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Second Nature

An Early American Estate by MossCreek

The Ehrlichs wanted a retreat from the city, a place to indulge their passion for collecting. They wound up with a house that is itself a collection—of five different 19th-century farm buildings.



The Ehrlichs first approached MossCreek because of their national reputation for designing homes in this medium.

In the master bedroom, rough-hewn shelves play host to Arts and Crafts pottery made by the Ohio-based Weller Company, which operated from 1872 through 1948. OPPOSITE PAGE: This porch, formerly part of an Indiana barn, extends off the Ehrlichs' living room.

Bringing new life to old structures has always been a passion of ours.” says Allen Halcomb, president of MossCreek.



Bil Ehrlich purchased this giant, circa 1929 Magic Chef stove, with three ovens and six burners, from an antiques dealer in Massachusetts before restoring it and adding a custom hood. A collection of copper pots hang nearby, and more Weller vases sit on the beam above. “We love how Weller pieces adapted over time to fit the changing tastes of Americans,” he says.

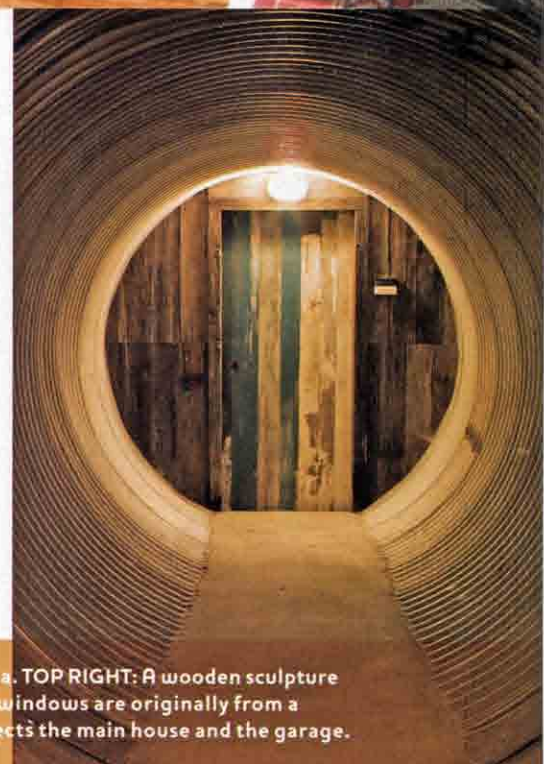


The urban landscape of our young century throngs with people who live for minimalism, for pristine spaces and angular white walls that play the perfect host to cutting-edge furniture and today's giant photographs and paintings. But when it comes to the weekend, many of those modernists slink off to country houses with gables, where they lounge on squasy vintage-style sofas in front of nice old fireplaces—traitors to the modern cause.

You'd never think Bil Ehrlich to be such a man. He doesn't only live in a modern Manhattan townhouse; he designed the place himself in the late 1960s, before turning from architecture to real estate. And yes, its soaring, sharp white walls feature major modern art; most of the tables and chairs hail from the Italian company Zanotta. Certainly, Ehrlich's retreat would be some Marcel Breuer-designed box. Yet the upstate New York vacation home he shares with his wife, Ruth, and their son, Ace, is as rural and as 19th-century as one could imagine. The fact that it has no air conditioning is only the beginning.

The Ehrlichs, you see, didn't just fall in love with one old house. They amassed five forgotten farm structures—a large and small barn, cabin, granary, and silo—with the help of a man who specializes in finding old agrarian buildings. Then Bil designed a home encompassing all of them. This part came from Tennessee, that part from Indiana, and so on.

"What we wanted was a building that felt like it had always been here," Bil explains. The one-time cabin is now a grand, two-level master-bedroom suite. The large barn, on one end, is a high-ceilinged living room with a massive stone fireplace that opens onto a lovely porch; on the other, it's a downstairs kitchen and two upstairs bedrooms. The structures are joined with an indoor bridge: a new catwalk that connects the second levels of the cabin and the barn. ■



TOP LEFT: Bil, Ruth, and their son, Ace, 13, stand on the side porch with Lola, a long-haired Chihuahua. TOP RIGHT: A wooden sculpture by artist Nancy Dwyer urges guests to spend time in the living room. The room's Prairie-style windows are originally from a home in Cincinnati. BOTTOM: This underground culvert tunnel, with a poured-concrete floor, connects the main house and the garage.



The confluence of art and architecture drove the details of MossCreek's design. "Bill's collection of American craft was exceptional, and it begged to be displayed in this project"

A view from the upper balcony into the dining room showcases the family's Stickley table and chairs, all of which date from before 1910. The table is set with Weller Coppertone ceramics and lit by a Joel Otterson chandelier, which represents an upside-down lotus pond and is composed of colored cast-metal leaves and blown-glass flowers.



“All the art we selected is based on the theme of artificial nature. We love the simplicity that nature implies, but so much of what we respond to has been manipulated by man.” —BIL EHRLICH



Bil made this two-dimensional steer sculpture, which greets guests when they first arrive at the Ehrlichs' home, by magnifying an 18th-century woodblock print and then transferring it onto plastic used for outdoor signs. "I wanted to have a cow without the responsibility of having a real one," he says.



Art Nouveau vases by Clément Massier, a late 19th-century French ceramist, sit on hanging, reinforced beams in the living room. "The iridescent glaze of these pieces gives them a fiery life of their own," Bil says. "We love how the rich yet subtle colors change with varying shades of light." Humphrey, the family's mini wirehaired Dachshund, stands proudly in front.



The granary and silo now serve as a guest house. And the small barn, sited many yards downhill, appears to be a shed but is actually the garage, connected to the main building through an underground tunnel created with an old culvert.

Bil was equally intent on making the interior authentically rustic. Not only is there no A/C—or any vents anywhere; all the windows are single-paned. “There are no signs that it’s a faux old house,” he says. “When you’re here, you can’t imagine that six years ago this place didn’t even exist.”

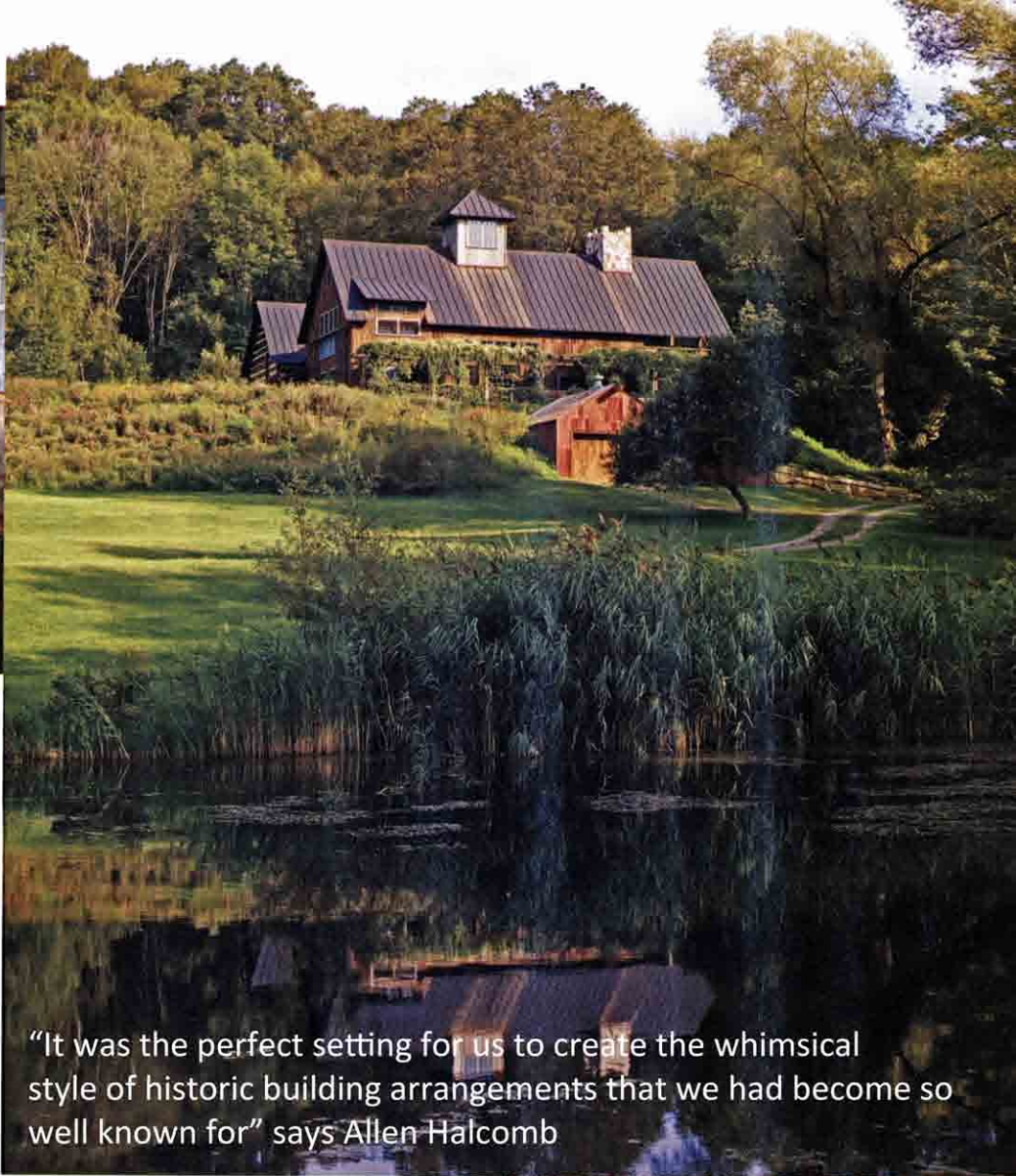
Sometimes, his plan backfired. “The first winter, we froze,” admits Ruth, who got her husband to install storm windows.

“But, the thing is, when Bil goes with something, he goes all the way.”

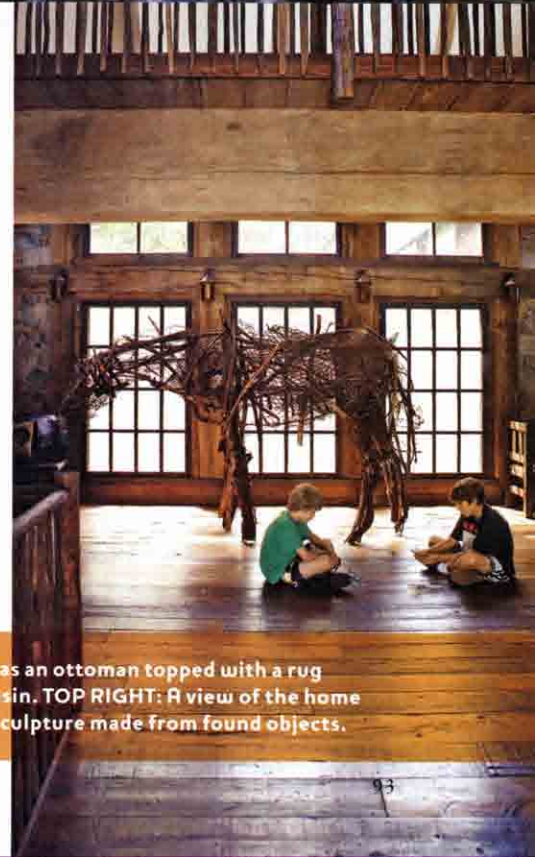
In this case, “all the way” meant traveling the world to find architectural details, furniture, and hardware to make the house an almost ostentatiously understated marvel. Nowhere is this more clear than in the kitchen, which is anchored by a grand Magic Chef stove from the 1920s. For another note of verisimilitude, the room is lit by six delicate hanging fixtures rather than one massive ceiling fixture.

But the upstate house wasn’t built to satisfy the Ehrlichs’ desire to get back to the land. It’s meant to be an environment in which to indulge their collecting passions. “We live in a minimal, simple environment in the city, as clean and uncluttered as possible,” Bil says. “This house is more about things—about stuff.” Just as the structure itself is a congeries of buildings and shapes, the interior is a collage, too. There’s an assortment of antique irons and a wide-ranging assemblage of Mission-style furniture, for example. A few pieces are new—most are of original, early 20th-century pedigree. Perhaps most visible is the collection of Art Nouveau ceramics by Clément Massier and the Weller Arts and Crafts pottery, which is spread out over various ledges, shelves, mantels, tables, and étagères (and the Ehrlichs still don’t have all of it on display).

There are also enough indicators of the Ehrlichs’ first love—modern art—to bring the project ▣



“It was the perfect setting for us to create the whimsical style of historic building arrangements that we had become so well known for” says Allen Halcomb



TOP LEFT: The living room is filled with early 20th-century Mission furniture by Stickley, as well as an ottoman topped with a rug Ruth hooked herself. The anatomical art piece, by Fred Tomaselli, is composed of pills encased in resin. **TOP RIGHT:** A view of the home and garage. **BOTTOM:** Ace and his friend Max Kalikow play in front of a Deborah Butterfield horse sculpture made from found objects.



MossCreek chose antique flooring to complement the wood of the antique structures.

into an entirely new dimension. A Deborah Butterfield sculpture of a horse stands sentry in the entryway. A Joel Otterson light sculpture, designed to resemble an upside-down lotus pond, hangs above the dining table. And presiding over the living room fireplace is a Michael Joo sculpture of a pair of moose antlers that have been sliced and extended with steel rods.

“All the art we selected is based on the theme of artificial nature,” Bil says. “We love nature, and we love the simplicity that it implies, but so much of what we respond to has been manipulated by man—and that’s the new standard of nature. Even the Hudson River School—they only painted things in the most romantic light, and then that became the standard of excellence and beauty. We were trying to do the same thing here.”

Perhaps best of all, though, is the feeling of apartness the place has. “A lot of people want the same conveniences in a weekend house that they have at home, and we didn’t,” Ruth says. “It feels so different here, you know you’re not home.” **Q**



Collecting Weller Pottery

The Ehrlichs are obsessed with art pottery. Some of their pieces, including those by Clément Massier, now sell for thousands. But Weller remains affordable.

What it is: The Ohio company Weller made earthenware from 1872 through 1948—all of it handcrafted until the '20s, when mass production became the norm.

What to look for: Weller manufactured dozens of lines, each with its own mark. To see all of them, consult *Warman's Weller Pottery: Identification and Price Guide*, by Denise and David Rago, and Ann Gilbert McDonald's *All About Weller Book II*.

Where to find it: The Ehrlichs' favorite source is the Pottery Lovers Weekend (potterylovers.org), held every summer in Zanesville, Ohio. If you can't make it there, eBay is a great alternative.

What it costs: Most Weller items range between \$100 and \$500, although they can be bought for as little as \$10 and have been known to fetch as much as \$1,000.

For more info: Log on to hilltop treasures.com, which also offers Weller ceramics for sale.

TOP LEFT: The Ehrlichs found this 19th-century tin bathtub, with cast-iron legs and oak trim, at an antiques store in Hudson, New York. Weller vases sit on the mantel of a fireplace that also opens into the master bedroom. TOP RIGHT: Ruth displays some of her 150 antique irons on a window ledge in the kitchen.

“Away from the main house, we had a chance to create a pavilion with a sort of “Appalachian Zen” quality. This primitive and organic style of Appalachia is unique in the American landscape and one of our favorite styles to design”



MOSSCREEK

This 45-foot-long open porch was created from a barn frame and is connected to the guest house, which was composed of an old granary and silo. Chairs with woven-bark seats surround the hot tub, while birdhouses—created by artisans in Great Barrington, Massachusetts—line the stone fireplace’s mantel.

CHECK OUT THE SHOP GUIDE! See page 128 for more information on the Ehrlichs’ furniture and art.