



## a house with good bones morphs into a gem

BY JESSICA NEWENS

**W**hen Travis and Alison Spitzer decided to relocate from Malibu to Telluride in late 2006, they enlisted their friend, Telluride Properties real estate broker Brian O'Neill, to help them locate the right home for their growing family. But finding an appealing house that could comfortably accommodate their two (and soon three) children was no easy task.

"It was difficult to find something of size in town with views and sunshine – aside from building something new," said Travis Spitzer.

Eventually the Spitzers found a sterile, circa-1989 structure on North Aspen St., known by many as "the river rock" house, with its incongruous rock siding detail and tower on one side. The scale was right, at roughly 3,500-square feet, and it stood higher than most homes in the neighborhood – something they would not be able to repli-

cate under current zoning regulations. But the house had poor curb appeal, the quality of the original construction was not great, and there were no views from the ground floor kitchen and living areas.

Nonetheless, "we liked the bones of the structure, the layout of the house," said Spitzer. They were intrigued enough to ask Luke Trujillo of TruLinea Architects, Inc., to take a look at the house. With his help, they developed a bold plan for a complete renovation, including reversing the floor plan so that the common living areas would be upstairs, with the views, and the more private bedroom spaces would be downstairs.

A mere 14 months after the house went under contract – despite a lengthy approval process with the Town of Telluride, an intense re-engineering and redesign of interior roof trusses, and complete gutting of the house down to its studs and foundation – the

home was entirely transformed into what is now a distinctly modern yet comfortable and inviting home. The heart of the house is its dramatic, open-floor-plan kitchen and living room space, complete with a vaulted, exposed-truss ceiling, floating loft, and sweeping views of Ajax Peak, Bear Creek, the Telluride Ski Resort and Down Valley.

### a ship in a bottle

"There were so many things to overcome and make the house work for Travis and Ali, and get town approval," said Trujillo. It was in fact his first project working independently as a newly licensed architect. "There were some tough days," he said. "It wasn't all glory, but it was worth it."

One of the main goals from the start was to complete the renovations within the existing shell of the house to preserve its height



Clockwise from top left: White Nuevo Matteo bar stools sit in front of the kitchen's centerpiece – a Silurian limestone island. The room also features concrete countertops, a custom farmhouse sink, walnut cabinets, and top-of-the-line appliances; An Eames Lounge Chair and Ottoman reside in the loft, which hovers above the living room (Photos by Whit Richardson); The top floor of the tower now houses a formal sitting area and a beautiful new ceiling made by Telluride Woodworks (Photo by Brett Schreckengost); The master bathroom is a sanctuary with imported Italian limestone floors, white marble, Ann Sacks tile, and frosted glass panels. (Photo by Whit Richardson)



and mass, which is much larger than what would be allowed by today's standards, governed by Telluride's Historic and Architectural Review Commission.

While the footprint for the house remained the same, several aspects of the renovation required HARC approval, including moving and replacing windows, adding second-floor decks to the south and east sides of the house (a deal breaker for Travis and Alison, according to Trujillo), and relocating an old shed that sat awkwardly between the house and the street. By March of 2007, the Spitzers had received the HARC approvals they needed and were able to launch head-on into the renovation.

The shed, which encroached on the town right-of-way, was taken apart and rebuilt, using some of the original siding and studs. With its gable now turned toward the street, the structure serves as a garage with a guest room on top. Its new location, further back on the lot and at the south corner of the house, makes sense both visually and functionally.

As for the house, once it was demolished down to its studs, most of the windows were moved. Although the original structure had extensive glazing, especially on the south and east sides, a number of windows were uncom-

fortably short from inside the home, especially for six-foot-six-inch Spitzer. To allow the structure to breathe and to open it up to mountain views, Trujillo shuffled around the glazing percentages. "We didn't add any windows, we just moved them to the right spots," he said. They also added a dormer on the south side, allowing taller windows with transoms to be inserted in between the rafters, which dramatically opened up the upstairs great room.

"It was like a bag full of liquid moving it all around," from the inside out, like a "ship in a bottle," said Trujillo. The "rabbit warren" of upstairs bedrooms was moved downstairs, and the upstairs became a blank slate for creating a grand common space for eating, entertaining and relaxing.

When pondering the practicality of having the living room and kitchen upstairs, Trujillo's conclusion was, "When you live in a really urban context, you want to be above, looking at the roofs. You want to get up high – you want to feel like you're outside." This was further achieved by the home's upstairs decks, which make up for the fact that there is little for yard space outside.

"We love the way the house sits above town," said Spitzer.

### the crux and the hero

Re-engineering and redesigning the home's exposed interior roof trusses, by far the most significant challenge of the project, is what created the most dramatic results. Trujillo and structural engineer Marc Perin came up with a design to replace the home's clunky wooden trusses and collar ties with sleek steel rafters and tie rods. But there was a catch: In order to keep the original height of the house and the great room's 25-foot ceilings, they could not remove the roof. That meant whoever installed the new trusses would have to do it from the inside, without the help of a crane.

After interviewing building contractors from Grand Junction to Durango, none of whom were willing to tackle the trusses without removing the roof, the Spitzers finally met with Kathy Green and Chuck Kroger of BONE Construction. Kroger, a man of few words, silently took in the project and then said, "No problem, I can do it."

"No one else would give us any confidence that they could get it done in a timely manner," said Spitzer.

Kroger later did a mockup of his plan, taking two sections of blackened steel C-channels



Page 51: The 'River Rock' house as it looked before renovation began, with the shed squeezed awkwardly between the street and the house. (Courtesy photo)

This page: The Spitzer house transformed with board-and-batten siding, Loewen windows, field stone skirting, and a classic white paint. (Photo by Brett Schreckengost)

and placing them on either side of an existing rafter to make a sandwich around the wood. "That was a fun moment," said Trujillo, noting that a section of walnut was then incorporated to cover up the rafter's middle section.

The look was right, but the actual process of lifting the 32 1,000-pound beams 22 feet in the air and welding them in place had yet to be worked out. One weekend, Kroger called up longtime BONE employee Peter Garber and said, "I was wondering if you'd come in on Saturday. I want to see if these trusses will

work, 'cause I might not be coming back."

Kroger, who had been in remission from cancer for years, had received a diagnosis of pancreatic cancer and was scheduled for surgery. Garber agreed to meet Kroger at the house, where, using an old portable scissor lift, they worked out a complicated formula for installing the 1,000-pound trusses using custom posts, stabilizers, cables and bolts. Garber and Kroger got two beams installed that Saturday, and then Kroger left Telluride to have surgery. "He only made it back a couple more times," during the month it took Garber and his helpers to complete the installation. Kroger died in 2007, on Christmas Day.

"It was tough having Chuck die during the project," said Garber. "It kind of made our company chaotic, but we carried on. That's what Chuck would have done.

"Basically, he had it all figured out. He'd have everything all laid out for you — he was good that way.

"I think Chuck was part bluffing" when he agreed to do the job, added Garber. "But that was Chuck. If somebody said, 'Oh, you can't do that,' he had to show them he could do it. A lot of his heroes were the mountaineer types" of mid-century Everest pioneer Eric Shipton's era.

Spitzer, himself an avid climber, was thrilled to have Kroger involved with the project. "Chuck had such a great history in the climbing community. Because of this, there was an unspoken bond. That was a special component for us — the brotherhood of the rope, so to speak. We had confidence they could get it done from the start."

Kroger and Garber "were the unsung heroes of the project," said Trujillo. "They somehow put it together."

### the details

With the largest obstacles tackled, details of the Spitzer house began to truly take shape. The tower, now home to a formal sitting area upstairs and master bedroom below, received new windows and a beautiful wooden ceiling by Telluride Woodworks, responsible for the entire home's new woodwork and casework. Accessed by a custom-welded spiral staircase by Skol Studio, the loft hovers above the kitchen and living room, functioning as an informal office space and cozy hangout for the kids.

The kitchen — a favorite gathering spot — is anchored by a black Silurian limestone island with embedded fossils, sourced in Asia by interior designer Catherine Frank, of Studio Frank, who worked closely with Alison Spitzer on the interiors for the project. The choice of black

walnut cabinetry was informed by the walnut detail in the trusses – a choice of wood that carried over into the floors, interior doors and trim throughout the house. The concrete kitchen countertops were poured in place, framing a large farmhouse sink, which sits under a large window that looks out toward Ingram Falls.

“We spend most of our time in the kitchen,” said Spitzer. “We live very casually with the kids.”

The couple’s 10- and 4-year-old daughters’ downstairs bedrooms are cozy and bright, one boasting a window seat set in the same bump out that once held the kitchen sink. An old sunroom on the south side of the house, which once rose all the way to the second floor, is now the master bath and walk-in closet – a space made luxurious by Italian limestone floors, white marble and frosted glass partitions and doors.

The lowest level of the home contains the couple’s 7-year-old son’s bedroom, as well as a large recreation area for playing and movie viewing, with access to a large outdoor hot tub as well. Clear glass panels on the stairs between the three floors keep the stairwell bright and open feeling.

For the exterior of the home, the Spitzers opted for a classic board-and-batten siding detail, and painting the entire exterior white, which sets off the black trim around the windows and the black roof. A grey and beige fieldstone skirt lines the bottom of the house – a distant nod to the home’s original river-rock siding.

“There wasn’t one thing in this house that wasn’t thought about, down to the custom door knobs,” said Trujillo. “Clients don’t typically go to that level of detail. There’s a million of those tiny little details in that house.”

But what especially stood out for Trujillo was the amazing team that came together to see the project through in such a timely fashion. “The group that went together on it was so dynamic, that’s what made it special,” he said. “All these confluences of energy were so perfect. . . . That one more layer, that one other person that’s so into the project” is what made the Spitzer renovation so successful. “It’s a confluence of all these rivers, and all of a sudden it’s this big waterfall.”

For him, beyond HARC, making the home’s structure come together with the interior design was perhaps the biggest challenge – and the most satisfying.

As for Travis and Alison Spitzer, re-building the house was an enjoyable experience. “We had a great time doing it,” said Travis Spitzer. And – most importantly – they now have a fabulously redesigned home that suits their family perfectly. ■



A view from the loft to the great room through the custom metal spiral staircase made by Jeff Skolada of Ouray’s Skol Studio. (Photo by Whit Richardson)