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*The fall foliage
reflected on
Lake Junaluska's
glassy surface makes
this mountain view
twice as nice.*

A Little Bit of ASIA in APPALACHIA

What's it like to live in the most meditative homes
in the North Carolina mountains? Come inside.

written by MORGAN SYKES / *photography by* TIM ROBISON

In Japan, *torii* gates mark entrances to sacred spaces. That's what Hans Doellgast (pictured) was going for when he designed the doors to the barn next to his home using steel, *shoji* paper, and cypress charred in the Japanese style of *shou sugi ban*.



THE DOELLGASTS' HOME SITS on the gentle slope of a hillside near Fairview, just southeast of Asheville, looking out over a panorama of horse pastures and hazy, undulating mountains. Tina and Hans live here with their two daughters on quintessential Blue Ridge land, in a home that is anything but typical in this area. "See the color of the windows?" Hans says, pointing to the burnt orange tint. "We had them custom color-matched to what they paint their *torii* gates in Japan." He smiles. "Isn't that fun?" The commanding lines of the roof drop into steeply angled eaves, evoking a Shinto shrine. The porch, ornamented with graceful ironwork whose horizontal lines recall samurai swords, was constructed with white oak and black locust. "This is what fence posts are made of out here in Appalachia," Hans says, referring to the latter. "It's the local, rot-free wood."

That's the thing about the Doellgasts' home: It is neither an orthodox homage to Japanese architecture nor a traditional mountain cabin. The building style is the unique result of interpreting Japanese design through an Appalachian lens.

The Doellgasts — Sierra, Hans, Tina, Oriah Sparrow, and Wyatt, their wirehaired pointing Griffon — pose on their porch around a column made from white oak. In the front yard (opposite), Tina and Oriah Sparrow do a little gardening as Hans fires up the grill. The solar panels on the roof provide 6.5 kilowatts of power to the home.



Oriah Sparrow reads in the stillness of the living room as Tina and Hans relax in the kitchen. At right is a whiskey and sake bar with shelves meant to resemble clouds drifting across the moon.

The roof drops into steeply angled eaves, evoking a Shinto shrine.

Hans, whose long beard and sinewy frame recall mountain men of generations past, has nurtured a long-standing obsession with Appalachia. As an environmental education major at Warren Wilson College in Swannanoa, he earned a concentration in Appalachian studies. In his final semester, he spent six weeks in a van traveling around Appalachia, meeting with furniture makers and other craftspeople, musicians, and herbalists, and studying wildflowers and medicinal plants.

Hans was further immersed in traditional folkways when he spent two weeks learning from the legendary primitive skills expert Eustace Conway, the hardscrabble, living-off-the-land subject of *The Last American Man*, written by *Eat, Pray, Love* author Elizabeth Gilbert. It was while working with Conway that Hans decided to build his own primitive Appalachian cabin.

He constructed the little cottage in Boone using mostly reclaimed and scavenged materials and putting it together with hand tools. It was “totally off the grid,” Hans says — no electricity or running water. To bathe, he had to run creek water to his

enormous claw-foot bathtub and then start a fire underneath to warm it. “The only meat I ate for probably seven years was deer I harvested myself,” he says. “It was just a very pure, simple, affordable life, where the only bill I had was for a cell phone.” During those postgraduate years, Hans chased his passion for building by working as a contractor and eventually spearheading projects for friends. He met Tina when she borrowed his friend’s truck; she and Hans spent their first official date together planting ginseng at his cabin.

In 2002, five years before the Doellgasts would officially incorporate their custom building company as Jade Mountain Builders, Hans was studying furniture-making and discovered the woodworking of Japanese-American architect George Nakashima, whose reverence for imperfections and rounded edges electrified Hans. Japanese styles started creeping into his projects. Years ago, while planting native ferns and wildflowers in a Japanese-inspired configuration, he told a friend that it was a Japanese-Appalachian garden. “He was like, ‘You should call it Japalachian,’” Hans says. The term resonated with him, and it stuck. Today, he and Tina use it to describe one of Jade Mountain Builders’ architectural styles.

HANS ISN'T THE ONLY ONE IN THE ASHEVILLE AREA who's found peace in the convergence of Japanese and Appalachian architectural styles. About half an hour northeast of Fairview, Jim and Susan Jones's home sits at the bottom of a holler in Black Mountain, with a sweeping roof, angled to offset the mountains beyond, that has a similar Japanese feel.

Like the Doellgasts' home, the Joneses' juxtaposition of an Asian-influenced house in the North Carolina mountains isn't jarring; instead, the Appalachian rhododendron thickets harmonize with the Eastern-inspired stacked stone and dramatic eaves. "We're in a rhododendron grove, but we've also got that long view, which is really nice," Jim says. "It's the best of both worlds." He's referring to the feeling of seclusion with unobscured views, but he could easily be talking about the meditative melding of Eastern design in his western Carolina retreat.

While there's not yet a Japanese-inspired building boom in the area, the Doellgast and Jones homes, just over the mountains from one another,



In the late afternoon, Susan and Jim Jones retire to their open back porch, facing west toward Mount Mitchell and the Blue Ridge Parkway, to watch the sun set over the Swannanoa Valley.



The Joneses' home sits just below a ridgeline at an elevation of 2,800 feet. The large window on its stacked-stone stair tower brings natural light into the interior, and the thousands of plant species in the surrounding natural landscape give the area a rustic feel.

speak to how inspiration rises and is reinterpreted, to be built anew on distant soil. In the case of both homes, imagination and a profound desire for mountain sanctuary have produced a new building language: Japanese with an Appalachian twang.

The Joneses can relate to the idea of simply finding something beautiful and functional, without belaboring the reasons behind it. Married for 40 years, Jim and Susan decided to retire to Black Mountain from Greensboro, and they hired Living Stone Design + Build to help them carry out their vision. According to Jim, the couple's previous home had been more traditionally Southern. "It was big, grand, with lots of moldings," he says. "This time, we wanted to go in the opposite direction. We wanted something contemporary."

Living Stone's Sean Sullivan, the son of a Marine, had lived in Japan twice as a child, and the architecture always struck a chord with him. "I have fond memories of those years," he says. Sullivan remembers sleeping on mats in rooms with paper walls and sliding doors. He remembers the temples, the tranquility. "When the Joneses started to describe the type of home they wanted, I thought, 'Wow, let's do something with some Asian infusion.'" There were two parameters the design had to work within: First, the lot, full of wild turkeys and the occasional

It's a new building language: Japanese with an Appalachian twang.

black bear, is located in an Arts and Crafts community, so the home had to fulfill those requirements. Second, the Joneses are avid art collectors, so the Living Stone team needed to provide enough wall space to showcase the couple's beloved pieces.

The Joneses are also proud North Carolinians. Jim's family has lived here for generations, and he says hard work is in his DNA. His grandfather began working in the Ramseur textile mills when he was 9 years old, and he eventually established a Chevrolet dealership. Jim's father took it over, and then Jim and his brother, Steve, took it over from him. Something of a serial entrepreneur, Jim, along with Steve, later closed the dealership and developed it into an apartment community. Jim and Susan also run Joymongers, a craft brewery in Greensboro. Although they claim to be semi-retired, their life in the Piedmont remains active and full: They have two adult children who



have a hand in their businesses, and Jim also sings in a rock band called The B-Sides. They made the decision that their home in Black Mountain would be a place for respite and stillness.

While talking about the design of the house with John Petry, an architect at Living Stone, what emerged was something that surprised the Joneses. “When he put it on paper, it just kind of spoke to us,” Susan says. “We just looked at each other and went, ‘We didn’t know we liked that, but we do.’”

Inside, the Japanese influence is evident in the stacked-stone grand staircase, floating shelving, and recessed, elevated reading room. The built-ins flanking the kitchen and the incorporation of

Susan and Jim Jones entertain guests in their 1,100-square-foot great room with sliding glass doors overlooking the Swannanoa Valley and contemporary furniture that’s paired with a traditional Karastan rug.

indoor-outdoor spaces like screened-in porches also reiterate the Japanese theme. The couple advocated for a neutral palette and imperfect, artful finishes wherever possible. For example, when Jim was selecting flooring from a local source, he had

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a surprising request. “I said, ‘I want the knottiest, most figurative pieces you can find. I want the pieces nobody else wants,’” he says. “So you get this old barn floor feel that contrasts with the contemporary feel of the space. You’re looking for this natural tension between things.”

That tension isn’t for everyone. Susan remembers that the first time her son saw the imperfect finish of the walls, he worried that his parents had been had by an unsavory contractor. His mother reassured him that the bumpiness was deliberate and desired. Susan and Jim consider their home to be a work of art, the result of a highly collaborative process. Although they are not professional builders like the Doellgasts, Jim is proud that he and Susan “laid hands on everything in the house.” The home, Susan says, is where, after decades of hard work and raising kids, she and Jim “became a couple again.”

Today, the Joneses relish drinking in what feels to them like an “ocean view” as they watch the weather roll in over Swannanoa Valley. On clear days, in the meditative stillness of their home, they can see Mount Mitchell. “We get the reflection of the sunrise. We get these deep reds,” Jim says. “Everything is always changing.”

THE DOELLGASTS WERE FINALLY ABLE TO start construction on their dream home in 2010. Tina, who runs Jade Mountain with Hans, is tall with honey-colored hair and a gentle presence that contrasts with her husband’s excitable energy. Although they integrate Japanese design elements, like sliding mulberry-paper *shoji* screens and lantern-style lights, she insists, “We’re not trying to claim anything. It’s just this aesthetic we really like.” She calls it “the honoring of

the elements, the connection to nature within the home.”

Hans calls it the honoring of two rich traditions. “If you’re building a Japanese-style home in Appalachia, it’s honoring both,” he says. For Hans, who cut his teeth as a builder using locally sourced materials with an eye toward minimalism, the strengths of both architectural styles are emphasized: harmony with nature, craftsmanship, and the celebration of natural materials, neutral palettes, and imperfections. All of this, together, highlights an almost spiritual connection between the traditions. “It’s what I find to be beautiful,” he says.

If the Jones home is Asian-inspired by collaboration, the Doellgast home is Asian-inspired by obsession, brought into being by Hans, who fused his Appalachian heritage with his affinity for what he’s learned about Japan. As he gives a tour of his five and a half acres, where his daughters are growing up and where he lives with the woman of his dreams, it is apparent that he still cannot quite believe his good fortune. The young man who stalked deer in Boone and bathed in creek water has built, with his wife, a home entirely of his own vision and creation.

There is a declaration of hope in the details: The couple chose to finish much of the wood siding with rust and vinegar so that it will get even more beautiful as it ages. And the invocation of *torii* gates in the orange paint around the windows? “*Torii* gates in Japan are used to mark the entrance to a sacred space,” Hans says. “So for us, this is all a sacred space.” **OS**

Morgan Sykes splits her time between Transylvania County and New York City. She has written for New York magazine and Oxford American.