



Above and inset: A Wyoming house designed by Carney Architects and built by Rocky Mountain Log Homes

# Home Front

*Falling in love with a piece of the West is easy — then comes the fun part — building a home of your dreams*

By Elizabeth Clair Flood

AFTER WATCHING *The Horse Whisperer* three times, a New York literary agent traveled to Wyoming and fell in love with the place. During her first week, she discovered a mangy moose chomping on grass; she watched the sun set over the Grand Tetons and a grizzly bear cross a meadow in Yellowstone National Park. Then she spent two nights in a one-room Montana cabin, and she was convinced: she was moving west, business and all. With Don Edwards' *Cowboy Love Song* playing in the background, she set off to hunt for the perfect Western home.

This feverish response to the Rocky Mountain West is not unusual. Giddy with desire, people march into local real estate offices hourly. Some are looking for ranch property, others for a secluded sanctuary, still others a ski-in-ski-out chalet. But often, in their love-stricken state, it's difficult for newcomers to know exactly what to look for. Questions about how to find the right spot, what style of home to build, how many rooms to have, local building costs, and whether the lifestyle will suit their needs are overwhelming. A handful of re-

gional professionals, who specialize in helping find the answers, offer advice on Western properties and styles of homes.

While most architects start working with a client after the property has already been chosen, in the West it's not unusual to involve a local architect early on. Walking through properties with an architect can help clients visualize their dream, whether it's a log cabin in the woods, an adobe dug into a hillside, or a castle with trees and a stream running through it. Montana architect Candace Tillotson-Miller, who is also a rancher, says she has accompanied many people who are hunting for the perfect cattle property.

"They'll ask me to come take a look and then ask me where I would suggest putting a home. They'll ask me to pick out a few home sites," she says. "I look for trees to give vertical dimension to the house and the land." If there are no trees, she'll look for rocky outcroppings or a stream, both for aesthetic reasons. The water also allows the owner to plant trees. For one new rancher, understanding the positioning of the homesite in regards to the beauty of the



location helped him decide on one ranch after he had looked at over 70 sites over a span of 10 years.

In Santa Fe, New Mexico, hiring an architect early in the process is also wise. More than most towns, Santa Fe has an inordinate number of building codes. "Santa Fe is probably one of the few places that still has a strong regional style," says Jay Bush of Architects Santa Fe, and he adds, "That is one thing I love about it. When you're here, you know visually that you're in Santa Fe." An architect in this area will advise the newcomer that height restrictions make it virtually impossible to build a home on a ridge; that flat roofs are required in most areas, and that in historic districts, the size of windows, colors, and kinds of roofs are specified.

Comfortable living in Cody, Wyoming





This adobe home in Santa Fe, New Mexico, was designed and built by Jay Bush

Tim and Nancy Hild of Tandem, Inc., Telluride built this quintessentially Western home of local-quarried stone and wood in the Mountain Village at Telluride in Colorado

Square footage is another issue when choosing property. In Jackson Hole, Wyoming, homes cannot exceed 10,000 square feet, whereas in Sun Valley, Idaho, there are no restrictions on size (therefore, 30,000-sq.-ft. homes are common).

Cost of the home, of course, varies depending on size, site, and the extent of custom work. In Santa Fe, a 3,000-sq.-ft. home can cost \$165 per square foot; in Jackson Hole, up to \$400 a square foot; in Vail, Colorado, anywhere from \$325 to \$900 a square foot, and in Montana, approximately \$140-\$200 per square foot.

As architect James Morter of Vail says, there is "just not much of a norm for construction costs," because it's difficult to predict how a client's fantasy will play out. Some people want streams running through their living rooms, while others want enormous rock fireplaces or fossil stone in their showers, or stone cave rooms for their televisions, or 10 guest bedrooms. In one unusual vision, clients even wanted a solid concrete building resembling a bunker.

### In their love-stricken state, it's difficult for newcomers to know exactly what to look for

Once property has been selected, conversation between the client and architect invariably turns to style. For most, the challenge is to build something that is functional but in keeping with the area's regional traditions. In the Southwest, the adobe style predominates. The house may actually be made of traditional adobe bricks, or use wood frame and plaster to simulate adobe. Territorial style combines adobe and a pitched roof with more wood detailing on exteriors.

Bush suggests visiting as many adobe homes as possible to get a feel for the basic structure and the variations. Often, different types of woods are used throughout the construction, including old barnwood, cedar, mesquite, pine, or saguaro cactus. Recently, builders have been using recycled materials as alternative insulation for homes. Walls have been formed from old tires, aluminum cans, and hay bales.

Throughout Colorado, Wyoming, and

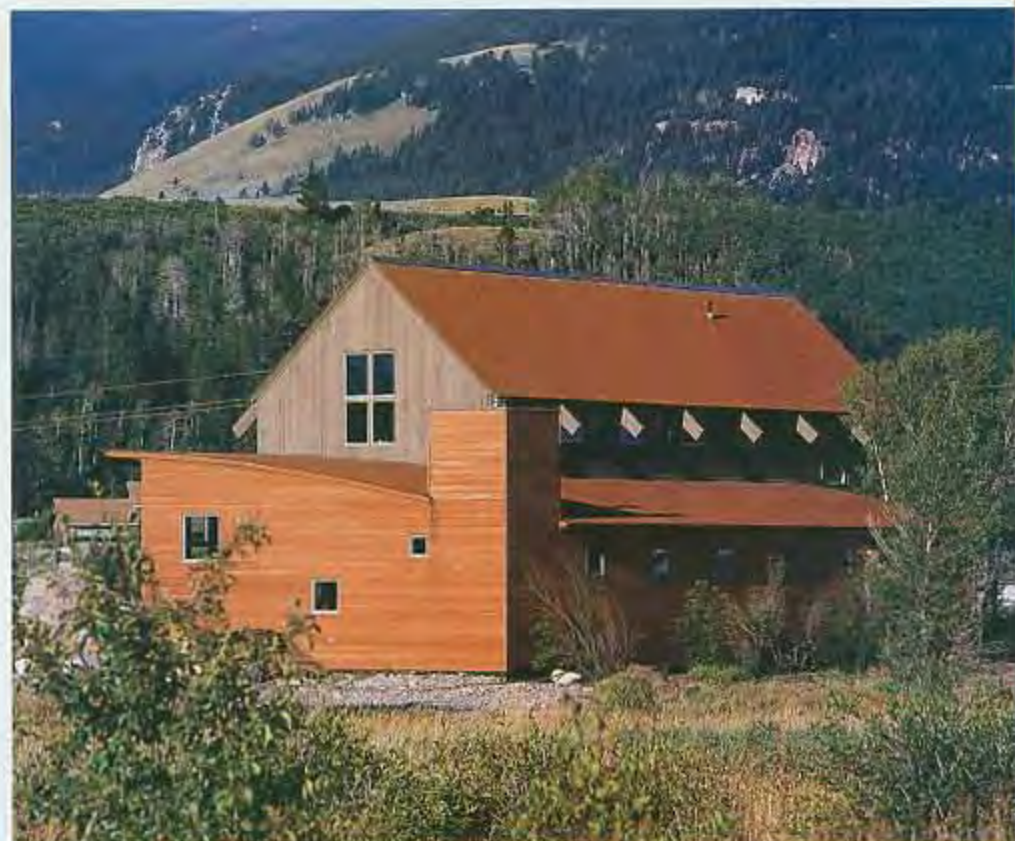
Montana, the log home is more common for historical reasons. But modern pioneers don't want to live in one-room trapper cabins, so the trend has been to build enormous lodges — what locals call "log cabins on steroids."

"The log cabin is getting bigger and fancier," says Jackson Hole architect Vince Lee, who has worked in Jackson since 1967. "The new homes are a far cry from the little historical cabin."

One of the reasons for a larger home is that owners want to be able to entertain friends and family in their rustic retreats.

"Our clients are people who have worked hard," says John Carney, who works with his wife Nancy and a full team at Carney Architects in Jackson. "They are planning to retire here and want to enjoy and share their wealth with friends and family." So, Western homes are now usually equipped with a "great room" for entertaining, numerous guest bedrooms, an exercise room, and media rooms which make doing business in the morning and fishing in the afternoon a viable schedule.

Log kits from Montana and Canada have been popular during the last two decades, because they offer log-home romance in a quickly assembled package. Within a year, a client can be installed in a cowboy chateau, along a stream, perched



on a mountain, or in a pine grove, surrounded by 10-to 12-inch-diameter logs and picture windows framing the scenery. More and more people these days, however, are seeking custom-style homes,

This studio and workshop designed by Stephen Dynia, architect in Jackson, Wyoming, is nestled in the colorful community of Kelly, Wyoming. With a steel and wood frame, a roof of corrugated steel, and a contemporary interior, it serves as a multiple-use space for a couple's office, workshop, and storage needs, as well as their hobbies. The architect calls the style "an inventive interpretation of indigenous forms" that suits both the function of the space and the personalities of the owners. The main house is a half mile away.

A view from a nearby ski slope of a log and stone home in the Colorado Rocky Mountains. James Morter Architects of Vail, Colorado



A Cody, Wyoming ranch: it's easy to fall in love with the West.

The formal living areas of this home are in a single vaulted space with a massive river rock fireplace as the traditional focus. James Morter Architects of Vail, Colorado

where all the building takes place on site.

Another trend is that architects are challenging the predictable log structure, creating more innovative spaces by varying material and rethinking traditional perceptions about space. Recently, architects have discovered that many clients still want a cabin feel but don't want "a clunky old log house" anymore.

"Trends and fads don't necessarily go away," says architect Bruce Hawtin, "but they do slow down." Because of the cost of log, the strain on a limited resource, and changing tastes, clients are asking for homes that utilize log in combination with other materials.

When Jackson, Wyoming, architect Stephen Dynia, who once worked with Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill, first meets with his clients, he tries to understand whether they want a purely nostalgic building or something more interpretive. His most recent work has been in the interpretive category. While he won't build a white spaceship style house in the middle of a



The screen porch in this Wyoming house designed by Carney Architects and built by Rocky Mountain Log Homes is perfect for reading a book, contemplating the mountains, or entertaining friends or family

People still love the look of log: an elegant log kitchen in Montana designed by Candace Tillotson-Miller, AIA, and built by Yellowstone Traditions, Gandy Peace Inc.

prairie, he will capture views with untraditionally large windows, use rusted metal roofs instead of shingles, and create modern living spaces on a second floor, allowing inhabitants to enjoy 360-degree views.

Dynia continues to use log accents. He has designed homes with log frameworks and walls made of stone or glass, as well as traditional framed walls. "The untouched natural element of log, the crookedness and the variety of it, still appeals to clients," Dynia says. But with modern walls, Dynia's clients can keep the costs down, vary the textures in their interior, and live in a better-insulated home.

Throughout conversations about style, a good architect will also insist on making practical decisions based on function. All Rocky Mountain homes must be able to withstand extreme

weather conditions. Roofs must be designed to handle snow loads, and in many cases, large windows must have glass that protects inhabitants from extreme ultraviolet rays. Screened-in porches deter mosquitoes in summer, and in the thick of winter, smaller rooms heat quicker and passive solar heat makes homes more comfortable. In the West, everyone needs a mud room with plenty of hooks and cubby holes.

Through choice of materials and arrangement of spaces, Carney believes he can impart the spirit of the region to his clients. When he designs a home, he respects wetlands, animal habitats, setbacks for streams, and elk migratory paths.

There is also a tendency for people to want to bring habits and customs from their former homes which they don't need. Wallace Stegner wrote in his book, *The American West as Living Space*, "Instead of adapting, as we began to do, we have tried to make a country and climate over to fit



## Getting Started

The best way to find an architect is through a recommendation from someone you trust. Sometimes real estate agents will have suggestions, and often, contractors are your best bet for information. The American Institute of Architects has listings of architects in specific areas, though not every registered architect is a member. For AIA information, access their web site: [www.aiaonline.com](http://www.aiaonline.com) or call (202) 626-7300.

our existing habits and desires." For example, air conditioning may not be necessary, and private helicopter pads may be inappropriate for the scale of the area. Introduced plants for landscaping may use precious water where native plants would be water-wise.

As more and more people crave a home out west, the land and the existing communities are challenged by their needs. As growth proceeds, 10,000-sq.-ft. homes dominate the mountaintops, outlet stores drive mom-and-pop operations out of business, and pressures mount on water supplies, forests, and recreation areas. The natural resources that made newcomers fall in love with the West begin to dwindle.

A few architects are trying to turn the tide. "We can help be a bridge for our clients," Carney says. "Through our designs we can impart the spirit of the place and help people adapt to and live in this environment in an appropriate way." The architect can also help the client realize



Adobe has its own special charm and ambiance: the Manns home in Santa Fe, New Mexico; designed by Jay Bush

his dream whether it is a log home next to a stream, an adobe in the cottonwood trees, or something more exotic. "When we walk around a property and admire the beauty of the place, that's the beginning," Carney says. "The execution of that dream is our responsibility. When the client's dreams are fulfilled, that's heady stuff."

Illustration by Dorothy Lamb

