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ARTICULATING THE WEST

MILLER-ROODELL ARCHITECTS

by AARON KAMPFE

DO WE DEFINE THE WEST OR DOES THE WEST DEFINE US? IS THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE WEST DETERMINED BY OUR WANTS, NEEDS, AND PERCEPTIONS, OR DO THE WEST'S LANDSCAPES, NATURAL RESOURCES, HISTORY, AND TOPOGRAPHY DETERMINE ITS ARCHITECTURAL FORMS?

PARADOXICALLY, BOTH.

SINCE ITS ORIGINS IN 1992, BOZEMAN-BASED MILLER-ROODELL ARCHITECTS HAS BEEN DEFINING WESTERN ARCHITECTURE WHILE, SIMULTANEOUSLY, ALLOWING THE WEST TO DEFINE ITS ARCHITECTURAL VERNACULAR. PRINCIPAL ARCHITECT AND PARTNER JOE ROODELL EXPLAINS THIS PARADOX, "CLIENTS OFTEN BOTH KNOW AND DON'T KNOW WHAT THEY WANT. OUR JOB AS A TEAM IS TO HELP THEM ARTICULATE WHAT THEY WANT AND EXPOSE TO THEM TO IDEAS THEY HAVEN'T THOUGHT OF. THEY CHOSE OUR FIRM NOT JUST TO DESIGN THEM A BUILDING, BUT TO GUIDE THEM THROUGH A COLLABORATIVE AND CREATIVE PROCESS."

DO YOU PICK THE LAND?
OR DOES THE LAND PICK YOU?

The draw of the West is its vast and varied landscapes. Within short distances, the topography and climate can vary greatly. A desert-like open prairie can be within a ten-minute Jeep ride of a dense alpine forest at the base of a snow-capped peak. One can ski, fly fish, and horseback ride all in the same day. Our homes are an extension of our Western experience that is tightly tied to its landscape.

Both Joe Roodell and partner Matt Miller grew up in rural communities in Montana and Wyoming. Coming from agricultural families that worked the land, Joe and Matt are both comfortable roaming open spaces in four-wheelers, driving a tractor, moving cattle on horseback, or casting a fly rod. The farming, ranching, and outdoor recreation of the West is in their DNA and is one of the building blocks of their architectural practice.

In Western movies, the male lead is often rough around the edges, unemotional, and stoic. The West has an association with "macho" men in tough landscapes. Contrastingly, Joe and Matt, men of the rural West, are warm, approachable, contemplative, and analytical. Their strengths as architects, businessmen, spouses, and fathers have been shaped and defined by the West—a West where humility, empathy, and thoughtfulness make up a special kind of "tough."

The ambiance of Miller-Roodell's office in Bozeman's cannery district reflects the authenticity of Joe and Matt—nothing snooty, pretentious, or trendy. The staff is dressed casually, nice enough to look professional but comfortable enough to head to a bike path or walking trail after work. A friendly dog might greet you. Throughout the office, tactile elements beckon—paneling from reclaimed wood, coffee table books on art and design, stone samples for a future retaining wall or fireplace, and textile swatches for upholstery—things that want to be touched, explored, and considered when designing a home.

With true Western roots and sensibilities, Miller-Roodell leads its clients and is also led by its clients. Matt Miller says, "When a client comes to us, they have fallen in love with the land—be it open ranchland, the shore of a river or lake, a lot along a ski slope, or a property nestled in the mountains—and they have fallen in love with the experience of being on that land. The land speaks to them and offers a physical and spiritual place that is grounding. Clients come to us to connect them to that land. This is both our greatest joy and greatest challenge of being architects. It is our process of articulation."

OPEN PRAIRIE IN THE ROCKIES:

A RANCH RETREAT ALONG THE BIG HOLE RIVER

Over the course of a year, the new owners of a ranch near Twin Bridges, Montana, camped in their Airstream trailer at multiple locations on the property. Before building their home, they wanted to experience the views, wildlife activity, and micro-climates at different potential building sites in all four seasons. When looking for strategic locations, they asked questions such as:

FROM WHERE AND WHEN
DOES THE WIND BLOW?



WHAT IS THE PATTERN
OF WILDLIFE MIGRATION?



WHERE ARE GOOD FISHING
ACCESS POINTS?



WHERE DOES THE SNOW ACCUMULATE?



FROM WHERE CAN I SEE THE RIVER
AND MOUNTAINS IN THE SAME FRAME?

For Miller-Roodell Architects, these on-the-ground, first-hand interactions with the land were a foundation for the process. Matt Miller says, “We went out to the ranch and were driving around on four-wheelers. The client stopped at a spot up on a bluff overlooking a double oxbow along the Big Hole River. We had that eureka moment. This is it!”

Although the ranch is surrounded in four directions by mountains, the topography has a wide-open prairie feel. Any of the ranch’s potential building sites are very exposed to the wind, intense sunlight, drifting snow, and extreme summer heat and winter cold. Rather than having the architecture fight these elements, the design needed to work with them.

The final design was a relatively modest home that feels like both a simple fishing cabin as well as a little house on the prairie. As a low-lying, single-story structure, the home minimized its exposure to the elements and blended into the landscape. Neutral tones in both the interior and exteriors mirrored the tones of the surrounding landscape that is brown and gray much of the year.



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—Matt Miller, Miller-Roodell Architects



Craig Taylor Construction, the home's Dillon, Montana-based contractor, used reclaimed lumber including boards from the ranch's own horse corral fences. With a tough environment outside, the house was made cozy with a protected porch and living room fireplace of native moss rock stone. The river below dictated the site orientation, placement of picture windows, positioning of porches, and landscape design.

As with many of her projects, Abby Hetherington of Abby Hetherington Interiors interweaves classic Western conventions with colorful, quirky accents. Her designs give a subtle nod to Hollywood Western film genre iconography, early 20th-century pop culture, and National Park memorabilia. Abby says, "If someone comes out West and wants to live in a bunkhouse, they don't need us. We're not creating dwellings of the past but we're creating homes that honor the past. In line with Miller-Roodell's approach, we design homes that are updated with today's amenities, conveniences, technology, and aesthetics. These homes may reference a bunkhouse... or a homesteader's cabin, fishing lodge, or little house on the prairie... but ultimately folks seek something that looks beautiful, and is timeless, warm, and regionally authentic while still being contemporary and comfortable."



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—Abby Hetherington, Abby Hetherington Interiors



ALPINE CANYON

A BRIDGER CANYON
FAMILY GATHERING SPOT

A Texas couple with a young family sought a multi-generational mountain home—a place where the family would want to gather for years to come. After much searching, they selected a property in Bridger Canyon, not just for its natural beauty but also for its convenient location within minutes of Bridger Bowl for alpine skiing, trout streams for fly fishing, trailheads with a wide variety of hiking options, the well-serviced Yellowstone/Bozeman airport, and Bozeman's vibrant downtown.

The couple initially built a guest cabin near a pond at a lower elevation on the property. The guest house has a classic Western feel—earthy and rustic—made with reclaimed timbers and native stone. The main house took elements of the cabin but gave it an updated look. The result was a contemporary-traditional hybrid.

The house's roof pitch creates a clean, sloping line. At a 12 to 1 pitch, it opens the house on the eastern side where the kitchen and dining areas are. With expansive floor-to-ceiling windows, the open plan kitchen/dining/living room radiates with morning light. The reclaimed ceiling boards seamlessly extend from the interior through the walls to the exterior overhang that wraps around the decks.

At times, a challenge for the builder, Bolton Custom Homes, was simply getting supplies to the site as the access was a steep gravel road. Company owner Cass Bolton says, "My crew built most of the major components of the house, including the concrete, framing, window installation, and finishes... and, during that particularly snowy winter, we did a lot of snow removal just to get up to the site. This was not always the best use of these talented craftsmen's time, but necessary to get the job done. I do appreciate my crew and their 'get-er-done' attitude."

"SINCE WE WERE YOUNG GUYS, JOE RODELL AND I HAVE WORKED TOGETHER ON MANY PROJECTS OVER THE YEARS. WE'LL GET TOGETHER FOR BEERS AND JUST ENJOY TALKING SHOP—ARCHITECTURE AND CONSTRUCTION. FROM THESE CASUAL CONVERSATIONS, IDEAS GET BRAINSTORMED AND DISCUSSED. THE PROCESS IS INFORMAL AND ORGANIC AND LEADS TO A BETTER PRODUCT WITH CLEARER, MORE HONEST COMMUNICATION."

—Cass Bolton,
Bolton Custom Homes

Cass continues, “Since we were young guys, Joe Roodell and I have worked together on many projects over the years. We’ll get together for beers and just enjoy talking shop—architecture and construction. From these casual conversations, ideas get brainstormed and discussed. The process is informal and organic and leads to a better product with clearer, more honest communication.”

To reduce clutter in the kitchen, Miller-Roodell designed a large pantry right off the main cooking area that functions as a second kitchen. Like in anyone’s home, family and guests gather in the kitchen while meals are being prepared but, in this home, much of the staging of the food preparation, item storage, and clean-up is done out of the way in this ‘butler’ pantry/kitchen.

Michael McGee and his crew members from Integrity Builders built the kitchen cabinetry and the steel and glass display shelving that forms an archway to the pantry/kitchen. The wood in the kitchen cabinets is French Oak harvested from a forest in France that has been sustainably managed for hundreds of years. Michael says, “Whether it is a bigger-picture design concept like a kitchen extension or a detail like the type of wood used in the cabinets, Miller-Roodell is open to all ideas. During construction they are responsive and appreciative of what our craftsmen create. They present concepts to the team, talk through the possibilities, and listen to our feedback. Ultimately, the designs that are put on paper must be executed and they trust us to give them input about what can and can’t be done construction-wise.”



“WHETHER IT IS A BIGGER-PICTURE DESIGN CONCEPT LIKE A KITCHEN EXTENSION OR A DETAIL LIKE THE TYPE OF WOOD USED IN THE CABINETS, MILLER-ROODELL IS OPEN TO ALL IDEAS.”

—Michael McGee, Integrity Builders



HIGH DESERT: A TWO-FAMILY RANCH IN CENTRAL UTAH

The high-desert environment radiates a color palette based in hues of reds, browns, and greens. The reds are of the high-desert rock formations that are exposed along the cliffs, mesas, and plateaus that define the landscape throughout the Southwest. The browns are of the soils, downed timber, and low-lying brush. The greens are of the rangelands and coniferous trees.

The seasonal extremes can paint the landscape with a coat of white during the winter, large swatches of green during the verdant spring, radiating reds during the dry summers, and patches of yellow, orange, and brown as the deciduous trees change color in the autumn. In any season, the open, clear blue sky is the landscape's canopy. Color palettes in nature are worthy of re-creating in architecture.

The remote, high-desert landscape attracted two Texan business partners to a ranch in central Utah. Best friends, they shared an interest in hunting, fishing, and ranching, and envisioned a compound where each of their families would have their own home as well as shared spaces to gather their families and ranch community together.

From the project's inception, Miller-Roodell worked with other Bozeman-based professionals—general contractor North Fork Builders, landscape architect Charlie Kees (principal and founder of Field Studio Landscape Architects), and Haven Interior Design. Over an hour's drive by gravel road from the nearest airport, the ranch's location was both a challenge to access as well as an inspiration. When the team needed to gather onsite, the most economical transportation was taking a jet to bring 8 to 10 members of the team from Bozeman to an airfield in remote Utah.

Jon Evans, CEO and Founding Partner of North Fork Builders, reflects on the process, "From the initial scouting of building sites, the environment influenced our decision making. As is the typical approach for a Miller-Roodell project, we weren't looking for a hill to build a castle, but for a compound that was built into the land, something modest and subdued but finely crafted. We identified a creek on the property and homesite locations where the owners could see and hear the water flow."

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Working closely with Miller-Roodell Architects, Haven Interior Design shared the firm's appreciation for the regional environment and paid careful attention to the clients' requests and sensibilities. Debra Shull, co-partner at Haven, says, "When the team would fly into the area, we'd get to see the landscape from 20,000 feet. This high-desert terrain would influence everyone's decisions—the architects, builders, landscape architects, and us, the interior designers. We'd experience the color palette of the landscape from the air, then from a truck as we drove to the ranch, and finally on foot as we walked the property."

Phoebe McEldowney, co-partner at Haven, says, "One of the clients wanted a classic rustic cabin—wood walls and floors, casual and comfortable. The other client wanted a rustic cabin but cleaner, more refined. Their desires were as different as their personalities. Like in any of our projects, the design took cues from the landscape. What happens outside with the natural landscape, seasons, and light is translated inside. At first their wives weren't overly interested in the ranch as it initially was a man camp and hunting outpost in the middle of nowhere; however, as the design evolved and the houses started to look and feel as beautiful as the landscape, they were excited to be a part of the creative process." ■

ON MILLER-ROODELL'S WEBSITE A QUESTION IS ASKED, "OLD TRUCKS. GRAVEL ROADS. A FIELD OF WHEAT. WHAT DOES THAT HAVE TO DO WITH ARCHITECTURE?"

RESPONDING TO THAT QUESTION, JOE AND MATT WILL ARTICULATE, "EVERYTHING."
