

NEW HEIGHTS

After falling in love with a small mountain town,
a couple creates a home away from home.

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Architecture: Brandon Smith, BHH Partners Interior Design: Michele Merz, MMI Design
Home Builder: Tony Mathison, Mathison Custom Builders Landscape Architecture: Geoffry Lee, Neils Lunceford

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very summer, adrenaline aficionados around the world dream of Leadville—former mining town and current home of the legendary Leadville Race Series. With an altitude of over 10,000 feet, the town has been dubbed “the highest city in

North America,” and it’s a location that challenges endurance runners and bikers to test their mettle against a 100-mile racecourse. The promise of adventure was what first brought designer Michele Merz and her mountain bike-loving husband, Shane, to the sky-high town. Many competitions later, the stunning views of the Rockies and the genuine warmth of Leadville’s locals convinced the Houston-based couple to build a second residence there.

When they purchased a few acres overlooking Mount Massive and Mount Elbert, Merz knew a true modern mountain home with wide open vistas would best honor the location. “It’s amazing that these views exist, and that you can wake up to them every day, so we designed the house around them,” she says. Architect Brandon Smith, builder Tony Mathison and landscape designer Geoffry Lee proved key to fleshing out this vision.

The team composed a streamlined, rectilinear structure that blends into the landscape. Central gathering areas orient toward mountain views that are framed by a double-height, floor-to-ceiling glass wall. “We like to capture as much natural light as possible,” explains Smith. “The whole living space opens up to the outdoors through big sliding doors.” Minimalist interior architecture preserves this openness; the sleek floating staircase and suspended catwalk, for example, direct movement around the home “without imposing too much into the space,” Smith notes.

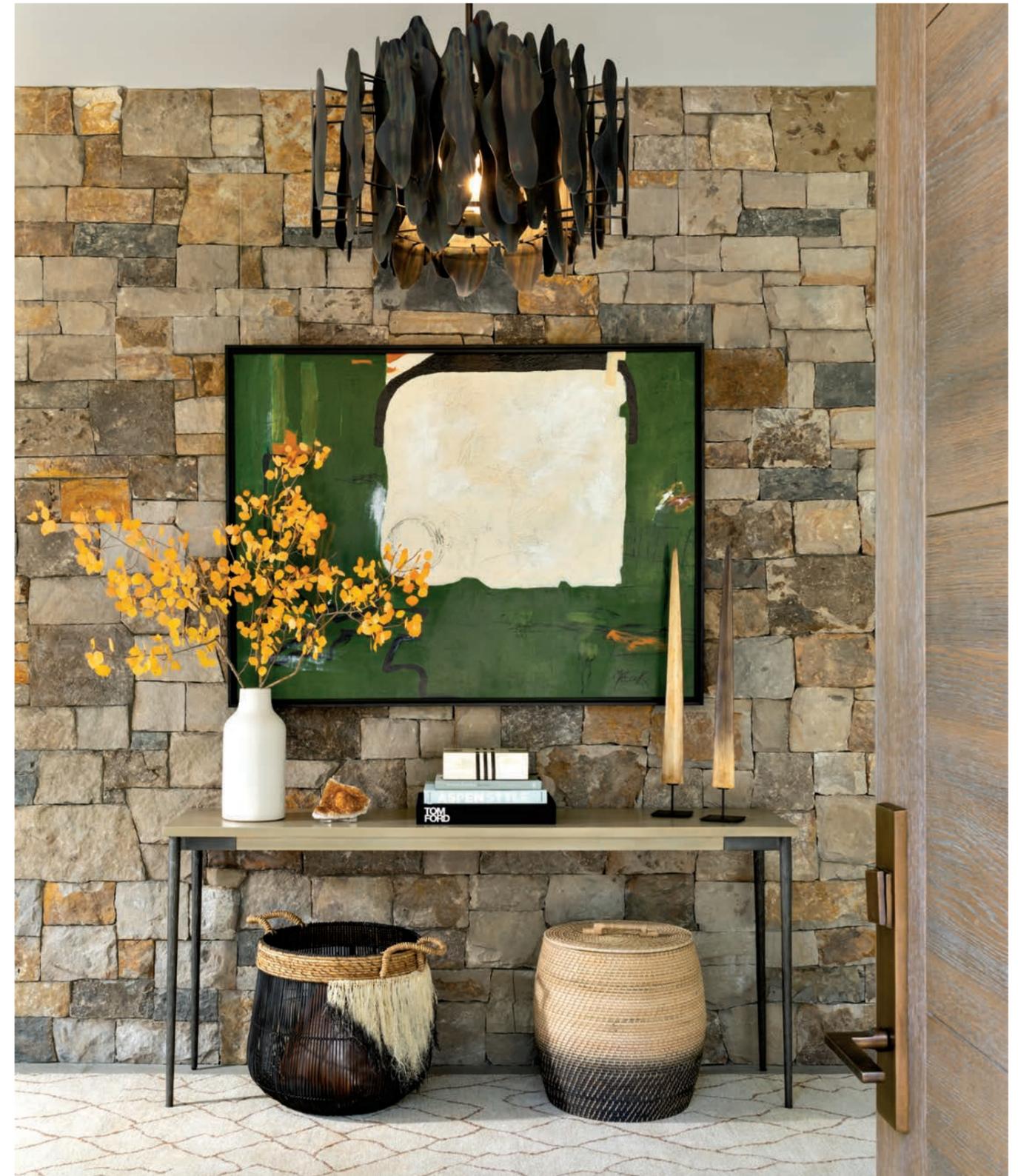
Evoking the mountain terrain, the interior and exterior incorporated natural materials like chiseled stone, slate and warm wood paneling. As if echoing the town’s mining origins, the dwelling also embraces industrial elements, with black steel beams and polished concrete floors. The concrete’s durability has practical benefits. “I wanted to make sure that the sweaty athletes hanging out here couldn’t hurt anything,” jokes Merz. “It just felt inappropriate to have a home that was too precious.” Yet these humble surfaces

create notable moments of beauty, like the raw steel fireplace in the central living area. On installation day, the design team discovered the panel’s natural finish forms gentle waves, not unlike the scenery just outside.

Balancing pragmatism and style guided Merz’s overall approach to the design of the interiors. For the furnishings, “I chose sleek, modern silhouettes, but crafted with performance fabrics. Then I layered in things with a patinated look and feel,” she says, calling out the weathered leather upholstery and the antique Turkish rugs as items that fit right in the comfortable vibe. Textiles in shades of beige, gray and sharp black—colors pulled from the home’s steel and stonework—are married with accents of green (the designer’s favorite hue) that mirror the surrounding forest. The lofty ceilings are a stage for statement lighting, including fixtures endowed with elements like shards of handblown glass and artfully oxidized metal.

Designing kitchens was Merz’s first foray into the industry, so creating her own was where “we really pushed the envelope,” she says. Ideas blossomed when Mathison recruited his frequent collaborator, local cabinet company Cutting Edge Woodworking. “I’ve worked with them on probably a hundred projects over the years,” shares Mathison. “It seems like wonderful karma that Leadville just so happens to be home to the most talented group of cabinetmakers I have ever worked with,” says Merz. “They are true artists.” The final design contrasts seamless millwork made with blond rift-cut white oak against a dark-stained chevron pattern. A quartz backsplash and waterfall island counter, featuring ripples of gray, add organic movement.

While transitioning from low-lying Houston to this lofty town, learning to cook at these altitudes was an adventure in itself for the couple. But finding fun in any challenge feels central to Leadville’s enduring spirit—after all, it’s the kind of place where the whole town gathers to cheer every last person across the finish line during its namesake race. Alongside the beautiful views and design of their new home, it is this sense of kinship that makes the couple feel like they belong. “The people are what brought us there,” says Merz. “It’s that beautiful small-town culture of really caring for one another.” ■



The entry in designer Michele Merz’s new Leadville home sets the style stage for things to come. She commissioned the abstract painting by Michelle Pockock that hangs over a metal-and-wood console by Interlude Home, two baskets by Anthropologie and a wool rug by Williams-Sonoma Home. A fired-steel pendant by Craftmade strikes a dramatic note.

With a backdrop of stunning mountain views, the living room offers a blend of design styles and textures. A gray Bassett sectional anchors the space, paired with two midcentury-style armchairs by the same manufacturer and a Lee Industries swivel chair. A Dovetail tufted cocktail ottoman and Lee Industries stools round out the conversation area. A Shine Rugs patchwork rug is underfoot.





Merz collaborated closely with Cutting Edge Woodworking in Leadville to create the two-toned cabinets for the kitchen, contrasting dark-stained chevron paneling with rift-cut white oak. She completed the space with a Cambria quartz backsplash, Crate & Barrel brass pendants and Nuevo counter stools crafted with metal and wood.



Above, left: Taking advantage of the beautiful mountain sun, Merz incorporated many materials that reflect and bounce back the light. The dining room's bar, for example, is like a jewel box with an antique-style mirror backsplash, Cambria quartz countertops and a Brizo brass faucet.

Above, right: For the kitchen countertops and backsplash, "I wanted very practical surfaces," says Merz. To that end, the designer turned to quartz for its durability, using a Vicostone quartz for the counters, and a dramatic Cambria quartz with undulating veins of gray for the backsplash.



Above: Marble mosaic tile by Tile Bar brings a bold pattern to the main bath. Playing off its geometric motif, Merz incorporated dark-hued accents with Quoizel glass pendants and round Williams-Sonoma Home dark horn mirrors. For the vanity, Cutting Edge Woodworking created custom rift-cut white oak cabinetry.

Left: With its inviting fireplace, the main bedroom carves out warmth with layers of textures, starting with the Bassett upholstered bed, custom throw pillows in a variety of Schumacher fabrics, a Lee Industries hide-and-brass bench, a Williams-Sonoma Home hand-knotted rug, and dappled dark brown Thibaut wallpaper.

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Sitting around the fire pit on the patio provides stunning views of mountain vistas. As Merz says, “What better spot for an alfresco dinner?” RH sofas with Sunbrella upholstery center on a RH black metal coffee table and a teak stump side table from France & Son.