





TREADING LIGHTLY

After years of RV life, retirees build a house they
and the landscape can live with.

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Photography by David Agnello*



“Of course we had a groundbreaking celebration,” Carol Schoner says as if it were as usual as filing for a building permit. Sitting at the dining table of the home she and husband Phil moved into in December 2016, she pushes a paper titled “Groundbreaking Words” toward me. “These are the promises we made then,” she says.

“To these majestic mountains: You are why we selected this spot to build our home. We promise every morning we will look to the west in appreciation.

“To the wildlife: This was your home before it was ours. We will respect your space and minimize our intrusion into it.

“To the great sea of sagebrush: Please be patient. We will disturb the terrain as little as

possible. We will do all we can to repair and restore this space.

“Our goal is for our house to sit lightly on the land.”

Before the Schoners built on a two-and-a-half acre site in the sagebrush flats behind the Jackson Hole Airport, they looked everywhere in the valley, from condos at the Four Seasons to a Jackson Hole Golf & Tennis cottage to scrappers to other lots. But then they decided views were their primary consideration. This lot was the clear winner, Carol says, adding, “I thought, if nothing else, whatever happens to us with our health, if I can wake up and see these mountains, everything would be all right.”

Now 67 (Carol) and 75 (Phil), the Schoners plan to live in this house until “we go to the old

cowboys’ home,” Carol says. “It’s a very elder-friendly home. There is not a step anywhere. And that was the whole idea.” When the couple hired architectural firm kt814 to design the house, they asked for an age-in-place, open-space design that was clean and contemporary and that, of course, made the most of the property’s views, which are unobstructed and of the entire Teton Range. The area is also rich in wildlife; it’s in a migration corridor. “When we were inside, I wanted to feel that the outside came in to us,” Carol says. “I wanted to lie in bed and watch moose wander by between my feet.”

But now that they’ve been in the house for almost two years, Carol says she’s not sure she is living up to the promises made at the groundbreaking ceremony. “It’s hard to maintain

“...TO THE GREAT SEA OF SAGEBRUSH: PLEASE BE PATIENT. WE WILL DISTURB THE TERRAIN AS LITTLE AS POSSIBLE. WE WILL DO ALL WE CAN TO REPAIR AND RESTORE THIS SPACE.”

[CAROL SCHONER, HOMEOWNER]

Opening spread: The goals of architectural firm kt814, founded by Rich Assenberg and Nathan Gray, and owners Carol and Phil Schoner aligned in this project: “We wanted to respect the nature of the site,” the architects say. “We wanted the planar landscape to feel like it was traveling through the home—letting the outside in, and back out again.”

Left: The architects advised the Schoners to invest in the home’s windows and cabinetry. “They were right,” Carol says. In the combined kitchen/dining/living space, a 10-foot tall, 24-foot-wide lift-slide window/sliding door by Zola opens to bring the outside in. Interior designer Jacque Jenkins-Stireman worked with the couple to fill the interior space with simple, yet interesting, furniture, fixtures, and accents including the SONNEMAN Lighting Stix LED pendant above the dining table. Cabinets are by Brian Stepek Custom Carpentry.

Right: Built-in cabinets and closets line the western wall of the master bedroom.





Carol and Phil worked closely with architects kt814 on their home's design to get it just right. Making the home even more personal is that Carol's son-in-law, Alex Everett, founder of Alex Everett Building, built it. The home takes advantage of gorgeous Teton Range views as seen from the master bath, above, and the front entrance, below.



An oversize sliding glass door opens directly from the master bedroom onto the sage flats that surround the home.

that sense of wonder,” she says. Her excitement as she talks about watching a bison wallow in a patch of dirt twenty feet from the dining table just the day before suggests otherwise, though.

Phil talks about one night when he woke up around 2 a.m.: “I just happened to look out the windows from the bed and the Big Dipper was perfectly framed,” he says. He woke up Carol and the two sat together on the outside patio and wondered at the stars and Milky Way for about an hour. “The stars were actually shimmering,” Carol says. “It was amazing.”

The day after I visited with them, vegetation restoration consultants were coming to replant sagebrush in the area nearest the home, the only part of the lot, other than the house site itself, that was disturbed during construction.

When weather permits, Phil starts off his mornings with a cup of coffee on the patio on the north side of the house. “I’ll spend an hour out there, listening to the meadowlarks and just sitting,” he says. “They’re lovely to listen to.” When the weather’s too inclement, Phil sits on the sofa in the main living area, where walls on two sides are glass and the northern one frames the Tetons. “The views are always changing,” he says. “Clouds make it different, the angle of the sun. Every day, every hour, is a different view, but they are the same mountains.” During our chat, Phil spies a bluebird perched in a small aspen tree outside and points it out. “They were my mom’s favorite bird,” he says.

With how well Carol and Phil live in this home, it’s hard to imagine they spent the

thirteen years prior to moving into it living in an RV. In 2005, when they learned that neither of Carol’s kids (the youngest of whom was away at college) would return to Cincinnati, Ohio, where they had lived for more than thirty years, they became what Phil calls “RV road warriors.”

Their RV was big, and living in it “was not roughing it at all,” Carol says. The couple didn’t spend all their time driving around, but instead would arrive at a place and stay there for several months. They volunteered at national parks during the summer. After three summers at Bryce Canyon, they came to Grand Teton National Park and volunteered on the park’s Wildlife Brigade. (Carol’s daughter had recently moved to Victor, Idaho.)



Carol and Phil, who've been married for more than twenty years, agree that living in an RV taught them a lot, most importantly, "You don't need a lot of stuff," Carol says. When they sold their Cincinnati house, a historic Tudor that they loved so much an oil painting of it hangs in the entrance of this new home, "We kept only things that were exceptionally beautiful or had deep sentimental value," Carol says. Phil adds, "That rules out a couch." Items they did keep include a rocking chair made by an Appalachian craftsman, Phil's mother's cedar chest, an oil painting from Phil's childhood home, and artwork made by their children when they were young. Specific design elements were inspired by their RV life, too: "RVs have lots of built-ins," Carol says. "I came to like them, so we did a lot of built-ins in this home."

"I think it is important when you go into a big project like this—and for us it was a huge financial decision—you have to decide up front what your values are," Phil says. "We decided at the beginning that we weren't worried about resale. We didn't worry if someone else would like the design. If we liked it, that was all that mattered." Carol adds, "And that it disturbed the land and wildlife as little as possible." ▲



Left: Architects Rich Assenberg and Nathan Gray say they worked to "position the house on the site to take the greatest advantages of views, while detaching neighboring houses from the experience inside and offering a sense of protection."

Above: A painting of the Cincinnati Tudor home the owners lived in for more than twenty years hangs in the entrance.



Appalachian craftsman Chester Cornett made this rocking chair from walnut trees felled by a tornado on the farm of one of Carol's friends. Carol often visited Cornett's workshop while he was making the chair. Since his death in 1981, Cornett's work has gained considerable recognition: In 2014, the Kentucky Folk Art Center at Morehead State University curated the exhibit *Chester Cornett: Beyond the Narrow Sky*.