

SKY, NOT SPACE

Mountain home seamlessly fits into its surroundings

BY SEAN MEYERS | PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANDREW POGUE



QUIET RETREAT
Situated on the edge of a field on the Stillwater River, the home seems at one with nature.

THE PANDEMIC has pushed thousands of serenity-seeking Seattle residents into the remotest corners of the Northwest. It's the mission of Prentiss + Balance + Wickline Architects (PBWA) to make sure climate change doesn't chase them back.

Building in the extreme weather and topography of mountain environments is challenging in the best of times. The wildfires and historic weather swings of recent years have upped the ante.

PBWA's portfolio of award-winning mountain homes attracted the attention of Sally Ericsson and Tom Garwin, a couple with deep roots on both coasts.

They're not napkin-doodlers when it

comes to goal setting. Ericsson worked on Pacific Northwest conservation and environmental issues in the White House for the Clinton and Obama administrations, and Garwin served as director of impact planning and improvement for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation in the mid-2000s, later working for USAID in Washington, D.C. They now serve as consultants in their respective fields, and frequently visit their son and his family, who live in Seattle's Central District.

They didn't yet have a site picked out when they presented their goals to PBWA:

- A home that fit in the landscape.
- Riparian and habitat preservation.
- A variety of outdoor and indoor living spaces.

- Spaces that would be comfortable for just two people, with guests, or entertaining large numbers.
- Energy efficiency, sustainability, and quiet heating and cooling.

They eventually selected Whitefish, Mont., population 7,700. Located in the northwest corner of the state, it is routinely ranked as one of Montana's most beautiful cities. It is known for citizens who are generally agreeable, and grizzlies who occasionally are not.

"We wanted to spend time in the West and above the tree line – and also to be near a ski hill," Garwin says. "Glacier National Park was a significant attraction. Whitefish is a real community, in addition to being a mountain resort town."

VAST EXPANSE
Floor-to-ceiling windows offer views to the "Big Sky."



They selected a 35-acre parcel on the edge of a field along the Stillwater River. The property was purchased as a second home for quiet retreats as well as larger gatherings, and for eventual permanent residency. The scenery, proximity to outdoor activities and the remoteness of the rural site were the main attractions.

"They strongly desired a light touch, restoring the existing disturbances to the land where possible, and requested that we design with sustainable elements of all sorts, from low-tech passive solar strategies to cutting-edge climate control systems," says project architect Kelby Riegsecker. "Placing the house was crucial. The clients desired views and access to the water, along with the breathtaking 'Big Sky' view across the meadow to the mountains."

Due to a slide failure on the property, a county road that had previously run through the site was moved away from the edge of the water, leaving an overgrown roadbed along the entire riverfront. The prior roadbed provided great access to the river's edge, but taking advantage of this existing disturbance required topographical restoration. Excess fill from the necessary regrading was gently mounded in the meadow to protect against noise from the new road for a more natural shape.

The overarching design of the landscape is one that works in tandem with the design of the house, seamlessly integrating it into the restored topography.

The main axis of the 3,500-square-foot house is aligned to the length of the river,

allowing for views as well as optimal solar orientation. Passive-solar design choices, including the thermal mass of the concrete floors, help moderate internal temperature; energy efficient windows, deep roof overhangs and a super-insulated envelope all reduce energy use.

Elevating interior climate control to a fine art, a sophisticated monitoring system includes numerous sensors, a weather station and an open-loop ground source heat pump, reducing the supplemental heating and cooling demand, and maintaining near-perfect humidity, temperature and air flow.

Guests at Stillwater arrive at the auto court, which consists of two two-car garages separated by a patio. Their procession through the house is punctuated by alternating views of the water and mountains, with clerestory windows that pop above the volumes to capture additional sunlight.

Visitors have the run of a 1,000-square-foot guest wing, complete with mud room, bunkhouse and additional bedroom, TV room, bathroom and laundry.

Exterior courtyard spaces are defined by shifting different functions of the house to each side of the main axis, providing multiple protected outdoor spaces for living and dining.

The exterior siding is wire-brushed beetle-kill pine. "It's a great product. I really like the look, and it has an agrarian feel," Riegsecker says.

Extending interior concrete floors

to exterior patios was one of several techniques used to blur the line between indoors and outdoors.

PBWA recently opened an office in the San Juan Islands to complement its Queen Anne and Winthrop, Wash., locations. It operates throughout the West.

Despite the wildfires, the craze for rural property continues unabated, says PBWA Principal Tom Lenchek.

"I thought we would see a complete collapse of our residential work, but that hasn't been the case," he says, adding that people are looking for big skies rather than big houses. "They don't want more space. They want space that is usable in many, many more ways."

This family home was selected by a panel of architects for the AIA Seattle Home of Distinction program due to its creatively changing the experience and views of this home toward a comprehensive design, all within the existing footprint. Dreaming about a home design project and not sure where to start? AIA architects can help. aia-seattle.org/askanarchitect

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