

PROPERTIES

Simplicity over luxury in rustic Alpine renovation

GSTAAD, SWITZERLAND

Designers, craftsmanship and reclaimed wood restore a house's charm

BY JANE A. PETERSON

Soon after Marie Béjot-Harang sold her French skin-care company to the pharmaceutical giant Sanofi in 2009, she and her husband Benoît bought Hedi, a dilapidated farmhouse in Switzerland, in the exclusive hilltop area of Gstaad called Oberbort.

Looking out the front window, they fell in love with the surrounding meadows and the chain of snow-capped mountains rising up from the valley of Turbach. It was as if time had been standing still for the last 200 years, they recall.

The buying opportunity, in 2011, was extremely rare. Agents say Hedi was the first farmhouse in Oberbort on the market in more than 10 years, partly because there never were very many, and partly because changing a property's agricultural designation is extremely difficult. "It's a dream that everyone talks about, but it's very difficult to come by," said Cyrille de Kostine of Sine Tempore, a local real estate agency.

After making the winning bid, the couple agreed to abide by the canton's strict conditions: Hedi's 1810 exterior would be restored to its original appearance; the living space would be no more than 30 percent larger than the original size, for a new total of 320 square meters, or 3,445 square feet; and local cows still would be allowed to graze the meadows.

"It was a labor of love," Ms. Béjot-Harang said of the two-year project. "We wanted to build a very simple mountain retreat using old wood, and we wanted it to be ecologically sustainable."

Max Rieder, an architect from the nearby town of Saanen, designed the three-story home — in an authentic Saanenland-style — with six bedrooms, five bathrooms, a media room, a library and a hamman spa room. It included a heating system that used wood pellets and a front garden for organic fruits and vegetables. Because Swiss law limits a foreign couple whose primary residence is outside Switzerland to 200 square meters of living space, Mr. Rieder divided the home into two units: the two top floors legally belong to the

couple; a lower floor belongs to their children and can be closed off by a door.

Ms. Béjot-Harang said she was particularly impressed by the craftsmanship of the local carpenters used in the work: Arnold Reuteler, Bernard Ludi and Marcel Brand. "They gave the chalet its specific atmosphere," she said.

Traditional elements abound: two front staircases to the main-floor porch; small shuttered windows with antique glass panes; handmade roof shingles; and — most important — walls of old spruce planks, some salvaged from the original Hedi, but most coming from other old homes and barns in the region. Dark brown stain covers the front facade, and gray is used on the back.

"It's about three times more expensive to build with old wood," Mr. Rieder said. "We don't do it very often — espe-

every piece of old wood and all the restored door handles. "Marie even used the farmer's old fence."

Mr. von Unger spent hundreds of hours with his client, visiting well-established craftsmen in and out of the Saanenland region, including Christian Messerli in Thun, who provided the 200-year-old slate stones for the ground floor entrance and limestone from Mitholz in the Kander Valley for the bathrooms. A creamy white Crystallina-brand marble for the kitchen counters came from a quarry in Maggia, near the Italian border.

Mr. von Unger also found authentic furniture, which had not been retouched, including a rustic dining table in a convent, 14 chairs in a monastery and an outdoor bench from Christian Kohli Antiques in Saanen. The hunt for



cially exteriors. It's difficult for the carpenters to find good quality wood. You need more than one old house to find the right size pieces."

Construction methods, however, have changed. "In the old days, you built a house with one wood wall, just 12 centimeters" thick, Mr. Rieder explained. "Today, we use triple construction — old wood on the inside and outside, new wood in the middle — and sheep wool insulation."

To establish her vision for the house, Ms. Béjot-Harang enlisted the help of an interior designer, also from Saanen, who acted as project manager. "It was a fun project, trying to use old materials," said Urs von Unger, who helped pick

more pieces continues.

Ms. Béjot-Harang added living room pieces from London, where she owns a home in Knightsbridge. She bought the 19th-century sofas by Howard and Sons from the London antiques company Humphrey-Carrasco and a Windsor comb-back armchair from James Graham-Stewart, an art and antiques dealer.

Hedi's kitchen is its true luxury. Designed and built by Zbären, the upmarket kitchen company in nearby Sannenmöser, plain doors of recovered spruce were used for the cupboards as well as the Sub-Zero refrigerator, V-Zug ovens and Miele dishwasher. "It was a long process for Hedi," Benjamin Zbären recalled. "It takes hours and hours to



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Spruce planks from barns and old homes cover this renovated farmhouse in Gstaad. Such old wood was used throughout the house, left.

make samples of the stained wood to match the raw wood in the rest of the house. And you need a special varnish. There is a lot of waste."

Mr. Zbären, who has had clients all over the world, said the majority of his Gstaad clients opt for reclaimed-wood kitchens, which he says are not popular elsewhere. While new cabinetry generally accounts for 30 percent of a kitchen construction budget, old wood eats up 40 percent, lifting the total price to as much as 250,000 Swiss francs, or about \$276,000, not including wiring and plumbing.

Mr. von Unger says just a few of his Gstaad clients opt for such simplicity over luxury. But "some want Gstaad to be different" from the luxury homes they have in other parts of the world, he said, adding, "You know, designing something simple can be quite a challenge."

Neither Ms. Béjot-Harang nor Mr. von Unger would disclose the cost of the Hedi project. They are not alone. There is no official tally of sale prices for the Saanenland region. In Gstaad, notices of properties for sale are displayed in agency windows with two or more diamond icons rather than actual prices,

which are considered indiscreet.

What agents will say is that Gstaad's prices per square meter range from 15,000 francs to 50,000 francs, with a select few properties in Oberbort going for much more.

Regarding top-end renovation costs, Mr. de Kostine estimated that they ran from 2,000 francs to 2,500 francs per cubic meter.

However, Ben Worbs of the local real estate agency Gerax said farmhouse costs often run much higher, depending on the complexity of construction. "It is like women's shoes, which can range from a pair of simple sneakers to Louboutin sandals," he said.

Beyond Gstaad, farmhouses are more plentiful and prices usually are lower — and listed. In Turbach, which is a 10-minute drive from the center, an unrenovated farmhouse with architectural building plans was on the market for two years despite being listed with several agents. The sellers — 24 inheritors — dropped the price to 6 million francs, finally selling in July it for an undisclosed amount.

In Gsteig, which is a 10-minute drive

from Gstaad's center, Mr. Worbs has listings for two farmhouses: the first is listed at less than 3 million francs, and the second is a fully renovated farmhouse of 400 square meters, listed for more than 10 million francs.

Mr. Worbs also is selling several so-called farmer huts of 50 square meters to 100 square meters, in various locations, from 500,000 francs to 700,000 francs.

Antonia Crespi of Engel & Völkers, who was Ms. Béjot-Harang's agent for Hedi, is listing an unrenovated farmhouse in Grund for about 25 million francs and a renovated one in Gruben for 45 million francs. They are within 10 minutes' drive of Gstaad.

Agents characterize the current market differently. Mr. de Kostine looks at Gstaad and its surrounding villages and sees a tentative buyers' market with prices in a healthy stagnation.

Mr. Worbs prefers to focus on the top end in Gstaad, which he says is a sellers' market. "I'm flooded with appointments all day," he said. "If a good property is priced correctly, it will sell quickly."