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# Alice's Wonderland

How one couple built a curious house suitable for Wonderland.



The Starsks' fairytale tower and arched entryway transport visitors into a mystical realm, even before they discover the curiosities inside.

BY WENDY UNDERHILL  PHOTOS BY RON FORTH

## "Curiouser and curiouser!" cried Alice.

That's what Lewis G. Carroll's heroine exclaimed when she fell down the rabbit hole into Wonderland in the beloved children's novel. Curiously, that's the same thing visitors might say when they first experience Alice and Karel Starek's wondrous home near Gold Hill.

In the book, of course, things are not only curious, but also fantastical: Alice shrinks and grows; caterpillars smoke hookahs; a deck of cards plays croquet; and a baby turns into a piglet. At the Stareks' home, things aren't so much fantastical as fanciful, given their home's spiral shape and myriad surprises.

In terms of their home's design, "To me, it's a huge experiment," says Alice, who has years of architectural schooling, though no license, and designed her home as well as other projects. "I wanted



*Above:* Warm colors and natural wood enhance the entryway's curves, creating a cozy, womb-like space.

*Right:* Alice combined a greenhouse with the dining room to produce an indoor picnic area that's "as much like being outside as possible."





**Top:** Supporting local art, the Stareks' house features a colorful mosaic by Boulder glass artist Matt Bezark and a copper chimney by metalworker Kathy McGovern.

**Bottom:** Embedded glass in the doors enlivens every room, like this master bath, complete with a copper bathtub.

to learn about building it. People have tried the idea of a box so many times. I wanted to challenge my sense—and other people's sense—of what a house is."

She can thank her husband, Karel, for that. Alice had worked on spiral designs before, but never had a client for whom one was just right. When it came time to build their own home, "since we were starting from scratch, I thought it was an opportunity to go back to her roots," Karel says, "to something she'd almost forgotten and stopped putting into her designs—spirals."

The couple has worked on projects together for years. Their biggest one was renovating the buildings and installing lakeside hot tubs at Gold Lake Mountain Resort and Spa, which they owned from 1994 to 2005.

With their own house, Karel played devil's advocate, pushing Alice to expand her architectural expertise: "What about this, what about that, how are you planning to accomplish these things?" he recalls of their many brainstorming sessions.

Together, they envisioned how their family of three children, Adam, Peter and Emma, two dogs, Isabelle and Gilda, and cat, Snowball, would truly live in the house. Even though every detail has a story, Alice says her aim was to make the

house "nice, but not perfect," so the family wouldn't have to live in a showcase.

### It's Alive!

As it turns out, the home is, if not quite a family member, at least sentient in Alice's mind: "The thing I love about this house is that it's alive. It changes as you move through it," she says. "I think any place you live in should change, because life is like that—it's never static."

Take the kitchen, for example. The counters are made from a quartzite boulder that the Stareks sliced like a loaf of bread. Because the stone is somewhat porous, the marks it develops will attest to time's passage, just as crows' feet add character to a loved one's face. The kitchen cabinets are made of scavenged cottonwood, known for knots and shrinkage. Instead of avoiding those traits, in the Stareks' home the cottonwood is allowed to show off its quirky beauty, changing with time as it pleases.

The home's "living" nature runs deeper than the finishes, however. Alice says "from day one" she designed it within a theoretical framework called biomimicry. As part of that framework, "Squares don't make a lot of sense," she says. Just look outside and try to find a 90-degree angle in nature. Smooth surfaces are also rare in



Like nature itself, Alice's spiral house is all twists and bends, with nary a flat plane or 90-degree angle to be found.

nature. So, with the exception of honed countertops, most surfaces inside this house are rough-hewn.

The kitchen is at the spiral's center, and living spaces radiate outward into the living room, laundry room, office, dining room and greenhouse areas.

Steps curve up to the children's area and the top floor, which is reserved for Alice and Karel. And, because it's a spiral inside and out, curves are everywhere. As for bedrooms, the actual beds are tacked

into nooks, crannies, kivas or lofts, and each has a "sky connection" via skylights. In the master "bed nook," the window is an easy egress, right at futon height. Protected by a 5-foot overhang, the large window stays open most nights so that sleeping in the master suite is a bit like indoor camping.

But Alice didn't want to just mimic nature; she wanted to preserve it as well. "I wanted to build a home with my values in it," she says. So most materials

are natural, eco-friendly and organic, the landscape is bermed to promote easy heating and cooling, and the hot water and heat are produced by solar energy. Many materials are also scavenged: a ceiling is built out of beetle-kill pine, beams come from an old farmhouse, and one adobe wall is made with leftover bricks from another project.

As for the passive-solar dining room-cum-greenhouse, Alice has always enjoyed

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Above: The natural stone chimney and stone floors give the house a connection to the Earth, while the wood-burning stove and solar-heated water in tubes beneath the floor make heating the house energy efficient and eco-friendly.

## "Like a dream come true!"

picnics, but that's only possible for a few months at their home's 8,300-foot elevation. So she asked herself, "Why not create a space as much like being outside as I could?" She accomplished that by putting the dining table in the greenhouse area and planting night-blooming jasmine so that dinnertime is also a delightful olfactory and visual experience. Runoff from the copper roof waters the greenhouse area, which contains two additional, sunny, plant-filled rooms.

### Earthy Roots

At its most basic level, the Stareks' house is "coupled to the earth, with no barriers between," Alice says. Because the ground temperature stays in the high 50s and low 60s year-round, by not being insulated from the earth, the home maintains a comfortable temperature in every

season. An efficient wood-burning stove boosts the heat, when necessary, and tubes beneath the floors carry hot water from the solar panels. "To me, it works on almost a spiritual level as well [as a physical one]," Alice says. "When you're walking in contact with the floor, you're in contact with the Earth."

Many of these floors are adobe mixed with oil, while the bathroom and kitchen floors are flagstone, and the upstairs floors are cork. Alice inlaid three glass panes into the study's cork floor to draw natural light into the kitchen below and add a playful twist for observers on both floors.

While it's clear the Stareks wanted to create an environmentally sustainable home, "I was desperately trying to build something old," Alice says with a laugh, pointing out the home's Rapunzel-like tower, wrought-iron rods and railings, and rich textured fabrics.

But, unlike the white rabbit in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* who ran about saying, "Oh dear! I shall be too late!" the Stareks took six years building their Wonderland. "We're more interested in the story of the house's evolution than in speed," Karel says, "more interested in how it would feel to live in the house than in economics." That's also partly because they wanted to incorporate local art into their home. (See "The Wonders of Wonderland" on page 56).

Outdoors, the house has a surprisingly low profile, except for the tower that contains Adam's sleeping loft and a phallic-like chimney protruding from the roof patio. (There is a balance: Alice says the front entryway "is all about vagina," or at least a sense of entering a womb-like space.) The best parts about the exterior are the wondrous views and exits to nature from nearly every spital level. Tucked into a rock outcropping, the house takes full advantage of the natural grade.

Inside and out, the Stareks' home is indeed a Wonderland-like achievement. But, unlike the Alice in Lewis Carroll's novel, the Stareks can continue to dream up new adventures for their Wonderland.

*Wendy Underhill bought her Boulder home from the Stareks seven years ago and now has interesting ideas on how to turn it into a Wonderland, too.*

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