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At Home in Big Sky Country

Natural elements and materials from old homesteads turn a Montana ranch into a rustic retreat



text by Jane Innes

photos by
Mark C. Darley/
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this page:

An old ranch hand's
cabin was transformed
into the spacious
main house.

In a small, verdant valley in southwestern Montana—a place rich in cottonwood trees and gushing streams—sits an unassuming ranch that first-time visitors might easily pass right by. Its one-story houses, made of recycled barn wood, are so discreet that they're practically invisible. Together, however, they add up to a multi-faceted home. "It's low-key and rustic," says one of the ranch's owners. "Everything's been done to keep the scale of it very modest."

That's exactly the point. As any self-respecting Montanan knows, it's best to build low to the

ground in this climatically challenged state, where frigid winters and scorching summers are the norm. "Building a McMansion doesn't work here," says designer Hilary Heminway, who did the interiors on this project. "Who wants to get up on a ladder 20 feet in the air and scrape fly dung from the windows in the summer heat?"

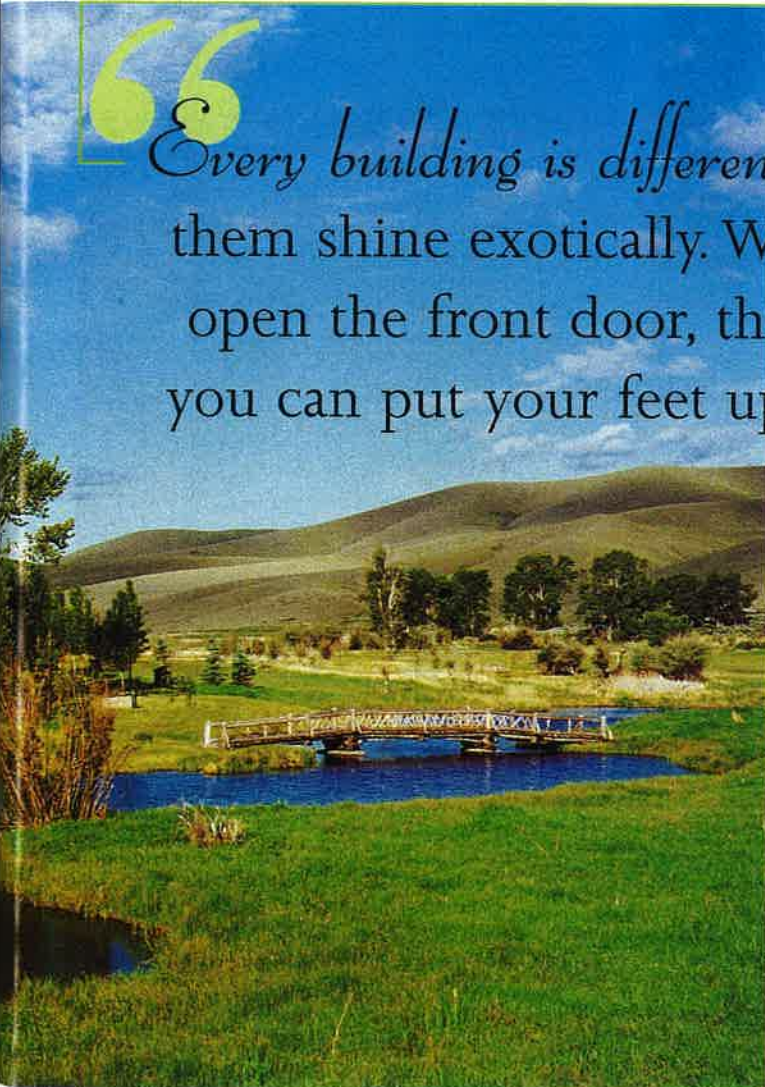
When the owners, who live in the Southeast but spend part of each year in Montana, first bought their acreage in this valley, they assumed they'd be building a hefty-size main house. In the meantime, they moved into a ranch hand's cabin on the property

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—Harry Howard

temporarily—or so they thought. "It was just going to be where they stayed for a year while they built the big house," recalls Heminway. But after a while that 1,800-square-foot structure, which comprised a living area, bedroom, kitchen, and dining area, began to feel like the right place to be. In the end, they decided to enlarge the humble cabin and abandoned the idea of building a new large house on the property.

Heminway, who's a part-time Montanan, was one of a close-knit





a torn pair of blue jeans are going to offend," Heminway says. Benches—to be used for shotgun loading and fly tying—can be found in almost every cabin, even in such unexpected places as the library. "Every single building has a rack for your fishing pole, shotgun, and boots," Howard adds.

These are down-to-earth houses, ones that don't put on airs. "Every building is different, and none of them shine exotically," says Howard. "They're solid, well-built, and well cared for. Ornamentation is kept to a minimum. Whenever you open the front door, there's a sense you can put your feet up anywhere."

Nothing could be more authentic than the materials used to build the structures. Many of them came from old homesteads, including the rusted metal roofing, known as blue galvanized, that's used for the main house. What Tillotson-Miller calls "the palette of materials" on these buildings is wonderfully weathered and subtle, including wood with the telltale gray patina that comes only with the

passing years. These materials may be old, but they're often used with a modern twist: The old barn wood used for the main house, for example, is reversed, so that the raw material faces the outside.

The love of venerable—and preferably local—materials informs the home's interiors, too. The team used old fir for the flooring and indigenous stone for chimneys and fireplaces. "We tried to make it seem as if this ranch complex had been here for years," Tillotson-Miller says. "It disappears into the landscape."

When it came to furnishings, designer Heminway, whose practice is based in Stonington, CT, was content to accumulate wonderful

pieces slowly, over time. "I like to find things that will grow with a house," she says. "I've come back quite a few times." Among the striking pieces that she's accumulated for this ranch are a wonderful old farm table by New West and a library table of hand-made burl wood by craftsman Ken Siggins of Cody, WY. New West also came up with the striking fringed "Montana chairs" found in the same room, as well as the unusual beds made of poles and leather that are in the other cabins.

One of the joys of this project was bringing land that had been "hard used," as one owner puts it, up to its full potential. Heminway, like her designing colleagues, gives the couple high marks for working within local traditions and, above all, respecting their land. "The thing I really appreciate about them is that they've been very sensitive and very caring about the privilege of owning such a beautiful piece of property and taking care of it and nurturing it and bringing it back to health," she says. [CONTINUED ON PAGE 89]

this page:

Furniture made of wood and leather adds to the rustic ambiance.

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One of the ways they did so was by adding water—lots of it. Joseph Urbani & Associates, a water development firm based in Bozeman, MT, added numerous water features. There seems to be a body of water nearby wherever you go on the property, beginning with the water flowing under a bridge at the entrance. Though they look timeless, most of the water elements are new. “We brought in ponds and streams to interact with the houses,” Howard says. “You’re never far from the sight of water.” One charming stream even separates the field house and library from the guest house and boys’ cabin, making the walk from one side to another an encounter with nature. And the water’s appeal is more than visual: Thanks to stocked fish, the valley has become a fisherman’s paradise, too.

Like nature, this project is always changing, always re-creating itself. Lately, the owners have begun contemplating building yet another new structure. “It’s a work in progress,” Heminway says. “I think that’s great. It gives everyone a chance to breathe, and it gives the house a chance to breathe and to grow with sensitivity.” As Howard puts it: “It’s been almost nine years, but we’re still dreaming up new stuff.” ■

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Resources:

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Candace Miller has been working in the architectural field since 1985 and in private practice since 1992. The rural landscape is the setting for most of her architectural projects, which range from cabins and lodges to complete ranch renovations.

Interior Designer:

Hilary Heminway,
Stonington, CT
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Contractor:

Yellowstone Traditions,
Bozeman, MT
406.587.0968

Furnishings:

New West,
Cody, WY
800.653.2391
www.newwest.com

Ken Siggins,
Triangle Z Ranch Furniture,
Cody, WY
307.587.3901

Water Development:

Joseph Urbani & Associates,
Bozeman, MT
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