

ARCHITECTURAL DIGEST

THE INTERNATIONAL MAGAZINE OF FINE INTERIOR DESIGN

AUGUST 1994 \$5.00



ARCHITECTURAL DIGEST

PEOPLE ARE THE ISSUE



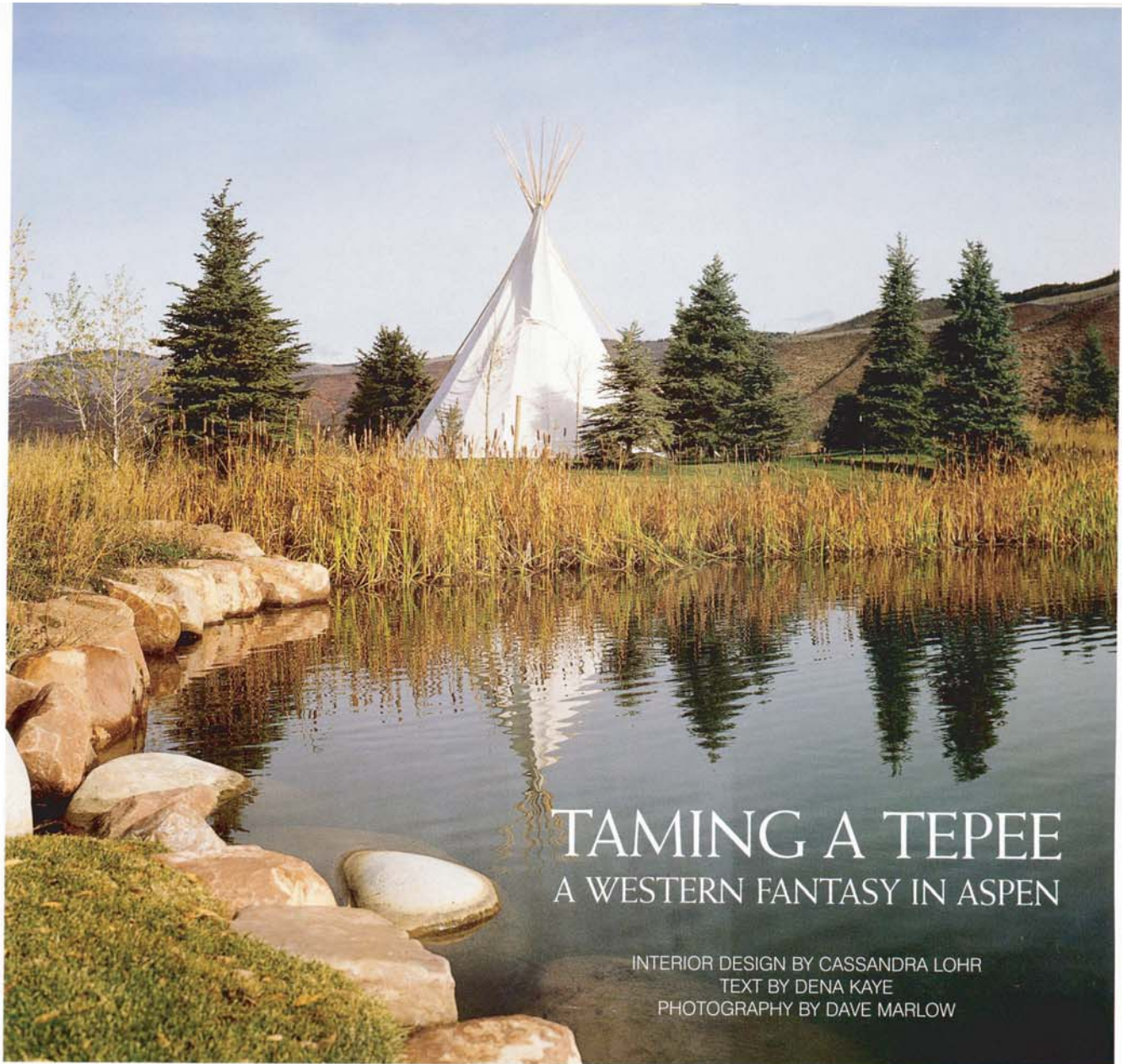
DAVE MARLOW

Cassandra Lohr

Taming a Tepee

"There's a certain mystery when you walk down from the house in the dark and hear the coyotes howling," says one of the owners of a tepee designed by Cassandra Lohr on his Aspen property. "One night I slept there in a thunderstorm and watched giant flashes of

lightning through the tepee walls." Although Lohr had never designed the interior of a tepee before, she went on to include acrylic, canvas and hand-stitched buffalo-hide tepees in her Old West Collection—a selection of rustic furniture and accessories made by Native American artisans. Lohr, who has worked on western-style interiors for clients such as Prince Bandar, the Saudi Arabian ambassador to the United States, located the artisans during a visit to remote areas of Wyoming, Utah, Colorado and New Mexico. "Many of them take up to four months to carve something," says Lohr. "They don't have factories but work out of small shops, garages or backyards. One man makes log beds that take four men to move. The houses here are big. Nothing about this furniture is light." *See page 72.*



TAMING A TEPEE

A WESTERN FANTASY IN ASPEN

INTERIOR DESIGN BY CASSANDRA LOHR
TEXT BY DENA KAYE
PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVE MARLOW

"They wanted a whole house in there—an office, bedroom and entertainment center in a twenty-eight-foot-diameter space," explains Cassandra Lohr, who designed the interior of a tepee retreat on her clients' Aspen property. "But with the tall pole frame and circular space, it doesn't feel cramped."

OPPOSITE AND COVER: Although the interior has electricity and hardwood floors, the hand-peeled lodgepole frame, exterior smoke flaps and eastern orientation are true to the original Plains Indians' dwellings. ABOVE: The mesa site behind the owners' main residence offers panoramic views.

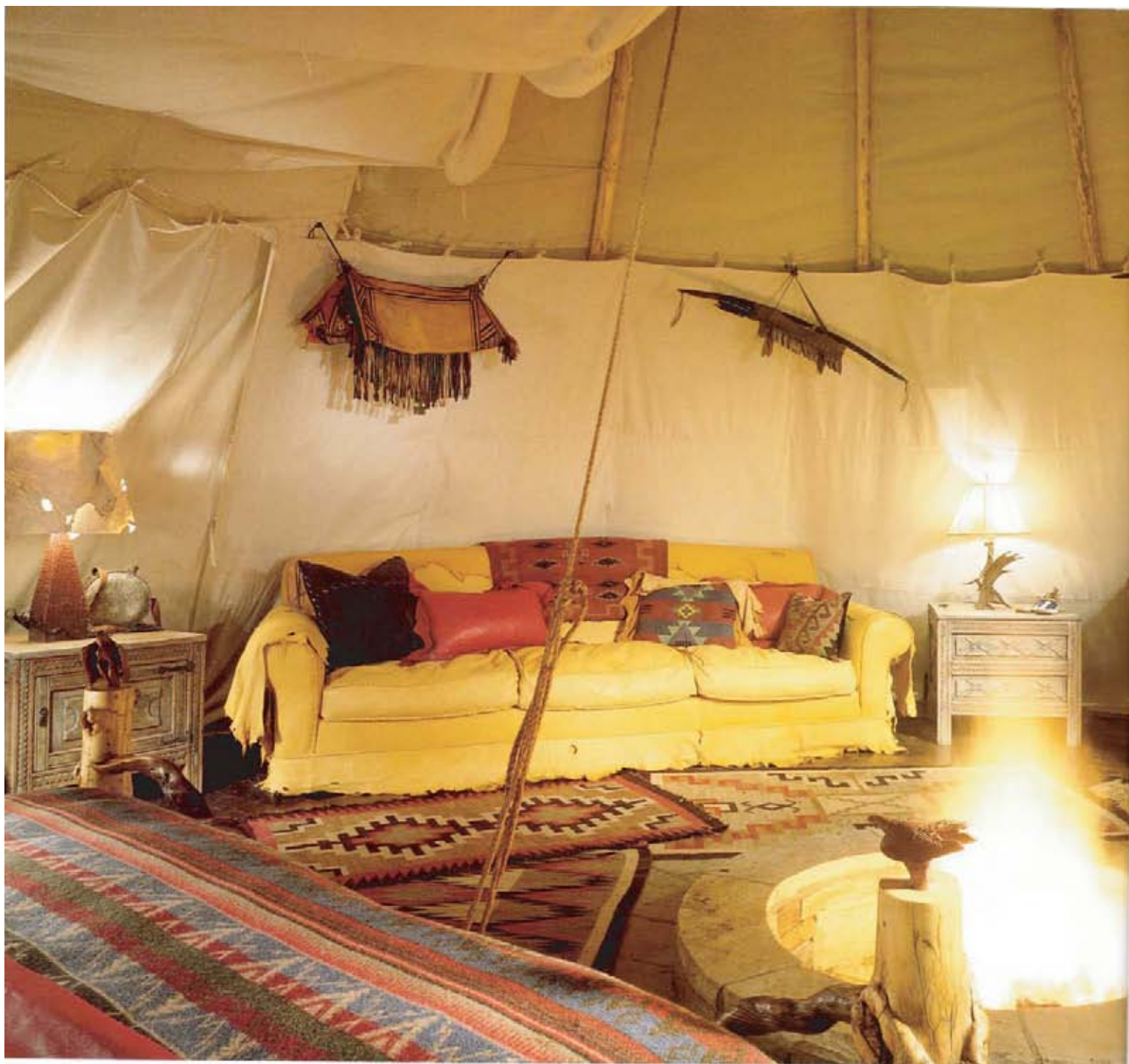
On a duvet of snow in winter that becomes an endless bed of summer wildflowers, a lone tepee stands. A noble signature for a people and their way of life, this tepee respects many of the structural and spiritual traditions of the Native Americans. Even the distant setting, a ring of mountains sometimes reaching peaks of fourteen thousand feet, represents the Indians' sacred shape, the eternal circle. But here in Starwood, an exclu-

sive expanse about twelve minutes from downtown Aspen, this tepee sports some strictly techno-modern features: a pop-up Mitsubishi TV and a cordless telephone with a customized touch—the last four digits of the number spell TIPI.

"I thought my client was kidding when he asked me to build a tepee," says interior designer Cassandra Lohr. "I told him I didn't know the first thing about tepees." But she had re-

cently created several rugged yet soigné western-themed houses and log cabins. In fact, her client had seen one such retreat that belonged to a Saudi prince. "I told him I wanted my own retreat too, but that I could only afford a tepee," he recalls. "I just jokingly said it, but the idea stuck.

"We have our dream house on thirty acres," he continues, "but we'd always talked about adding on." He and his wife had also talked about



putting something unusual by the pond. "I wanted a completely different environment from the house," he says, "something primitive but plush, a cheerful, masculine 'clubhouse' for music, television, reading, letter writing and meditation." Or, as his wife says, a place to smoke his cigar.

Cassandra Lohr's skill in rustic chic décor brought her the project, but she was also spiritually correct. "I've always been inspired by the Indian cul-

ture," she says. At a party two days after the husband approached her, she met John Eagle Day, an administrator for development programs for Native American youth leadership. His experience with tepees reflects the traditional values and ideals of his Bannock ancestry. And he had sources for making an authentic tepee. "My biggest challenge was personal," he says. "A tepee for me is like a wild animal, not to be harnessed by modern-

ABOVE: "We added a fire pit to maintain the authenticity of the American Indian theme as much as possible," says Lohr. Hanging above the yellow elk-hide sofa from Crystal Farm are a bow-and-arrow set and a fringed North African Taureg bag.

OPPOSITE: "Many of the furnishings were made by Native American artisans," Lohr notes. "A Wyoming furniture maker walked the forests and riverbeds to find burl fir for the bed frame." The Beacon-style fabric on the bedcovering is from Ralph Lauren.



ization. The simplicity of a tepee and its aesthetic beauty are relevant to what life should be. Visually, you see where you have been, where you are, where you are going. The tepee is timeless. A house with geometric angles represents another kind of life."

Needless to say, the demands that life and the environment placed on the tepees of the Plains Indians diverge wildly from those of this suburban creation. The Plains Indians were nomads who followed the buffalo herds; their tepees had to be lightweight with few furnishings. Location involved proper water drainage and proximity to trees—too close meant danger from lightning and falling branches, as well as dripping rain after a storm. In this case, pure aesthetics prevailed. "I knew exactly where the tepee should go," says the husband. "In the prettiest spot with

continued on page 139

LEFT: A reading area includes a horn-and-steer-hide chaise, an iron floor lamp with a painted rawhide shade and Navajo rugs. The Adirondack-style cabinet was built to conform to the curve of the tepee walls.



TAMING A TEPEE

A WESTERN FANTASY IN ASPEN
continued from page 75

the best views of the pond." But, in keeping with tradition, the door faces east. "East expresses the beginning of creation with the sun," explains Eagle Day, "and the sun feeds the life force into the home."

Getting a building permit in Aspen requires stamina, since the process there could charitably be called byzantine. The application was granted for an "accessory structure," no higher than twenty-five feet. Although the tepee is only a three-minute walk from the house, the lack of plumbing is daunting when you consider the bear tracks on the path, the mountain lion sighted above a nearby tennis court, the abundance of roaming coyotes, deer and elk, and the chill of both summer and winter nights.

Eagle Day arranged for the tepee basics, including handpicked, hand-peeled, thirty-six-foot lodgepoles for the frame, tied together at twenty-four feet. It sits on a wood platform that makes a fine summer deck. Traditional buffalo skin or canvas coverings lost out to a flame-retardant, weather-resistant acrylic. A cotton army duck liner goes around the entire inside of the tepee, an eight-foot-high curtain that ensures insulation and privacy (and hides the stereo speakers). Without it, shadows are visible at night, when the tepee glows like a large lantern. An *ozan*, a retractable awning of sorts, shields the bed from rain and snow coming in the opening at the top.

A tepee isn't a tepee without a fire pit, the customary warming and cooking unit. (This tepee also has three electric heaters.) The catch is successfully operating the smoke flaps, movable parts of the outside covering that let the smoke out. The client learned to use them when a bird was caught inside.

"My primary concern was accommodating the need for a bedroom, desk, entertainment center and sofa all in one room that's not square with straight walls but circular, almost an oval, with the four-foot round fire pit right in the middle," says Lohr.

"Every time I'd ask John a question like 'Will it be dangerous to have electricity in a tepee?' or 'What about damage from rain and snow to the expensive interiors?' he'd just laugh and say, 'Cassandra, you're trying to cage a wild animal.'"

The tepee walls slope inward, so furniture with square contours has to be moved away from the perimeter, taking up precious space. Two of the major pieces were designed with a curved shape for a snug fit: the Adirondack-style cabinet that contains a refrigerator, a stereo and a hidden television; and the hand-carved pine desk with a wood frieze of Indians chasing buffaloes.

"I've pulled together textiles and accessories from such diverse places as Mexico, the Middle East, Africa and France, and the ensemble conveys the feel of the Old West," Lohr explains. Most of the furniture was made according to Lohr's detailed ideas by craftsmen she ferreted out while working on other projects.

Lohr met one of the most spiritual

**"A tepee for me is
like a wild animal, not
to be harnessed
by modernization."**

artists while traveling through Wyoming. Shanandoa considers himself an artist and a medicine man, and until he was ten he lived in a tepee after each winter on Montana's Blackfeet reservation. His proposal for making some of the pieces began by inviting the spirit into the process: "The earth is sacred, all things from her are sacred, let us spread the word, let us share the dignity." He also expressed his concern about respect for the space. "Part of the journey is to make a voice with creation that doesn't disturb the balance of the actual space."

His journey includes spending at

least four days in the mountains, collecting the appropriate wood, though never from a living tree. For the tepee, he designed a low cedar-and-burl-fir bed "for comfort and fantasy," he says. "Romance is enhanced the closer you are to the earth's energy." It took him almost two months to clean the wood with his pocket knife because he didn't want to destroy the intrinsic markings. "If I treat the wood with spiritual accord," says Shanandoa, "other people will feel it."

To achieve the client's desire for "a plush and primitive feeling," Lohr used regional Navajo rugs, accessories like nineteenth-century Sioux moccasins and Chippewa snowshoes, and a combination of rich fabrics in rustic frames. "I like things overstuffed and upholstered so they feel old," she explains, citing the yellow elk-hide sofa where the holes and tears are focal points, not hidden imperfections. "I want a down filling loose enough to have that baggy look of having been sat in for years."

The finished tepee has magic. It is a place for friends to come for a drink in summer or to have hot cider and light candles after cross-country skiing by moonlight. "When you see it lit up against a starry night, it's like going into a different era," says the wife.

The Indians had an etiquette for tepee living, rules governing how one entered and where one sat. These dwellers have their own decorum. "I don't want any unkind word or thought expressed here," says the husband. Both feel the shape has meaning. "There's something about a circle that soothes the spirit," he reflects. "When I'm down there for a while, it's difficult to pull away and go anywhere else."

Shanandoa explains the power of the circle most elegantly. "A circle is the round energy the Creator extended, with which all of life will flourish. The human role is to shape it correctly. Whatever emotions or deeds one contributes into the circle's center returns . . . mostly stronger. All things are included in its powerful flow." □