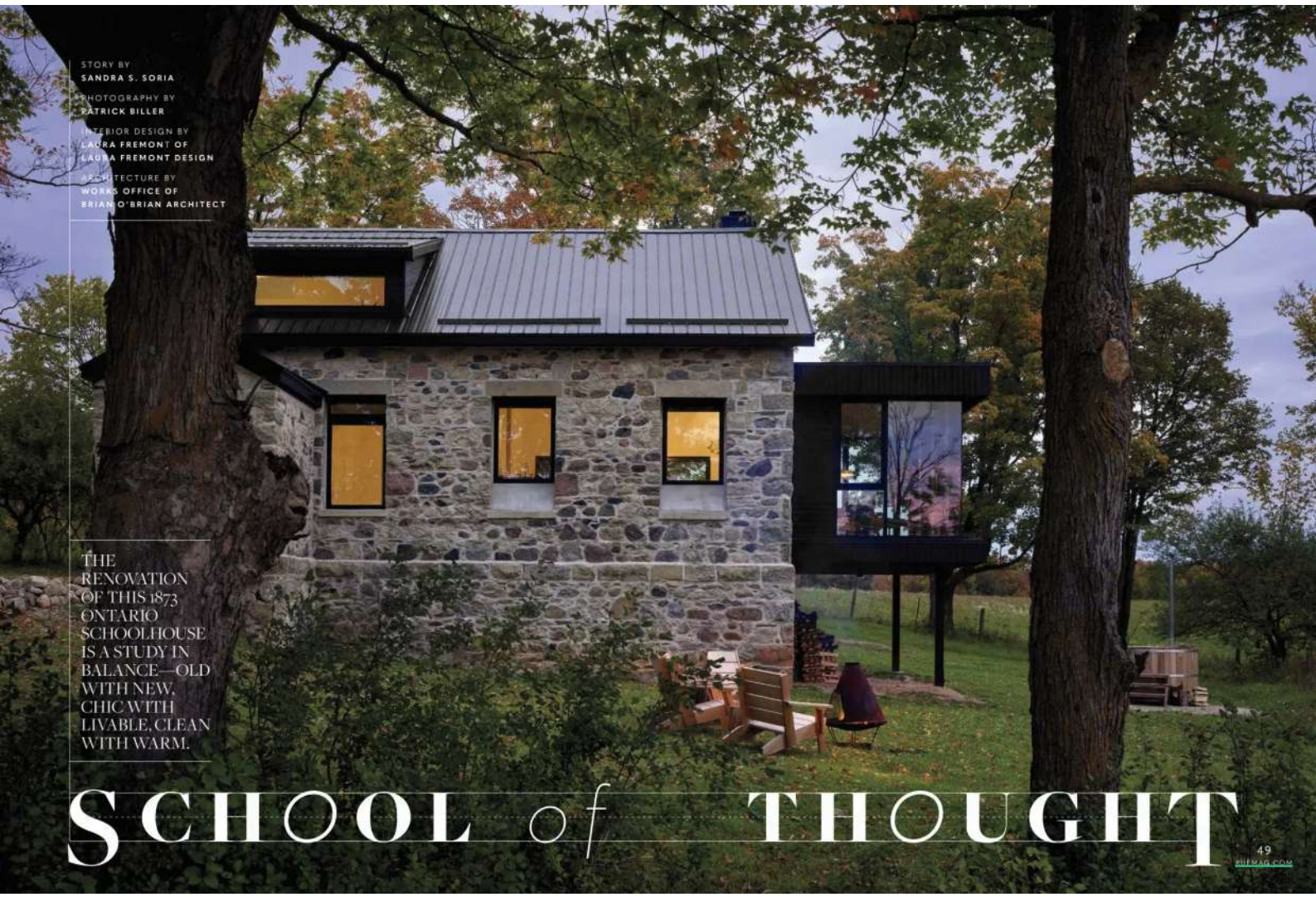

STORY BY
SANDRA S. SORIA

PHOTOGRAPHY BY
PATRICK BILLER

INTERIOR DESIGN BY
LAURA FREMONT OF LAURA FREMONT DESIGN

ARCHITECTURE BY
WORKS OFFICE OF BRIAN O'BRIAN ARCHITECT

THE RENOVATION OF THIS 1873 ONTARIO SCHOOLHOUSE IS A STUDY IN BALANCE—OLD WITH NEW, CHIC WITH LIVABLE, CLEAN WITH WARM.

SCHOOL of THOUGHT

THOUGH

THE STONE STRUCTURE HADN'T SEEN A STUDENT SINCE THE 1960s,

this rural outpost three hours northwest of Toronto had much to teach about the strength of earth-given materials and old-school handcraftsmanship. "The original masonry and stonework are so stunning," says interior designer Laura Fremont of Laura Fremont Designs, who was tapped by her friends Erin Connon and Ben Sykes to take it from schoolhouse to home. "It was just such a work of art, and we wanted to incorporate that into the space. When you have amazing craftsmanship, beautiful things can really, really take place."

Fremont and architect Brian O'Brian of Works Office worked with the design-conscious homeowners to make the beauty happen. The team had found the one-room schoolhouse in a pure state, with chalkboards on the walls and student desks populating the lower level. The plan was to honor both the building's history as well as its present task—to shelter the family and serve as a retreat. "We wanted to keep the feel of the schoolhouse as much as possible, and the flow between the new and the old feeling really cohesive," says Fremont. "It was important to pay homage to the bones of the building."

The framework consisted of 18-inch-thick stone walls and old-growth pine and cypress trusses, both of which were revealed in a soaring living room. What was left of a crumbling plaster interior shell was replaced with white walls designed into crisp, clean angles.

O'Brian extended the living space with a modern addition consisting of dining and seating areas that served up a panoramic view of rolling hills, woodlands, and grazing cattle. He left exposed a partial wall of stone that offers a backdrop for a fireplace forged of yet more thoughtfully angled white drywall atop a slender slice of concrete. On the upper level, dormers expanded the space to make way for a primary bedroom.

When finishing and furnishing the home, material choices—from the soft and subtle Calacatta marble to the naturally gray plank floors—were carefully studied. "Picking the finishes was really, really key and took some time," Fremont says. "The family includes a little boy, and a main goal was that he be able to run around and have fun. We picked design elements that were functional and not at all precious. Besides, when you go to a country home you don't want to worry about where you're putting your drink down. Everything was chosen for entertaining and living. It's a place to go to find calm."

Panorama Mode

To extend the living space, architect Brian O'Brian didn't attempt to blend with the original structure but responded to it with a straightforward glass box that would scoop in the pastoral view. Inside, Fremont says, "we wrapped the ceiling and sidewalls with wood to bring in added warmth because that space could have felt really cold and detached in the original stone."

Cooking Class
Charcoal-hued cabinetry is reminiscent of the slate chalkboards found in the schoolhouse. They're topped with Calacatta marble counters and backsplash with the just-right soft touch. "It took a long time to find that slab," Fremont says. "We went to many stone yards. We didn't want anything too veiny, but just veiny enough." A trio of vintage French pendants gracefully drop in from between the exposed original trusses.

Earthy Elegance

The residence's Zen sensibility kicks off in the mudroom, where timbers foraged from the property are milled into benches and shelves. In the living room, vintage Safari chairs by Arne Norell face off with folding rope chairs to bring form and function. They're joined by a squared-off sofa and demi-sphere coffee table from Elte that present a geometry lesson in contrast. Original windows were replaced with steel-framed panes designed to outline amazing views throughout the house.

Airy BnB
Dormers allowed for more floorspace in the upper-level main bedroom and bath. Windows placed on high invite in the light and make way for a built-in wall of drawers that echo the design of lockers. A vintage claw-foot tub and modern glass shower offer the best of old and new. They're bridged with neutral plank oak floors from Northern Wide Plank, which were chosen for their soft, naturally gray grains.