

words by RYAN WATERFIELD

# THE NATURAL ORDER OF THINGS

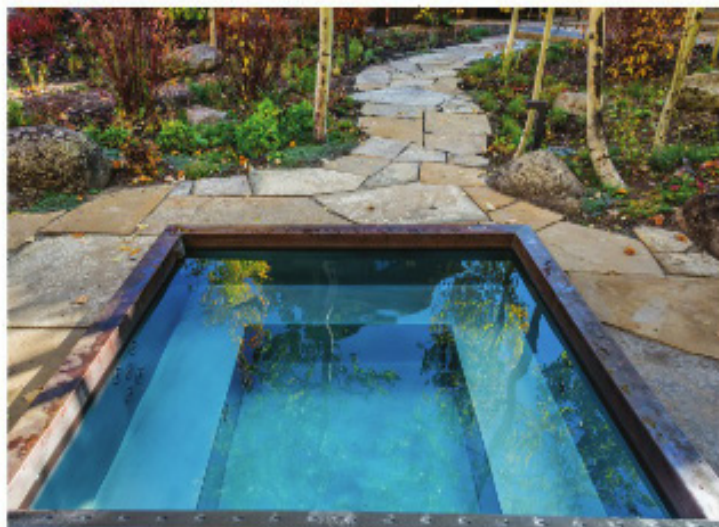
For landscape architect Karen Sherrerd, design is a messy business. Some days, you might find her knee-deep in dirt, digging to free a massive root structure that she envisioned as a sculptural piece and natural screen for a hot tub. The next day she might be on her hands and knees with masking tape, planning out the exact pattern for the rock walkway of a home's entrance. And yet, on other days, you'll find her on her perch in the HABITAT Landscape Architecture office in Ketchum, Idaho, surrounded by rolled up plans and drafts of designs piled up on the office ping-pong table. No matter where she's working or how messy it gets, Sherrerd and the rest of the HABITAT team excel in landscape design that seamlessly resonates with the natural surroundings.

Sherrerd, all 5-foot-4 of her, is a force of nature gifted with the ability to look at an unremarkable stretch of land and see the possibilities. She and her business partner at HABITAT, James Gillespie, work closely with their clients to understand their visions and tease out the ways those visions can take shape. I like to think of Sherrerd as a poet, writing within the structure of a sonnet instead of freeform. The challenges of each particular project are the constraints of line, rhyme, and meter. What she does with them is Shakespearean in three-dimensions. What

a lesser poet would see as limitations are really the moments when she and the HABITAT team transcend traditional design solutions.

Take a recent project located on the Big Wood River in Ketchum, Idaho, for instance. The clients—who live in California and for whom this is a mountain retreat—wanted something that held harmony with the environment. For the HABITAT team, the priority is always to give shape to the client's vision. But for Sherrerd and Gillespie, the end result should be so graceful, so subtle, and so informed by an innate logic that it just seems natural. According to

ABOVE: This entrance, grand yet welcoming, utilizes large steel screens and a meticulously planned meandering path of large stones handpicked by HABITAT. The wetland swale, large boulders, groundcovers, shrubs, and trees are layered with the stone and steel of the hardscape to harmonize with the natural surroundings.



PHOTOGRAPHY: KIRK ANDERSON

Sherrerd, "The property was really hammered when we started working on it, and our goal was to restore it to a more natural and healthy state." Today, it's stunning and at ease in its setting. Except for the lawn that runs from the entertainment barn to the river and the plants in the steel boxes that edge the home, not much of the overall landscape looks "designed." It's not fussy or manicured. It's organic and easy.

But looks can be deceiving; there was nothing "easy" about restoring the property. It was a labor energized by possibility. Consider what HABITAT had to start with and this project was nothing less than transformational. A gravel and dirt tract of land whose natural

undulations and swales had been flattened and silenced. The growth natural to those riverside lots, tamed. For the HABITAT team, it was clear from the get-go that layering would be key in this design. First, they needed to restore the property's natural swales to give depth and texture. Sherrerd explains, "We wanted to restore the dendritic glacial outwash patterns and use them to create authentic circulation patterns through the rhythm of spaces and places."

Then there's the planting. Countless tufts of native grasses were planted among native perennials and masses of native shrubs. Groves of native trees add more layers of texture. HABITAT created a

sculpted meadow through the heart of the property that showcases wildflowers and a walking path. In addition, the team brought in what they refer to as the "detritus." I know, not usually the stuff you find yourself paying the pros to bring into your landscape, but have faith in the vision. As I tour the property with Gillespie, I notice downed tree trunks, and Gillespie says, "We brought that in." Then he points across the field and says, "We brought that one in, too. And that one over there; we brought that one in and planted strawberry plants in it." I can't help but imagine Sherrerd and Gillespie and their team hiking around the hills of Sun Valley looking for downed trees to transfer to this project. The effect is graceful with a touch of whimsy.

And the whimsy doesn't stop there. Everywhere we walk, I fall in love just

a little more. There's a pathway that leads past the two fishing (guest) cabins and the entertainment barn. Along the path you encounter, first, an outdoor sleeping platform. It's a magical and generous sort of welcome. If you venture farther along the path, you come across a stone with "How" etched into it. You think to yourself, well, that's strange, but you're primed for more—your curiosity has been piqued. And since nothing about the experience of this property has been remotely disappointing yet, you continue to have faith. Sure enough, down the pathway a little more, there sits another stone with "Far." You have to admit to yourself that you love a puzzle. So you keep going. You have no idea where this path leads or what's waiting at the end, but you're stuck in the middle of a half-formed

ABOVE (left to right): Outdoor shower for the avid fishermen coming in from the river; a HABITAT-designed hot tub for relaxing.



thought and you have to keep going. Eventually, your curiosity pays off and you are treated to an *Alice in Wonderland* quote, a quote whose essence is about curiosity and you have to respect the wit. "How far are you willing to go down the rabbit hole?"

And if you're willing to go far enough down that particular rabbit hole, you'll be treated to a surprise "cowboy bathtub" set out there like a wonderful pause in the woods, next to an Airstream trailer. It's an invitation to mischief.

Sherrerd and Gillespie always give credit to their clients who have shared ideas about what they want to see and experience on their properties and whose personalities are ultimately reflected in the design. The owners of this riverside lot

brought the Carroll quote and the idea for the stones. They brought the passion for fishing and a desire to elevate the landscape to reflect the natural environment. Sherrerd and the HABITAT team just helped choreograph the program and return the property to the natural state of things, with a few delightful twists.

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ABOVE (top to bottom): The owners of this riverside property wanted playful and welcoming elements like the sleeping platform, the walking path with the *Alice in Wonderland* quote etched on stones, and the "cowboy bathtub."