Alpine Modern

Quarterly Magazine — Issue 06

To realize a young couple's dream of a mountain home modeled after traditional Swiss chalets, Geneva architect Simon Chessex transfers local memory by working with the form and scale of the neighboring buildings while looking to the surrounding alpine landscape for design inspiration.

Quietly Swiss

Words by Liz Susong   Photos by Joel Tettamanti

"The numerous windows give many opportunities to just look outside and bring the outside to you, just as if you were looking at a painting."

○ Olivier Unternaehrer, a Geneva-based attorney, and Céline Gay des Combes Unternaehrer, a professional harpist, had long dreamed of a mountain retreat where they could spend weekends and holidays, someday raise a family, and eventually retire. So when the young couple had the opportunity to own a plot in the mountains of Les Jeurs—land that had been in Céline's family since the 1800s—the decision to build there was obvious. A hamlet above the road to the Col de la Forclaz mountain pass in the Swiss Alps, Les Jeurs was the perfect place.

Longtime friend Simon Chessex, a founding partner of the Geneva architecture firm Lacroix Chessex, was the natural choice as Olivier and Céline's architect. The couple shared their requirements, nice-to-haves, and wildest dreams with Chessex and his team, and the collaborative design process was "a beautiful adventure," Olivier says. "We believe—and we think they do, too—that we brought the best out of each other throughout."

Simon Chessex founded Lacroix Chessex with fellow Swiss architect Hiéronyme Lacroix in 2005, based on their shared belief that good architecture is inspired by two factors: "a thorough analysis of the site, in which micro-and macro-scales are directly related, and a careful and critical reading of the brief that is given to us," Chessex says. Both partners strive to approach design and construction without preconceived ideas of what a project should become. The role of the architect, says Chessex, "is that of a tailor who designs and realizes a client's vision with care, passion, and accuracy."

The home's spectacular location near Trient was destined. Céline's ancestors were native to the region. As a child, her own father spent many holidays camping on the very land where Céline and Olivier would later build their chalet. Sharing the same dream of raising a family in these majestic mountains a generation earlier, Céline's parents relocated from Geneva to Les Jeurs in the 1970s. And decades later, as a couple, Olivier and Céline spent weeks at a time, even one entire summer, vacationing in the mountains. When Céline's father offered them a plot of the family land, their decision to build there was a simple one.

Like generations before them, committing to the family land for a lifetime felt timely. They pictured a mountain retreat where Céline could play the harp, where they could soon raise a family, and where they would eventually retire. "Our vision was to build a house that would be a place to welcome friends and family, that would fit well in the local and mountain landscape, yet that would be modern," Olivier says. Chessex absorbed their hopes and dreams and presented plans for his reinterpretation of a traditional Swiss chalet.

The architect drew upon the region's historical stone and wooden mountain homes for inspiration and let the alpine landscape guide his design. "It's clearly a site-specific project," Chessex notes. "The shape of the building comes from the profile of the surrounding mountains." It was important to Olivier and Céline that the house be modern yet also fit into its "quite wild" setting. And Chessex's design beautifully harmonized with the local village homes and the spectacular scenery. Aware that a large closed volume would disturb the harmony of scale, the architect designed the structure as two parts forming a V. They are connected by the entrance on the mountainside and are separated by a forty-five-degree angle that opens toward the valley.

"The numerous windows give many opportunities to just look outside and bring the outside to you, just as if you were looking at a painting," says Olivier.

The landscape and the design are in "smooth and direct relationship," he continues—inside the "cozy chalet atmosphere" and outside views of the "playground." Reinterpreting the functional design of historical Swiss barns that were elevated from the ground to preclude mice from entering, Chessex situated the home on a cantilevered

concrete plinth. He chose gray fir wood for the home's exterior and natural fir for the inside because the material is both naturally weather resistant and economical.

Chessex used the same wood for the walls, ceilings, and floors so that the interior uniformly appears as a single unit of space. This element of the composition is unsurprisingly one of Olivier and Céline's favorites. Olivier believes the house bridges cultural integrity and modernity by keeping things as simple as possible. The natural quality of the wood reminds him of older mountain dwellings marked by the years, wind, and snow.

At the same time, Chessex took the liberty to put an updated twist on traditional Swiss mountain architecture by designing the home as two connected wings: The main entryway is "folded where the two buildings unite," creating a V-shaped front door and window. Olivier shares that abandoning tradition to incorporate modern eaves "clearly surprised some people at first" but was ultimately very well received. The owners particularly enjoy the roof's geometry and the living room window that reaches down to the floor.

The rugged mountain location complicated the construction process. Inaccessible by truck, the site required helicopters to fly in prefabricated wooden pieces. Additionally, Chessex initially worried that the authorities and local population might find the house too radical for the village and feared he would be denied a building permit.
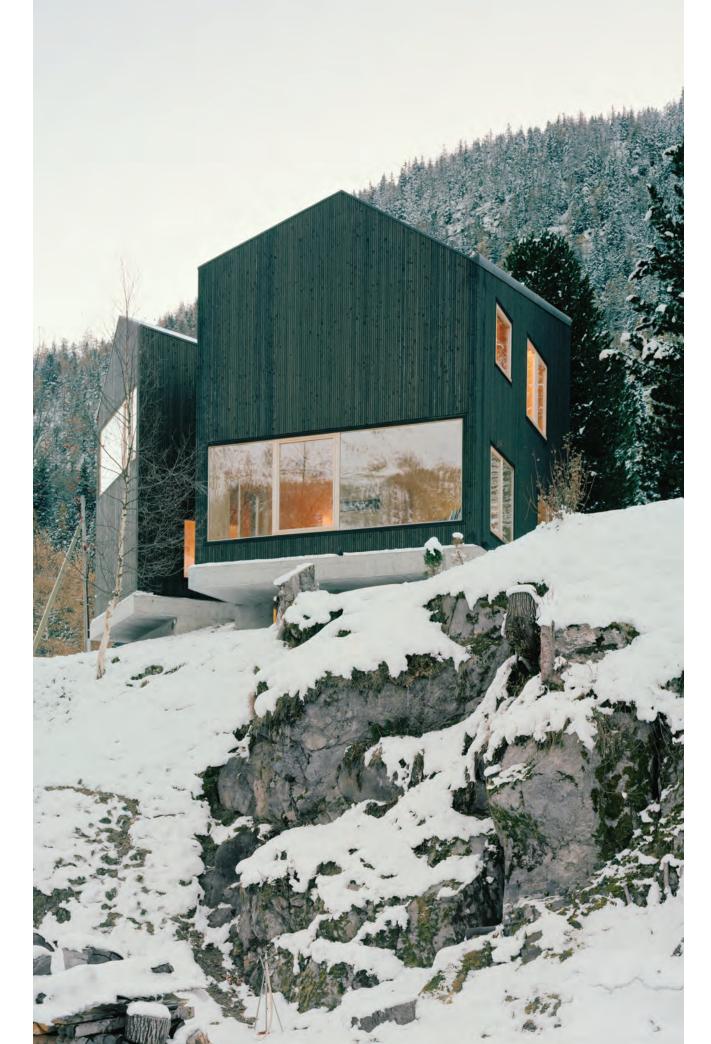
Despite the challenges, Olivier and Céline were able to move in exactly two years after hiring Chessex to design and build their home. Olivier describes the experience: "Quite simply, one day we could walk in and the house was

no longer the worksite it had been for the last year, but a complete house in which we could stay. It was quite an intense and beautiful moment."

Olivier and Céline quickly fell in love with the mountain house and now spend their weekends there after a week's work in Geneva, where they have been renting the same apartment for more than ten years. Olivier contemplates how the modern chalet is "majestic, like a quiet force, as the mountains can be." From the exterior, "the house appears to be changing shape depending on the viewing angle," he remarks. Inside, the home feels "peaceful, relaxing, and quiet" with direct views of nature and mountain wildlife.

Visiting friends often refer to the couple's hideaway as their "nest," given its high mountain perch—a dual meaning, since the couple hopes to raise a family in their "lifetime house," as Olivier calls it. "We intend for our house to become a family home and at all times to remain a place where friends and guests can come and share good times with us." What started as their self-admittedly "crazy" dream materialized into a beautiful sanctuary on the mountainside, a home daringly designed to mirror the innate artistry of the surrounding landscape and to nourish creativity and community. ◉

Right: Knowing a closed volume would disturb the harmony of scale, the architect designed the structure as two parts forming a V.

"We intend for our house to become a family home and at all times to remain a place where friends and guests can come and share good times with us."

Above: The alpine landscape guides the design of this reinterpretation of a traditional Swiss chalet whose shape imitates the profile of the surrounding mountains.

Above: The main entryway is folded where the two buildings unite, creating a V-shaped front door and a window in the crease.

"Quite simply, one day we could walk in and the house
 was no longer the worksite it had been for the last year,
 but a complete house in which we could stay. It was
 quite an intense and beautiful moment."

Above: Using the same wood for walls, ceilings, and floors
turned out to be one of the owners' favorite design elements.