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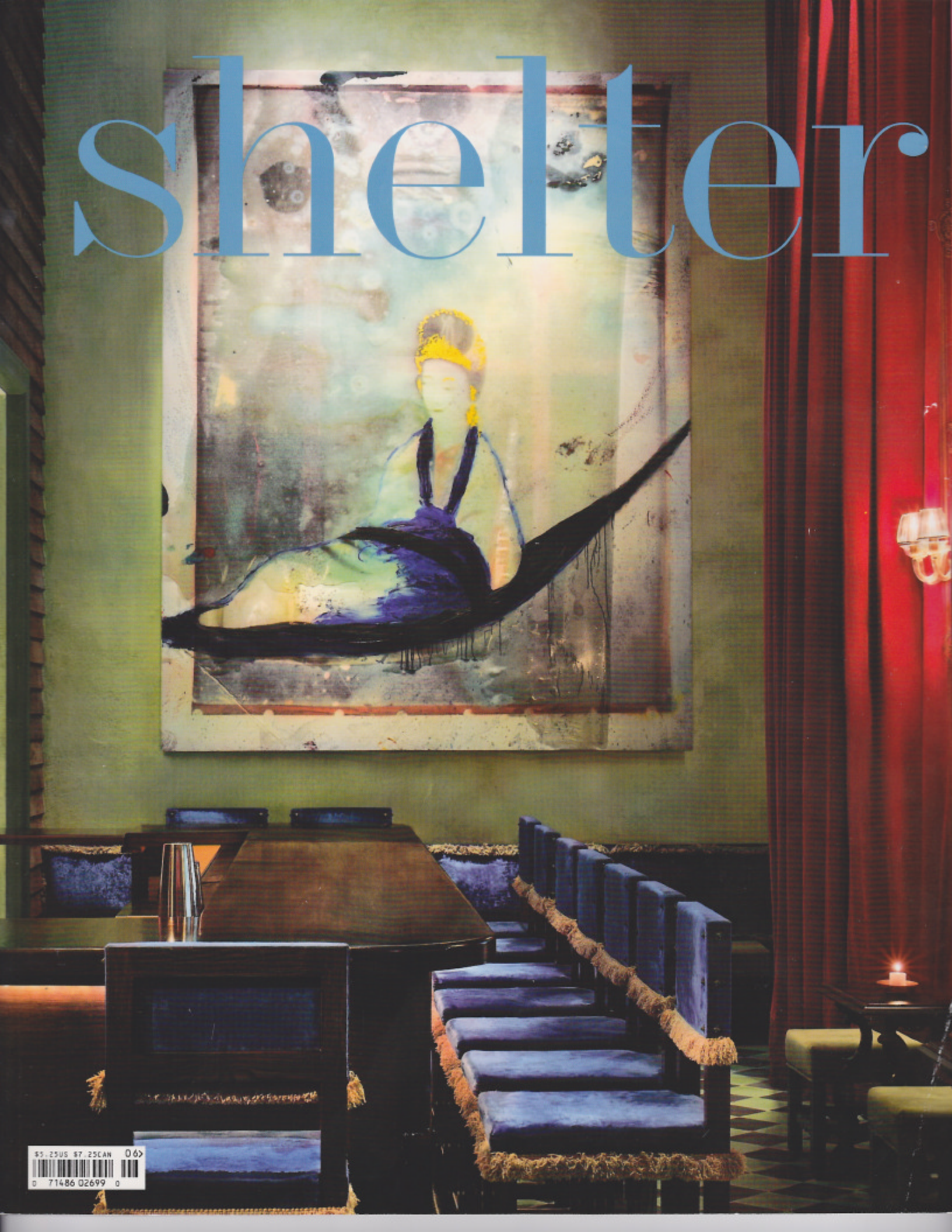

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Black Squirrel Farm

INTERIOR DESIGNER JACK FHILLIPS FINDS SOLACE FROM CITY LIFE AMID A RABBLE OF SQUIRRELS IN A 19TH CENTURY FARMHOUSE MILES AWAY FROM PAVED ROAD

"Too many people forget that when you look out a window, what you see outside is what comes in"

THEY SEEMED TO ANTICIPATE HIS ARRIVAL. Five unwearied black squirrels sat at the end of the dirt driveway as Jack Phillips drove up to his newly acquired 1890s farmhouse in the heart of New York's Catskill Mountains. The sight instantly inspired the noted Palm Beach designer to dub this northern getaway Black Squirrel Farm. Naming the property, however, would prove the easiest part of Phillips' three-year undertaking to make the tattered farmhouse befitting a modern gentleman's country quarters.

Set amid a bucolic scene of shady trees and fragrant grass, the white wood-clad farmhouse, with its inviting wraparound porch and blue shuttered windows, would have been a perfect respite from the grind of New York City, if only it hadn't been tangled in a briar of unfortunate design choices. A thorny predicament since Phillips for all his projects insists on clarity in graceful, natural accord with surrounding environs. For him to engender this place with a prerequisite easygoing spirit as perfectly at home as his neighborly squirrels, he first had to erase the muddled and often saccharine traces of past owners. What he chose instead was a palette of soothing cream, serene and vibrant greens and a collection of approachable furnishings—mostly from the 18th and 19th centuries—for long lazy days.

"When you restore a house, you should be true to its nature and yet make it comfortable and suitable for today's lifestyle," says Phillips, whose design practice based in Florida regularly takes him to New York, the Bahamas and Vail, Colorado. "When living in such lovely surroundings where there are trees and mountains or beaches, one should play into those environments."

FETCH

In creating his retreat, Jack Phillips yielded to the gentle nudge of antiquity

Regrettably, the home's previous owners had "remuddled" the interior over the years, quips the designer. Disparate wallpaper peeked from single walls, while fireplace mantles crowded narrow hallways and bedroom walls. The kitchen was a hodgepodge of styles and materials, and its countertops included granite, avocado-hued laminate and faux brick tile.

Throughout the painstaking restoration, Phillips maintained the integrity of the colloquial country home, vigilantly avoiding any Victorian-era, painted-lady affectations. In the kitchen, Phillips lined the walls in bead board inspired by the original butler's pantry and installed Carrara marble countertops. The marble's simplicity agreed with the home's straightforward detailing, such as original Shaker doors and standard trim. Phillips restored the floors and walls to an unadorned state and, on the front porch, installed worn wooden planks retrieved from a ramshackle neighboring farm.

It was during these slow-moving renovation projects that Phillips turned his attention toward furnishings—primarily 18th and 19th century antiques—and collections of ironstone and creamware dishes, neglected ancestral portraits and straw hats. His furniture ranges from a signed 1784 chest of long narrow drawers and a 19th century Orkney Island chair in the second floor's sitting room, to 1920s wicker and a 1940s hall tree down below. Regardless of age, the furnishings are approachable and sincere, suiting the farmhouse genre.

"Too many people forget that when you look out a window, what you see outside is what comes in. By working with colors [from the outdoors], the space that you're in becomes more peaceful," says Phillips.

"I don't know what got into me... It was one of those bad design moments"

So important was the natural color scheme with many shades of green and brown that the home rebuffed the initial attempt to impart South Florida sensibilities to its northern walls. "I don't know what got into me," Fhillips laughs wryly. "It was one of those bad design moments. I had been in Palm Beach and I came back wearing something pink and green and I thought, 'Oh, maybe I'll do a pink and green dining room'. So I find the colors and I'm painting away on a Saturday and well, I can tell you, by the time I was done painting the room, I knew I just couldn't live with it, he says. It was so disruptive to the view. I think that if you listen to it, nature will tell you, 'Hey, this doesn't work.'" Fhillips then employed a deep green on the dining room walls, darkening it to a gardenia-leaf shade in the living room. The upstairs hall color borrows from a paler spring leaf, while the master bedroom wears a summery grass green. One of the guest suites earned the name Bark Room for its khaki walls, and other nooks are the result of inspiration from the property's fiddlehead ferns and the gray-green grass on an early fall day.

Fhillips chose gauzy curtains, some of which never close, for the windows so as to avoid hindering the view. On furniture, the designer was mindful of distracting upholstery, opting for muted tones and fern and ivy motifs inspired by the flora on the property. As for the fauna, etchings of black squirrels appear throughout the home, most notably in the upstairs hall where Fhillips hung 80 specimens in antique frames in various states of disrepair—a felicitous gallery.

Serenity is, finally, well within reach at Black Squirrel Farm. The sun rises through the kitchen's bay window and sets across from the front porch, below the silhouetted mountains. In creating his retreat, Jack Fhillips yielded to nature and the gentle nudge of antiquity. In return, both grant him tranquility—and a few woodland creatures to keep things interesting

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