters*** *and king post trusses above the game room in the barn are new and added for decorative effect. Roughsawn roofing boards and wall panels more closely resemble traditional barn finishes.*

Bottom right: ***The bunkhouse is a classic ranch hands' quarters,*** *gussied up to be a guest bedroom. The peeled-log ceiling beams are original, and new walls and floors are left unfinished to add rustic character.*

The hayloft is a soaring game room and bar dressed up in early western style. The walls and floors are finished with new roughsawn planks, and the ceiling timbers are heavy hewn beams that are both decorative and structural, inserted under the old roof frame. Furnished with leather chairs and Native American rugs, the rusticity of the room plays up the cowboy theme done in the high style of the New West.

The Old West is preserved in the guest bedroom, which is housed in a part of the horse barn that was once a granary. This room was made to look like an updated version of a wranglers' bunkhouse. The iron bed frames and reproduction nineteenth-century drop-cord lights dress the room with *Details for Authenticity.*

TRADITIONAL CRAFTSMANSHIP

INSTANT TARNISHED INTERIORS

Patina is the tarnished appearance that a material takes on through years of exposure or wear, like the rich brown of an old copper penny or the hand-rubbed luster on a well-used doorknob. In a new old house, the patina of age can be introduced instantly, but it is a process of surface finishing that requires artistic skill.

A Santa Fe artist who specializes in faux finishes created the palette of distressed finishes throughout this ranch. By subtly grading paint and stain tones, the artist coaxed time-worn effects from shiny new surfaces. The grooves between boards are blackened as if embedded with dirt, the wall colors are smoked as if the paint had faded unevenly, and the cabinet finishes are rubbed thin as if handled by generations. The finishes were applied in layers, from a base coat of pure color to the darkening tones that were streaked over it. Where the finish is to look worn, the paint is wiped off or spot sanded down to bare wood.

The mustard yellow basecoat on the bathroom vanity was aged by unevenly ragging dark stain over the surface and into the joints of the boards.

made with round river stones, another way to tie the interiors to the rustic landscape outdoors.

The key to creating the mystique of the Old West inside the cabin came from a blend of antique materials and faux finishes. Faux finishing gives the kitchen an old-fashioned aura. Old oak floorboards and the beadboard ceiling are stained a deep scotch brown. The walls are made of wood boards, painted and then ragged with a smoky stain to make them look faded by time.

Newly minted kitchen cabinets are designed of simple plank frames with beaded panel doors. The cabinets are made to look well worn by the addition of old-fashioned bin pulls and butt hinges. The woodwork was aged by painting it a muddy celery white and then rubbing it down to bare wood in many places to create wear marks.

The new breakfast room porch, built to replace the old porch, looks out to the creek. When the architects added on the new room, they left a casement window in the wall to provide a pass-through to the kitchen. New saddle-notched logs are used for the walls and ceiling beams, making this room look like the rest of the cabin. Notches leftover from old roof rafters leave traces of earlier construction, so the cabin *Tells a Story Over Time.*

From the breakfast porch, the kitchen is visible beyond a pass-through created by a casement window that was leftover when the porch was added on. A notched log across the top of the wall suggests places where old rafters were once set into the wall.