



Movin' On Up

Relocating an existing house proved more rewarding than building a new one

BY LESLIE PETROVSKI

I CAN'T ARGUE that owning a second home represents a stringently sustainable lifestyle—it's a luxury. But over the course of my marriage, a dream began to emerge: Could Mitch and I live and work in the city and in the mountains too? And even if we could afford to, could we justify the environmental footprint?

Both of us had fallen in love with Colorado's Wet Mountain Valley, which is freckled with the buildings of two sister towns, Silver Cliff and Westcliffe. This wide, green valley opens onto the arcing parabola of the Sangre de Cristo, the southernmost range of the Rocky Mountains. We were—and still are—smitten with the rough granite faces, thousands of feet of sheer, wind-blasted rock rising from a velvety valley.

We started our second-home search one afternoon by looking at raw acreage, four-wheeling up a precarious, rutted road with a real estate agent named Ron. The property he showed us was strewn with lichen-covered boulders, and, if we stood on tiptoe, we could see a few peaks. "If you just top them trees," Ron suggested, "you'll have great views."

And that wasn't the only downside. Not only would we have to chop trees to clear a view, after land costs, we'd be looking at a price tag of about \$35,000 before we hammered a single nail. We'd have to drill a well for water, and we'd also have to pay for a driveway, electricity, phone lines and a septic system.

The tree chopping and the money weren't the only reasons to think twice. Here were these proud stands of trees, rock, and earth. Could we carve a driveway through these handsome white pines, when so many of Col-

orado's alpine valleys had already been scarred by bulldozers and second-home builders?

But a dream is a dream; and so, with no real plan except to hedge against inflation and find a way to make it work, we bought four lots in the town of Silver Cliff, with lovely views of Horn Peak. The land sat undeveloped for two years, until we found a most unusual solution.

The house that became our second home already lived somewhere else. We'd spent a weekend in the mountains and were heading home to Denver when we spotted it. It sat on a windswept stretch along the highway with a sign in the window that read, "For sale. To be moved." From the outside, it wasn't much to look at—just a rectangle with a pitched roof and peeling asphalt shingles; a simple, '50s-style, worse-for-the-wear ranch house, perched on blue I-beams and railroad ties.

Nosy and curious, we decided to stop and poke around. We climbed the stacks of railroad ties and tried the battered aluminum door, which gave easily. Inside it smelled dank and musty, like decaying carpet. The walls looked like someone had textured them with a rake. The steel cabinets—a vintage Youngstown kitchen—were horribly abraded and caked with grease.

I looked at Mitch and said, "No way," but with an unprintable thought in the middle.

"C'mon," he pleaded with me. "You've got to have vision."

"I have vision," I responded. "I'm envisioning a lot of work."

"Think of it, honey," he said, "we would be recycling an entire house."

The work was backbreaking. We did much of it ourselves, hiring local tradespeople for the skilled labor. Because we settled the house on town lots, we could hook up to local utilities, which eliminated the need to disturb pristine land for yet another septic system and well. We saved and recycled as much as we could. All the old screen doors, metal door jambs, and the water heater went into our city alley to be reclaimed by local metal scavengers. We kept the Youngstown kitchen, sprucing it up with a good scrubbing and paint job. The bathtub stayed, as did the vintage venetians, all the interior doors, windows, and light fixtures. We painted the inside bright, '50s colors—aqua, chartreuse, and yellow—and named it the "micro ranch." It felt very us.

When we show people photographs of the house moving into place, it's clear that it has a rich history. We're not the first to store pots and pans in the steel lazy Susans and gather family and friends for meals in the tiny dining room—no doubt we won't be the last. Moving a small house over a mountain pass isn't your typical vacation-home strategy, especially at a time when people are building enormous, toothbrush-ready mansions. But it is wonderfully satisfying to know that this modest dwelling, which might have crumbled into a pile of sticks and dust, is living its second life as our second home.

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