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VOL 11 ISSUE 12 DECEMBER 2012

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In the French Alps, a former farmhouse dating to 1826 has been transformed into a light-filled contemporary space. A clever mix of tradition and modernity has given this historical structure a sunny new lease of life.

A LIVING GEOGRAPHY

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Photographs Julien Lanoo Courtesy
JKA Architects





The furniture embraces the large open space - there is nothing diminutive here. The dining table nicknamed 'Big Foot' can seat sixteen people and is illuminated by an enormous overhead light.



The beautifully renovated house boasts of traditional elements such as ornamental cutwork on the front façade and a tapering roof.

The little village of Morzine in the French Alps is a favourite destination for skiers, mountain bikers, and occasionally, participants of Tour de France, who slug their way up the steep, but breathtakingly beautiful mountains. Along with all the modern trappings of a ski resort, traditional chalets continue to dot the valley, keeping the enchantment of the countryside alive.

With this scenic visual as a background, Parisian architectural firm Jérémie Koempfen Architecture (JKA), along with design firm FUGA, have redesigned a historical farmhouse to be a contemporary vacation rental. JKA is a fledgling firm (founded in 2007) that already has some impressive projects in its portfolio.

The original building of Villa Solaire dates back to 1826. It was vital that the architects maintained the existing sense of historicity and traditional architecture. **The key to the new-old look was to work with the traditional wood façade - a uniform cladding that wraps around the structure.** One of the challenges of the project was to “preserve its appearance, while filtering light into the heart of the building.” In the renovated building, the traditional spruce slats have decorative cut-outs (often seen on balconies) that help blend in with the neighbours.

The slats, though, are not just decorative; they serve to bring in light throughout the building. The interiors and exteriors were recreated keeping in mind the amount of light and shade each area receives. Shadows cast by the neighbouring buildings determined which areas stayed more open. As a result there is a “certain legibility of the continuity between the common spaces of the house.” This implosion of light and shadow has caused the house to be nicknamed the “solar house”, because like a sundial the house is exposed on all four sides to the path of the sun and the interiors reflect that journey.



The common spaces are on different levels in the centre of the house. Guests have various options to relax in, these include planned seating areas in the staircases and elsewhere.





Inside, the architects describe the house as having “a living geography.” Four independent units (or blocks) are at each corner of the building. Each unit has a sleeping area and other amenities and of course, views of the mountainside. In the middle of the building is the shared space, “a succession of stacked floors at different levels.” This space allows the occupants to mingle while cooking, dining or just relaxing in the living room around a cosy fire.

The interiors are dramatic and a refreshing change from traditional chalet decor. The walls and furniture are subdued grey while the floors and beams are in a wonderful contrasting light wood. The symmetry of the interiors - “luxury of sobriety” - carries on throughout the building - there are no jarring notes. Small squares of welcome sunlight filter in through the walls, providing a little more delicate illumination at surprising intervals.



In the bedrooms, red cedar panelling stained white forms the backdrop for a soothing retreat. The furnishings and even the linen are the same gray. The ceilings in the suites, however, are varnished white. **Accordion felt curtains from Loden form privacy screens.** To free up the central nave of the house, the smallest corners of the attic were also incorporated into the residential blocks, turning them into two alcove bedrooms.

The swimming pool has its own story to tell. The pool, fitted into a former cellar, has few enamel tiles on the floor. These tiles were taken from the old roof, “cleaned, calibrated and reused as flooring.” A low bay window offers views over the mountainside - a perfect companion to a warm relaxing dip.

Every corner of the house is used well, thanks to the new design. Modern ‘beds’ fit snugly under the sloping roof.



For the inhabitants of Villa Solaire, the sun keeps them company whether they are in their rooms or in the pool. By combining traditional architecture with contemporary design, JKA have shown that heritage and change can indeed go hand in hand.

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