

cabin fever

Architect James Philip Wright brings a breath of fresh air to a stodgy log cabin on the shores of Lake Almanor



OVERLOOKING BEAUTIFUL LAKE ALMANOR IN THE NORTHERN SIERRA NEVADA MOUNTAINS IS A MODERN-DAY GUEST CABIN THAT HAS ONLY ONE POSSIBLE DRAWBACK—GUESTS MAY NEVER WANT TO LEAVE. INSPIRED BY A BACKDROP OF SWEEPING NATURAL BEAUTY, THE CABIN IS AS BOLD AS THE MOUNTAINS IN THE DISTANCE AND AS RAW AND RUSTIC AS THE PINE AND FIR TREES THAT SWAY OUTSIDE.

The owner, who had spent childhood summers on Lake Almanor, had always dreamed of owning property there. His dream materialized in 2000, when he purchased a home on the lake and, one year later, bought the cabin next door as a guesthouse for his family and friends.

But the guest cabin's dark, inwardly focused design simply didn't work. So he recruited architect James Phillip Wright, AIA—renowned for his innovative luxury residences—to trans-



STORY BY KIMBERLY OLSON | PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANTHONY PERES



form the dowdy cottage into a spacious, modern lakefront playland that would work as a retreat for both Fourth of July week-ends and winter holiday celebrations.

“It was sort of criminal that the original design wasn’t taking advantage of the outdoors,” Wright recalls. “It was such an introverted, compartmentalized cabin, and we wanted to create spaces that would capture the exterior views.”

Wright’s redesign required gutting the space—interior walls and all—to create a spacious floor plan, with the kitchen, living area, and loft open to one another. The windows were raised to the roof on both ends of the gable structure to offer expansive views of the shimmering lake and towering trees, and to allow plenty of sunlight to flood into the center of the living space. What began as a 3,500-square-foot, three-bedroom cabin would ultimately become a 6,000-square-foot lodge with five bedrooms, six-and-a-half bathrooms, a game room, a loft, a barbeque area, and an expansive deck. “I wanted this to be a place where we could have a good party and go crazy, but also where people could have their own bedrooms to get away from the chaos,” the owner says. “And having the [original] log house next door gives my parents a quiet place to go and not be affected by all the noise.”

Wright embraced the owner-builder’s idea of a cabin that was both contemporary and luxurious, using rustic, natural materials to enhance the connection to the outdoors. “People often associate luxury with polished brass and marble,” Wright says. “But we wanted to take this to the other extreme, which is luxury in marriage with nature.”

Owner and architect were committed to incorporating local resources, so Wright suggested using salvaged materials from an old lumber mill that was being demolished nearby. The flooring from the old mill became the cabin’s wall paneling, and a stack of broken band-saw blades, discovered while poking around the mill’s “boneyard,” was artfully fashioned into a wainscot in the powder room.

Because the region is known for its historic craftsmanship, a team of top talent was easily assembled to help bring Wright’s vision to life. Skilled carpenters painstakingly coaxed and scribed each log and cut the margins so precisely that no trim was needed.

“Everyone says, ‘Oh, contemporary architecture is so simple,’” Wright says. “But the subframes and everything beneath the finishes have to be perfect, because you don’t have moldings like you do in traditional architecture. Any imperfections in the rough structure are telegraphed through.” In the end, a crew of 12 car-



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penters contributed their talents, several working on the cabin full-time for two years.

The building's stunning woodwork is complemented by plenty of local stone—much of it courtesy of nearby Mount Lassen, the now-dormant volcano—which was used to create rugged fireplaces, support columns, and other elements.

Wright and stonemason Ed Bishop allowed the rock's organic forms to inspire the design, as evidenced by the fireplace in the main space. "The mantel is actually asymmetrical," Wright says. "It's a slab of stone that has a chip the size of half a watermelon scalloped out of it, which makes it less functional, but the aesthetic is so unusual that it really complements the stonework on the balance of the house. Ed is a passionate artist who can do unbelievable things with stone. He even wove roots into some of the stonework, which is just beautiful." Bishop also added some whimsical touches, such as the image of a rock climber in the stone of the tapered chimney.

Wright says his close partnership with the owner was key to realizing his artistic vision. "Some clients are afraid to just let a design become what it wants to become," Wright says. "But this client was willing to take risks and really helped nourish the creative germ."

While getting the details right was important, the greater goal was to provide a comfortable mountain getaway for all seasons. "In the wintertime, the place takes on a warm and cozy feel," says the owner. "And in the summertime, it feels open and airy, with these great windows that open onto the lake and let all the colors in."

