Mountain time

Vernacular style in a majestic setting slows life to a blissful pace.

Text by Mary Grauerholz  Photos by

The Boarding House is a private residence club located in the Balsam Mountain Preserve in Sylva, North Carolina.
Bill Croswell, a businessman in Jackson, Mississippi, was as excited as a boy getting ready for camp. And in a way, he was: Croswell and his wife were preparing for a summer vacation at the Boarding House, a private residence club located in the Balsam Mountain Preserve in Sylva, North Carolina. Here, they would settle into one of 10 cabins clustered in the Blue Ridge Mountains, meet up with other family members, and do all the things that the couple is too busy at home, including taking their granddaughter to art camp at the Nature Center.

Several times a year, Bill and his family drive north to the Boarding House, where they mostly revel in the vast beauty of the mountains and the stunning, complete silence. When Bill is here, he is truly away. “Yes, you can use your cellphone if you can find a clear place,” he says with a chuckle, “but if it doesn’t work, that’s just fine.”

Some of the reasons that the Croswells are happily content at their Boarding House cabin are obvious—they enjoy each other’s company and the ever-present mountain setting. But the cabin has a variety of features that enhance the residents’ well-being, whether they are conscious of it or not. As they settle into their favorite chairs for a chat, their eyes are taking in the creamy, organic-shaded walls, the open rafter ceilings, fieldstone fireplace, and shining wood floors. The natural tones and materials, combined with majestic views of the Blue Ridge and Great Smoky Mountains, are a powerful salve for the body and soul.

Terry Pylant, a partner with Historical Concepts in Peachtree City, Georgia, led the team of architects that designed the Boarding House. Letting nature rule design, Pylant says, brings people into balance with themselves and with the world. “We wanted to make it genuine, honest, in such a way that people enjoy it,” Pylant says. “Driving up, you think the Boarding House has been there 100 years. It just feels right.”

The 10 cabins located at the Boarding house stem from the Appalachian vernacular. Much of the local wood used to build the cabins is reclaimed.
The Boarding House is a community within the Balsam Mountain Preserve, where 3,000 acres in the 4,400-acre property are permanently protected from development by conservation easements. The Boarding House is Balsam's fractional ownership community, with 10 cabins clustered around a central dining hall, near other amenities shared with other Balsam property owners.

From their early planning days in 2001, Pylant and his team knew that the setting of the Boarding House cabins—on either side a magnificent mountain ridge at an elevation of 3,700 feet—was a natural for vernacular style. By using local resources, including reclaimed wood, as well as area traditions and historical references, the structures are allowed to shine very simply, without a hint of ostentation.

The layout of the community has a ring of the classic Adirondack "great camp," where families would gather in a rambling wood structure deep in the woods. But the Boarding House cabins themselves hark more to Appalachian tradition. "We really pulled from the local vernacular," Pylant says.

Before the design work, Pylant and his team, along with the contractors of Clark & Leatherwood in Waynesville, North Carolina, took to the road, roaming the byways through western North Carolina, eyes peeled for classic mountain-style wood structures that had withstood decades of weather and use. What they saw was pure enchantment.

"We looked at a few third- and fourth-generation homes," Pylant recalls. "One particularly was a beautiful old home, simple but very airy and open. There was a richness to it." Walls were of random-width boards cut from the area, mostly pine. The light-washed walls and the utter simplicity—including a kitchen with open shelves held by battens—perfectly captured the mood that they wanted to imbue in the Boarding House.

Opposite: The dining hall at the Boarding House is a common area. A fieldstone fireplace anchors the living space. Left: The hall offers views of the Blue Ridge Mountains. Below: The guest cabin interiors are comfortable and casual.
The small footprint of the cabins allows the natural beauty of the Balsams to remain intact.

The staff of Historical Concepts and Clark & Leatherwood didn’t have to look far for their materials. Except for the wood shake roof and porch decking, the cabins’ construction is reclaimed wood and other recycled materials. From the rusty tin roofs to the rough-sawn waxed wood floors, the cabins are wrapped in the same character and history as this area. “You see how simple and honest the structures were,” Pylant says, “very functional and utilitarian. At the same time, the materials used were very rich.”

Inside, the cabin’s one-room layout lends an expansive feeling that is enhanced by walls in creamy whites and pale greens, with pine knots allowed to bleed through the paint. Generous transoms bring light into the space. “We really had fun, creating something to make people happy when they stay there,” Pylant says. “We wanted to lighten it up because of the dark trees around it.” Many of the interior details reflect the area’s historical architecture. The bathroom is equipped with an old-fashioned track that the door slides across, and reconditioned footed bathtubs.

The effect, Pylant says, is “intentionally casual, not necessarily rustic, but casual, for families, retirees, and other people to enjoy the land without it being a place to show off or have a bigger house. It’s about enjoying the place.”

A small footprint allows the natural world around the Balsam community to be a beautiful constant. “The whole purpose is to try to keep the view of the mountain as much as possible,” Pylant says. The Boarding House cabins are situated among existing tree cover, with other vegetation allowed to remain pristine. The dining hall is in a prominent high spot, near the primitive campsites, pool, golf course, and other amenities that draw people together. “It’s all about a sense of community,” Pylant says. “When people go there, they feel good.”

The community aspect is something the Croswells also appreciate. As Bill Croswell says, “It’s a big family.”

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