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Life of design

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architecture influences*

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Greek Revival
style in a Keswick
four-over-four

Reforming tradition



Brand-new tradition

*Transforming the past with
a farmhouse reboot*



BY ERIKA HOWSARE
PHOTOGRAPHY BY
VIRGINIA HAMRICK



Robin and Craig Ellis were searching for the perfect name for their Keswick property when they took a drive on the Blue Ridge Parkway. A sign directed their gaze across a ravine to a scree field—a place where fragments of rock covered a slope. These pieces, the remnants of a large boulder, are called “talus”: a perfect metaphor, the couple thought, for the transformation they’d undertaken at home.

The 1960s split-level ranch house on their property had served them well for a time, but they knew it wasn’t their ultimate home. “Talus” is now the name of an impressive traditional house they built in its place. As they moved into

the empty-nest phase of their lives, the idea of transformation became a touchstone for them personally, and an apt description of how they sought to change the raw materials of their seven-acre property into something new.

“I love classical design,” says Robin, who designed the house in collaboration with architect Bethany Puopolo. “I think it’s the most beautiful and highest form of architecture.” The Greek Revival style, associated with historical American buildings, especially attracted her.

“I like a traditional division of spaces, not an open floor plan,” Robin says. “I wanted it to fit into the neighborhood,” which is well-known for its stately historic horse farms.

Though quite formal from the front, the house reveals a not-entirely-traditional spirit within. “I wanted to tweak it to get more light in.”

She began with the idea of a traditional center hall, one that would allow a view straight through the house from the front entry. To admit light into each room from both sides, she considered designing the home only one room deep, eventually moving toward a four-over-four floor plan.

“We focused on the proportions of the openings,” says Puopolo—including a large cased opening between the living and dining rooms. Large windows all around, including a rear wall filled with French doors, bring in the sun. Most



Rather than an open floor plan, which is popular in modern constructions, Robin Ellis wanted a traditional four-over-four layout. A center hall allows a view straight through the house from the front entry. A large cased opening moves guests from dining room to living room and large windows throughout, including a rear wall filled with French doors, let the light in. The floor plan has distinctly contemporary touches, in architecture and décor—from the Arteriors chandelier with blown-glass birds to the large banks of windows in the kitchen.

interior doors include some glass to keep the light moving through.

Puopolo says that Ellis' concept, in terms of massing, was unusually pure. "The fact that it is 'just a box' is unusual. It was refreshing and inspiring."

Updated classic

The Ellises own three horses and wanted to site the house in a way that would maximize the open space on their property. "I wanted the pool, patio and house all clustered," says Robin. From the back porch off the main level, where the couple spends free time in three seasons, the view alights on the horse pasture downhill.

An outdoorsy, horse-and-dog lifestyle is dear to the couple and made its own demands on the program of the house. "We needed a really good mudroom," says Ellis. On the basement level, she can enter the mudroom at the rear of the house, put tack in a dedicated closet and launder horse blankets in a large, cheerful space with cabinets salvaged from the ranch house. Ceramic tile floors mimic the bluestone on the patio outside, but are easier to clean and more affordable.

This basement level, like the two above, is about 1,500 square feet—enough for a large office/den for Robin, a mother-in-law suite and an "orangerie" along the rear wall, a light-filled spot for plants and dogs.

On the main level, the space is divided fairly evenly among living, dining, kitchen and Craig's office: four quadrants separated by the wide center hall and stairwell. This time-tested arrangement has distinctly contemporary touches, in architecture and décor—from the Arteriors chandelier with blown-glass birds, to the tiny powder room cleverly placed off a stair landing, to the large banks of windows in the kitchen.

Mixing the eras

It's a lovely balance—guided by Robin's experience as an interior designer—of the nostalgic and the

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Porches off the basement level and main level are for comfort and convenience. Below, a mudroom provides a tack closet and a place to launder horse blankets. Above, the couple spends free time on the porch three seasons of the year, taking in views of the horse pasture downhill.

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modern. The kitchen harkens back to an earlier era with its brass fittings and softly hued marble countertops, but a showy wall-mounted wine rack is entirely of the present. Ellis refinished a number of salvaged elements, like mantels and doors, to lend a sense of history. “I tried to use indigenous materials”—brick, wood, bluestone—“as though it was built at a time when only local materials were available,” says Ellis.

The details (overseen by Ellis, Puopolo and project manager Chad Graves with Evergreen Construction) are luxurious but subtle, and they add up to an homage to the Greek Revival style. “We increased the size and detailing of the corner boards to have them read as pilasters,” says Puopolo, “and created special casing around openings and a deeper cornice.” Front porch columns are a Greek Doric style, meaning they



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lack a base at the bottom end. “We tried to create a vernacular version of a Greek Revival house rather than a reproduction,” says Puopolo, “a country carpenter’s version of the style.”

Brass cremone bolts on the French doors inside lend luxury, while the team’s willingness to use various types of wood and hardware add to the sense that this house is lived-in, “not matchy matchy,” says Ellis. “We mixed a ton of different woods.” Windows are fir, floors are white oak and the kitchen’s center island is walnut—and that’s not to mention the repurposed doors and mantels throughout the house.

“We love the way the double chimneys turned out,” says Puopolo. “From the road they give the impression that the house is much older than it is.”

“Everybody who comes up thinks it’s been here forever,” says Ellis. “One delivery driver said, ‘How long have you been working on this renovation?’ That was the biggest unintended compliment we got.”

THE BREAKDOWN

Square footage: 4,500 square feet

Structural system: Wood framing

Exterior material: Hardiplank siding with brick raised basement

Interior finishes: White oak flooring; Carrera, Crema Marfil and Calcutta marble counters and tile

Roof materials: Standing seam metal and copper

Window system: Loewen push-out French casement (fir interior and clad exterior)

Mechanical systems: Radiant heat flooring, gas stovetop, wood burning fireplaces

General contractor: Evergreen General Contracting



The home’s details are an homage to the Greek Revival style. “I tried to use indigenous materials”—brick, wood, bluestone—“as though it was built at a time when only local materials were available,” says Ellis. Windows are fir, floors are white oak and the kitchen’s center island is walnut—and that’s not to mention the repurposed mantels and doors (including those pictured here, saved from a Montpelier renovation) throughout the house.