

The War Widow: Read our series on a story of love and war, heartbreak and healing

Blending into the Blue Ridge

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Home of the Month is a collaborative effort with the N.C. State University College of Design through its Home Environments Design Initiative. Featured homes, selected by an expert panel, highlight the benefits of good home design and represent the diversity of homes and home renovations designed by North Carolina architects. The articles, written by faculty, graduate students and alumni of the School of Architecture, bring to light the attributes of each home. Our goal is to offer inspiration and knowledge that can be applied to your living space.

"This is the view ... from everywhere, really." The small, pixilated screen on Susan Henseny's BlackBerry shows an ocean of soft clouds below layers of mountain peaks -- a place of astonishing peace. Who wouldn't long to experience the ethereal place in the tiny, fuzzy photo?

For years Susan and Brett Henseny searched Blowing Rock for a vacation home. They wanted something special -- an open cabin with a view; not a "second home" but a retreat in the truest sense. They found older homes with views, but the interiors were divided into too many private spaces. They found beautiful, new cabin-style homes low in the valley, but the views were missing. So they decided to build.

The Charlotte couple found the perfect site: tremendous views of the Blue Ridge Parkway across an expansive valley, peace and privacy, south-facing to capture the warmth and light of the sun, adjacent to beautiful national parkland and close to town. The steep site was challenging, though, with only a narrow shelf of buildable land.

The site dictated the home's form -- long and narrow with views in one direction -- and the setting inspired its look, which pays homage to simple, vernacular mountain structures. The Henseys, both architects, wanted a place that "personifies simplicity, integrates with the outdoors and celebrates the magnificent views." The house is an uncomplicated rectangle with a steep, sheltering roof. The north side is rooted to the mountain by a concrete-block utility zone to house the functional needs -- bathrooms, closets, etc. -- and is literally anchored to the mountain bedrock. The glassy south side is completely open. Deep solar overhangs shield the high, hot summer sun yet allow in the low, warm winter sun.

You enter the home on a covered walkway, under a "treehouse." Immediately, your eye is pulled across the house to a carefully placed window at the far end. Passing through the open kitchen, you reach the two-story family room at the center of the home. A monolithic fireplace grounds you to the site and lends privacy to the master suite beyond.

The south side opens up to the views and light, and the north side has a gracious staircase. Upstairs you arrive on an interior bridge, facing the views across the two-story space. Again, the massive fireplace roots you and screens a second master suite. Opposite, a generous open loft leads across an exterior bridge and to the "treehouse," a secluded covered porch with hammocks. It anchors the thoughtful path through the home and, of course, has spectacular views. Here, the Henseys' 18-year-old son "chills out with his friends, jamming on their guitars."

When weathering is good

The Henseys selected long-lasting, low-maintenance materials. Rather than deteriorating, the materials are enhanced by the effect of weathering. The cedar shingles and galvanized metal roof evoke memories of North Carolina's tobacco barns and will weather back into the natural environment, causing the house to blend with its setting. The shingles are already beginning to "silver."

Interior materials are likewise simple and ennobling but unmistakably modern.

This house has no drywall; no dust, no paint, no maintenance. Walls and cabinetry are plywood. The wood structure, plumbing and electrical work are entirely exposed. There is a harmonious beauty in these unassuming materials. The wood is standard-size lumber -- even the roof trusses, which were built on site. The house is designed on an 8-foot module, taking advantage of the 8-foot dimension standard of most construction materials and reducing construction waste. This aesthetic is not without its challenges; typically, early construction work is concealed behind finishes. Here, those workers must thoughtfully apply their work as a finished product.

Radiant hydronic heat, an extremely efficient system that pumps hot water through tubes embedded in a concrete floor, keeps the house cozy in winter. The north wall has high, operable clerestory windows that pull fresh air up and through the house, keeping the house comfortably cool in summer -- there is no need for air conditioning. Smart House technology controls security, lighting, heating and entertainment. The Henseys can "turn the house on and off" from the Internet, so it is visible from the dark mountain road and warm when they arrive.

Apart from the novelty, Smart House monitoring systems offer a safer, more comfortable home while reducing overall energy consumption.

A happy juxtaposition

The house has stunning touches throughout: thick concrete countertops embedded with warm-toned amber and green glass, and a custom wood mantel and dining room table made by a local artist. In contrast to the modest material palette, the house is appointed with high-end, modern fixtures and appliances, with a focus on high quality and low energy consumption. The Henseys love this juxtaposition of time-honored materials and construction principles with contemporary technology and fixtures.

Nature does not always cooperate with budgets. The Henseys designed a \$150-per-square-foot project, but upon excavation, a series of hurricanes drenched the site for weeks. Between the water control, erosion and an ill-timed cement shortage, they ended up with twice as much foundation at an escalated cost -- and a dramatic impact to the overall budget.

The Henseys admit that not all who visit "get it." They laugh, saying their 5-year-old niece asked them, "Where's the paint?" But the home is exactly as they envisioned it, even better. They