DÃ©cor Score: Natural materials last long, are easy to maintain

by Rose Bennett Gilbert

Q: We plan to remodel the country house we just bought with an eye to eventually retiring there. All the living areas will be on one level, and we want to use materials that are appropriate to the location (mountains), will last, and are easy to maintain. Who wants to retire to more housework? What do you recommend?

VIEW OVER THE KITCHEN COUNTER - Natural materials like brick and hardwoods warm this all-in-one kitchen, dining and sitting area on an island retreat. CNS Photo courtesy of Hampton Island Reserve.

A: To quote the doyenne of interior designers, Elsie de Wolfe, I can sum up the best answer in one word: "Suitability, suitability, suitability!" Of course, Elsie was talking about much fancier digs -- after all, she decorated the likes of Henry Clay Frick's Fifth Avenue mansion in Manhattan -- but I can't do better than apply her advice to your mountain home. What could be more suitable than natural materials: warm woods, brick, and earthen elements like the beaten copper hood over the island counter in the all-in-one kitchen, dining and sitting room we show here.

Never mind that this room is actually on a salt marsh island off the coast of Georgia (we're in one of the four-suite guest houses designed by architect Bill Foley for the new Hampton Island Preserve, www.hamptonisland.com). The designer has used natural materials that are as natural as the view through the tall windows on the right. Knotholes, rustic beams, wooden countertops, tables, and simple built-ins ease this room into its outdoorsy setting.

Moreover, naturals are easy to maintain. Bricks are forever; copper, left alone, acquires an elegant patina; new water-based urethane finishes protect wood floors so regular sweeping is about all the care they need (see www.hardwoodinfo.com for everything you need to know about hardwood maintenance).

Today's fabrics are also as carefree as they are good looking and livable. Forget the old awning striped indoor/outdoor cliches; Manufacturers like Sunbrella, Donghia and Scalamandre offer posh living room looks -- including tassels and fringes -- that have sun porch manners. These new fabrics don't fade, mildew or feel like cardboard, so you can have your chocolate cake and drop it, too.

Q: Did my eyes deceive me, or were those plastic slipcovers in the old photo of Joan Crawford and her husband that ran on the cover of New York magazine this fall?

A: I saw the same thing: clear plastic slipcovers on the white tufted sofas in the star's 1958 apartment!

On second thought, that's not so shocking, really, if we can believe that Crawford also had a manic aversion

to wire hangers.

A number of years back, researching plastic slipcovers for a story, we uncovered some interesting facts: Children stick to them; cats won't sit on them; interior designers hate them; people who have them tend to apologize and promise they'll come off when the children are older.

The major truth: plastic slipcovers are usually congenital, that is, if your mother had them, you will, too, believing it's a kindness to your furniture to stave off the slings, arrows and spillages of household misfortunes.

Today, it's safe to say, plastic slipcovers are entering the retro movement, relics of mid-century design that have been made obsolete by spray-on protective finishes, new fibers and indoor/outdoor textile technology.

That New York magazine cover is a keepsake. Wrap it in plastic and save for your grandchildren!

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Is it deja vu all over again, this current vogue for 18th century design?

Yogi Berra might put it thus, but design historian Judy Straeten sees new inspirations coming from the period that produced the French Revolution and doomed young queen Marie Antoinette, (Straeten's not alone - Sofia Coppola's recent movie Marie Antoinette is also making many things 18th century feel new again).

The difference is that Straeten is the archivist for Brunschwig & Fils, the luxury fabric company that has long mined French history for its designs. The library Straeten oversees contains some 10,000 textiles, now including three new fabric designs that pay homage to Marie Antoinette's fondness for the country life and her make-believe peasant cottage, called Le Hameau de la Reine.

You can have rooms fit for a queen - and not lose your head in the process: check out "Montrache" "Antoinette," and "Honfleur," three floral patterns that evoke the gentler side of 18th century France (www.brunschwig.com).

Rose Bennett Gilbert is the co-author of "Hampton Style" and associate editor of Country Decorating Ideas.

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