

FEBRUARY 2013

# House Beautiful & Makeovers

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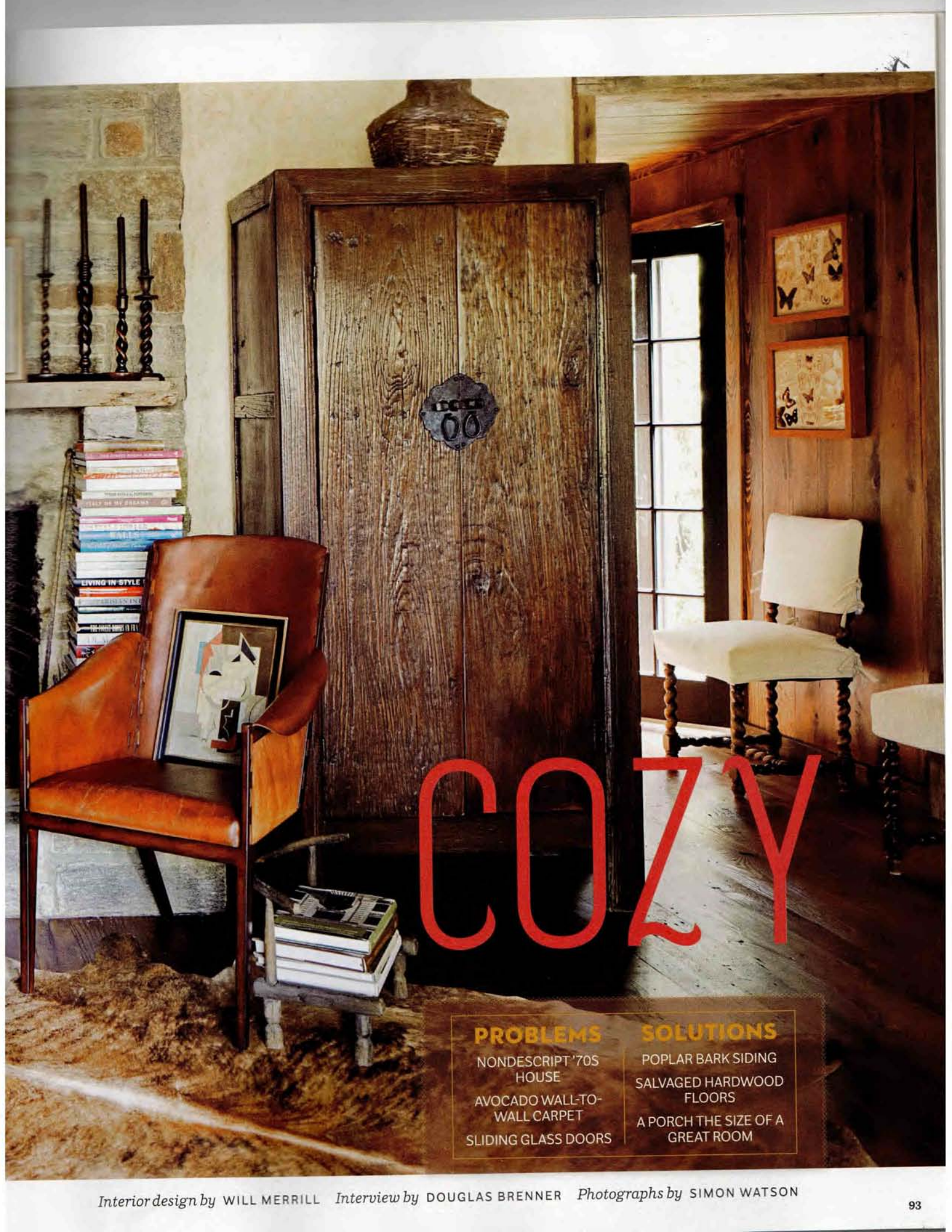
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Rustic meets sophisticated in Will Merrill's house in the Blue Ridge Mountains. The living room's hearthside leather-and-metal chair, based on a 1930s Jean-Michel Frank original, comes from Hickory Chair, where Merrill was design director for 25 years. Cubist art, English candlesticks, Mission Style andirons, a Chinese armoire, and an African stool speak of adventurous collecting.







# COZY

## PROBLEMS

NONDESCRIPT '70S  
HOUSE  
AVOCADO WALL-TO-  
WALL CARPET  
SLIDING GLASS DOORS

## SOLUTIONS

POPLAR BARK SIDING  
SALVAGED HARDWOOD  
FLOORS  
A PORCH THE SIZE OF A  
GREAT ROOM







**DOUGLAS BRENNER:** Are bark-shingled houses like this unique to your neck of the woods?

**WILL MERRILL:** It is a distinctively North Carolina mountain style, dating back to 1895. Squared-shingle bark houses were built as spacious summer retreats in the Appalachian resort communities. The first time I visited Blowing Rock, I stayed in a big, wonderful, old hotel right on the bluff, and it was covered in bark. That was the first time I'd ever seen such a structure. The bark came from chestnut trees, but a blight after World War I devastated them. That was the end of it until an engineer developed a way to harvest poplar bark about 20 years ago. It looks very much like chestnut bark.

**What vintage is your place?**

It was built in the '70s, and it was a nondescript, sad little house with a lean-to carport and feather-edge board siding—no character, no charm. But being a single person, the size was right for me, and it gave me an opportunity to do my own thing. So I bought it and slipcovered it all in poplar bark. I guess I'm a bit of a snob—I don't like things that look brand-new. This looks like a neat old house that's been here a long time.

**Did re-creating an old-school exterior determine how you handled the interior?**

Basically the interior is sort of mountain-y. But I did incorporate some more sophisticated things I'd always wanted to do but never had, like use leopard-spotted carpeting and paint a room black. I virtually gutted the main floor, which is the top floor—the house is built on the side of the hill, and you walk in at street level and then go downstairs to the bedrooms. I knocked down a few walls to join several rooms together and open it up a little; added a porch in back; ripped up avocado wall-to-wall carpeting; put in antique hardwood floors; and installed French doors.

**Was the stone fireplace already there?**

Yes, fortunately. There was a cutesy mantelpiece on it, so I tore it off and just put a wooden beam across the stone.

**How did you give the walls their mottled texture?**

That's the finish I used in the showrooms at Hickory Chair when I was director of design. We did a rough plaster skim coat, then put on a glaze and rubbed it off. It looks like well-aged plasterwork.

**It's such a friendly background for your eclectic mix of furniture and objects.**

Just a bunch of leftovers from my previous homes. But they're my favorite things. I always have stuff in storage, because once I acquire something, I

can't bear to part with it. I have always been an admirer of almost every period and style, once I get into it. I've managed to narrow down my storage to only one warehouse. But it's a big one.

**You don't often see Louis XIII-style chairs, and you have several.**

Yes, for some reason I do. I found them at an antiques store and bought them economically and put them in the warehouse—and kept them there until I moved here and reupholstered them. I had bought a bolt of off-white, pebbly textured fabric at an outlet many years ago. It also remained in storage until recently, and was used to upholster most of the chairs, but I decided to slipcover those two big chairs in the sitting room in a Schumacher printed linen. It was sort of like a piece of old faded Fortuny, and I love the color. About that fabric: May I tell you my Elsie Lee Gozzi story?

**Please do!**

When I was young, back in the '60s, I was traveling throughout Europe. The first day I was in Venice, it was just pouring down rain, too wet to go visiting Palladian villas, as I had planned. I knew a little bit about Fortuny, and the famous Countess Gozzi was the owner. I knew that she had built this little new house that was beautifully decorated over near the factory. So I went to the factory and pounded on the door, and a young Italian girl opened it. I vaguely knew that their process was secret, but I said I had been an interior design student and asked if there was anything she could show me. She said, 'Just a minute. You sit here.' So I sat in this cold, damp hallway, and then down a major staircase came a grand American lady, beautifully dressed but with her hair up in curlers.

**Countess Gozzi, I presume?**

Yes! She invited me to her studio, where she pulled out bolts of fabric: 'I designed this for David Niven's Swiss chalet. I got the inspiration for this one from the inside of a pomegranate.' Well, little boys from Oklahoma knew nothing about pomegranates. Then she said, 'Would you like to see my *palazzina*?' And she gave me a tour of her house. We ended up on the rooftop terrace, and she called for the butler. She said, 'It's after noon, so I can have a martini.' I said, 'I'll have one, too.' I was so nervous I ate two bowls of almonds. That was 50 years ago, and it was the most memorable day of my life. And that's the reason I had to have that fabric on the chairs. It wasn't a Fortuny, but it sort of looks like a Fortuny. It looks like the inside of a pomegranate.

PRODUCED BY DAVID M. MURPHY AND JENNIFER BOLES

**LEFT:** An abstract painting by Susan Hux hangs over the Chinese table that Merrill uses for dining and desk work. The antique stool, also Chinese, partners with 19th-century Louis XIII-style armchairs. A carved African figure and a Mexican santo flank a lamp with a root base and bark shade. French doors, which replaced a 1970s picture window, open onto the new back porch. The base paint for glazed-and-ragged rough plaster walls is Benjamin Moore Linen White. Merrill discarded wall-to-wall carpeting to lay random-plank floors of antique hemlock salvaged from a Pennsylvania barn.







A fireplace warms chilly evenings on the porch Merrill calls his "everything room." His mahogany version of Jean-Michel Frank's "pineapple" table stands between a wicker sofa and chairs from Mainly Baskets. The twig chair, stool, and side tables are a medley of Blue Ridge antiques and modern pieces still made in the mountains. **OPPOSITE:** Merrill designed the bark-clad dining table, which supports BoBo Intriguing Objects' Driftwood candelabra. Scroll-armed chairs, a vintage Hickory Chair design, were painted to match the architectural trim. FOR MORE DETAILS, SEE RESOURCES

