ARCHITECTURAL DIGEST

THE INTERNATIONAL DESIGN AUTHORITY

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THE SMART SET

DECORATING SECRETS FROM DESIGN EXPERTS

AD'S ULTIMATE RENOVATION STYLE GUIDE

RENZO PIANO REINVENTS THE WHITNEY MUSEUM

AT THE BEGINNING, THERE WAS A RUIN.

Make that the barest evidence of a ruin—a weedy foundation of scorched concrete blocks at the top of a dauntingly steep Tennessee hill. The house that once occupied the nearly two-acre site had burned to the ground after a lightning strike, and the owners never rebuilt. But the property's undeniable allure remained: breeze-ruffled stands of cedars, oaks, and shagbark hickories; the Oz-like spires of Nashville's skyline sparkling several miles to the north; and, on the horizon, the mysteriously befogged slopes of the Great Smoky Mountains.

"It really is purple mountain majesty," says Ray Booth, a principal at McAlpine Booth & Ferrier Interiors. Several years ago the designer was standing on that elevated acreage, wondering if it was the perfect place—and the right moment—to construct a house. At the time, Booth and his partner, John Shea, a television executive, were jetting between apartments in Nashville and Manhattan (McAlpine Booth & Ferrier has offices in both cities, plus Atlanta), but the designer had been daydreaming about having a true home base as well as a project that would be a professional challenge. As he explains, "I was feeling that in a few years I would want to find a hilltop and start realizing myself more architecturally." Then Booth got a call from a real-estate-agent friend saying she'd found his hilltop, a bit earlier than he'd planned. The catch? He had to see it that weekend and commit to it on the spot.

Shea was back in New York, so Booth called him from the site. He says Shea asked him, "Do you think you can build something wonderful there?" Nervously the designer answered that he believed he could. Though he graduated from Auburn University's architecture school in his native Alabama, Booth had never created a house from the ground up. Recounts Shea,