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ENDURING
design

Since pushing architectural
boundaries 10 years ago,
this Vail home endures

FALL 2009

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Concrete treads follow a compound radius along a stone wall in this Vail home.

a timeless home

SINCE PUSHING ARCHITECTURAL BOUNDARIES 10 YEARS AGO, THIS VAIL HOME ENDURES

BY KIMBERLY NICOLETTI



A clean, contemporary design makes this master bathroom a classic.

PHOTO BY TIM MURPHY

After working as an architect in Vail for almost a decade, Jack Snow decided to turn down “regular jobs” in pursuit of his true passion: Designing homes outside the usual spectrum.

It was just around that time, in 1997, that a Vail couple (who wishes to remain anonymous) approached Snow. They had lived in their West Vail neighborhood since 1980, and they had watched the same type of mountain homes pop up. What they saw: well-constructed, highly embellished, “very nice boxes,” designed in a “narrow color range.”

“We wanted something to stand the test of time in materials and look. We didn’t want it to be pigeonholed as built within a specific five-year period,” the Vail homeowner says, adding that he can pinpoint, within five years, when most Vail Valley homes are built, because they tend to follow similar architectural trends. Of course, the couple also didn’t want “something so outlandish that it’d be notorious and cause an uprising in the neighbors.”

The homeowners came to Snow with two main floor plan requirements — room for a two-car garage and an office. They also were interested in incorporating metal, especially after they saw a home at the top of their street use steel siding.

Snow impressed them; they saw his fearlessness when it came to architecture. They knew his courage led him to build a custom home where almost no man had

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built before: at the bottom of an avalanche run-out. Rather than seeing the problem, he looked for the solution. Part of his solution entailed digging a pond as a catch basin in-between the home and the run-out, as well as finding 18-inch windowpanes, used in commercial aquariums. “He was starting from a new spot (of thinking) and embracing technology as it became available,” the Vail homeowner says.

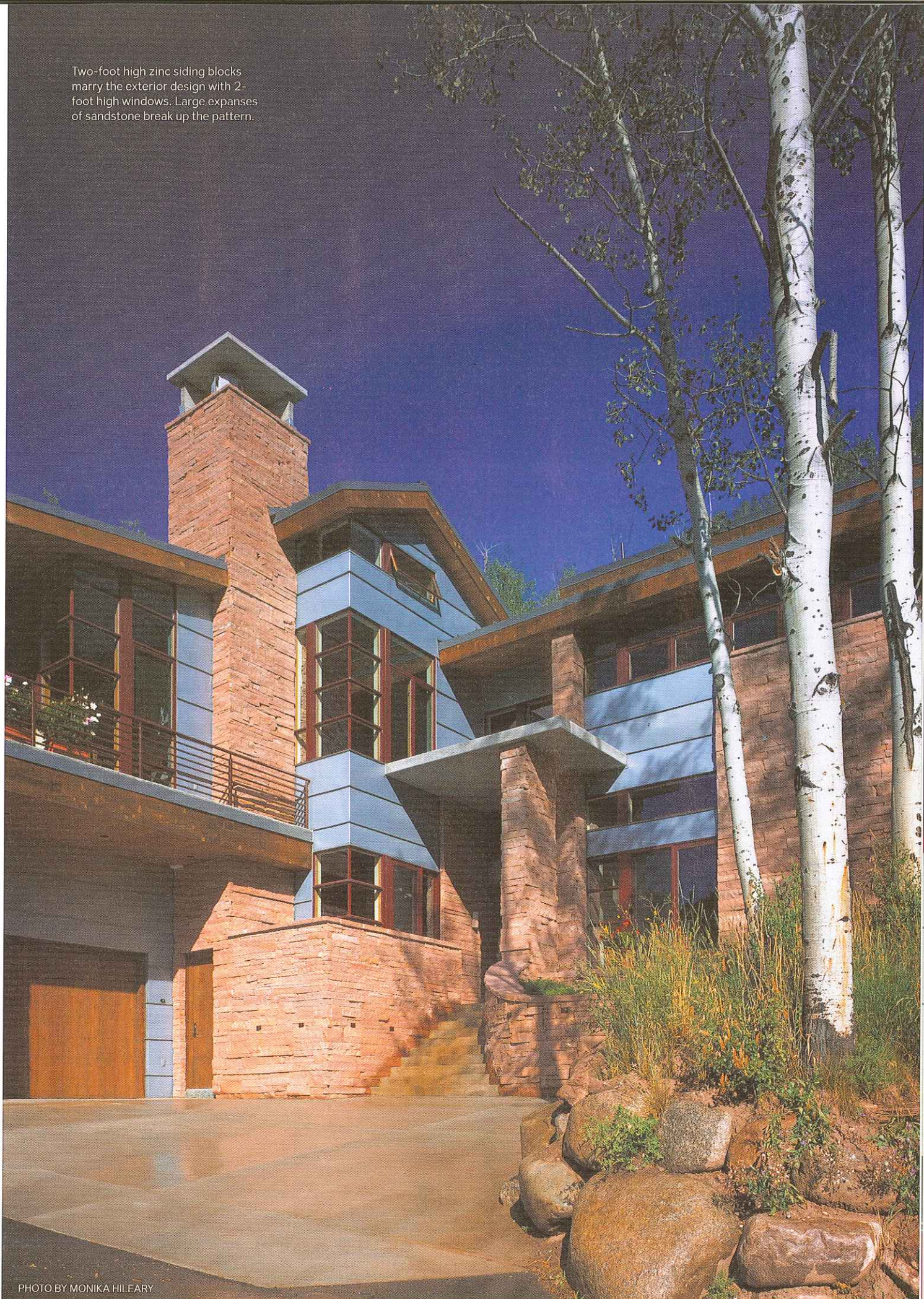
And, even when proper technology wasn’t available, it didn’t detour Snow. In 1998, during construction of this particular Vail home, three-dimensional architectural software wasn’t available. Snow held firm to his belief that if you have to build a staircase,



PHOTO BY TIM MURPHY

The expansive use of windows makes this 2,965-square-foot Vail home look and feel larger than it is.

Two-foot high zinc siding blocks marry the exterior design with 2-foot high windows. Large expanses of sandstone break up the pattern.



RIGHT: The compound radius of this wall posed a challenge for architect Jack Snow, but he had faith he could make the spiral staircase, which takes homeowners up to this dining room landing, work.

BELOW: Snow carried the concrete slab, designed to shelter people as they walked out the back door from the kitchen, to extend into the home's interior (shown above the door) in order to create continuity between the exterior and interior.



PHOTO BY TIM MURPHY



PHOTO BY TIM MURPHY

“make it a big deal visually.” So, he drew a beautifully arched staircase into the blueprint. As he drew it, he knew he was designing a compound curve, rather than a simple arched radius. Three-dimensional modeling would have allowed him to figure out if the treads needed to be wider or narrower with a few computer clicks, but without such technology, he had to take a more trial-and-error approach. Still, he had faith he could make the staircase work elegantly. “In projects like this, there’s a lot of the unknown,” the homeowner says. “In standard houses, (builders and architects) do it the way they did the last house.”

For the exterior, Snow had to search suppliers to match window-height dimensions to the house’s zinc siding dimensions. He eventually found matches in the 2-foot dimension. As a result, the L-shaped home features four or five windows vertically stacked, next to matching zinc siding. Large expanses of sandstone break up the patterned rectangles.

Art, inside and out

Snow’s signature style includes blending exteriors with interiors, rather than relying on an interior designer to work magic.

The indigenous slabs of stacked red sandstone accent the home’s exterior and interior walls. Zinc siding appears inside, on the side of the living room’s stone fireplace. Snow carried things like a concrete slab, employed over the back door to shelter people from the elements

as they walk out, inside, so that about two-thirds of the slab graces the kitchen. Concrete countertops in the kitchen complement the slab, and zinc strips in the wooden cabinets — and interior doors throughout the home — match the exterior siding.

The 2,965-square-foot home, which is built into a steep mountainside, looks and feels much larger than it is, because the structure is tall, and an abundant amount of windows give it an airy feeling.

One thing allowing the home to remain timeless is the fact that Snow and the homeowners sought out products and materials (such as concrete countertops and zinc siding) unavailable in the mountains at the time. The homeowners first learned how to discover the latest home building innovations years prior, when they scoured Denver suppliers to find “stuff that typical folks wouldn’t know about,” in order to customize a downtown loft they purchased. “We learned how to kind of get a lot of bang for what wasn’t a whole lot of bucks at the time,” the Vail homeowner says.

That’s also when he learned that working with an architect — especially one who loved pushing the envelope — pays off. “It doesn’t have to be more expensive to go this way,” he says. “Sometimes, it takes a little more brainwork or hair-pulling to figure it out, but it can be less expensive — part of it is the inside-outside (philosophy). You have most of the inside figured out, and there’s a lot of material flow through.”

The homeowners haven’t had to spend enormous amounts of money on artwork and furniture, because windows take the place of blank walls, and furnishings are sparse, which permits the design of the home to stand out. “The house is art,” Snow says.

Indeed, the home has inspired neighbors to break the mold of building in Vail Valley’s traditional mountain style, the homeowner says, adding that he sees the architectural world turning to more contemporary styles.

But Snow worries that mountain contemporary will fall into a rut by becoming distilled into a general style. “(Most) people aren’t even aware that there’s a whole world of architecture out there that they’re being shut out of,” Snow says. “I hope I’m not mountain contemporary — that each project is distinct enough, that they all share some DNA, but they’re (still unique).”

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