



Minimalism Meets the Mountains

Take a deep breath and say, "Ahhh. . ." >>>

BY SAMANTHA TISDEL WRIGHT
PHOTOS BY DAVID O. MARLOW

Aspen architect Lea Sisson has designed a lot of houses in Mountain Village over the years. To get to one of her very favorites, you have to take a grand tour all the way through the "village."

Past the turnoff to Adams Ranch Road. Past the gate and the guard house. Past Market Plaza and Town Hall Plaza and Conference Center Plaza and The Peaks Resort and Spa. Past employee housing and countless condos and outsized mountain cabins, some up to 12,000 square feet in size. Past shops, restaurants, bars, business offices and tantalizing glimpses of ski slopes and mountains that rise beyond, still covered in late-winter snow.

As beautiful as it all is, the sheer mass and scale of Mountain Village and all its assets can get to feeling a bit much by the time you finally arrive at the very end of Country Club Drive.

Then you see the house, and you feel



The inviting great room is rimmed with a bank of floor-to-ceiling glass doors with stellar views of the ski area and the mountains.

like taking a deep, cleansing breath and saying, "Ahhhhhh."

At 5,000 square feet, it's on the small side for a Mountain Village abode, and does not assert itself in a "look at me" sort of way. Yet even at first glance, the home has a certain, subtle, sexy curb appeal, with its thin roof line and elegant cantilevered deck and living space reaching over a dramatic slope that falls steeply away to Big Billy's and The Meadows ski trail down below.

MIAMI MODERN

The home's owners are from Miami, and wanted a modern, "warm minimalist" house that joined the landscape, with a seamless interface between the indoors and outdoors.

Sisson was happy to comply. She lived in Telluride for 11 years and raised her two kids here before making the move to Aspen. She still has a lot of connections in the area, and a lot of affection for the Telluride/ Mountain Village community.

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"I always have two or three projects going on here," she said.

The project owners showed Sisson some pictures of a house in Japan that they liked, "with a 60-foot to 80-foot cantilever off a mountainside with one post holding it up, and all glass, and a really thin roof," Sisson recalled. "And I said, 'Okay, we're in Mountain Village now. It's a little different here. But I can capture the essence of what you are after.'"

Sisson leaned into her design, which took into consideration mountain views, the sweep and curve of the land, and how sunlight and wind would interact with the structure and its inhabitants. She then worked closely with the homeowners to integrate their ideas with her own vision.

"We talked about color, texture, materials, and how they wanted to feel, and flow through the space," Sisson recalled.

The design she ended up with was on the cutting edge of a new generation of Mountain Village architecture. "We were definitely the first to do something this modern," Sisson said. "The Design Review Board still looks at it like, 'Are you sure we approved that?'"

In fact, the DRB didn't approve the entire design, as Sisson originally envisioned it. Her clients wanted a flat roof, which wasn't allowed at that time according to Mountain Village's design guidelines. So she proposed a hipped roof instead. The DRB nixed that idea as well, insisting on a more traditional, gabled roof.

Sisson was still able to achieve the illusion of a very thin, linear roofline all the way around the building by running part of the deck roof underneath the gable.

A PRIMER IN SIMPLICITY

The house was built by Rod Kukulan of Alpine Mountain Construction, and completed in the late spring of 2017.

Its owners are thrilled with how it all turned turned out.

"Our home is easy to live in without compromising on style or aesthetics," one of them said. "It is super efficient, flows beautifully, has great views and receives lots of natural light, making for a happy and invigorating environment."

The first thing you notice when you walk inside is not really the house at all. It is a view of Palmyra Peak, perfectly framed within a long, narrow two-story window in the rock-and-wood stairwell that cleaves the two wings of the house like a slot canyon.

"That's kind of my hallmark," Sisson said. "There is always one mountain that my clients gravitate toward. If it works out in the design — and it certainly did



Sisson enhanced the feeling of "warm minimalism" throughout the house by choosing natural building materials like stone and wood that resonate with the human energy field.

here — I can aim the house exactly to spotlight their favorite mountain."

Another one of Sisson's hallmarks is bringing outside materials in. "It helps with the consistency of the overall design," she said. "The idea is, when you walk on the site, the client has the experience of that expansiveness — the site, the view, the sun, the wind. What I try to capture is that sense of openness and connectedness to the site within the building. Materials and light and view and access."

Carefully selected materials, in a serene palette of earth tones, are repeated as if in a mantra throughout the structure, both inside and out — stone, wood, glass, steel, ceramic tile, melamine. There is hardly any drywall.



"Drywall is a cementitious material that doesn't resonate with our energy field(s) as well as wood or rock does," Sisson explained.

Windows naturally illuminate the entire house. "That's another component to most of my designs," Sisson said. "Daylight keeps us from turning on the lights which keeps us from using energy."

Although she doesn't strictly adhere to LEED standards, building "green" is always on Sisson's mind, and she is constantly looking for ways to use the "freebies" that a building site has to offer. "If you don't site it correctly and if you don't use the elements that are here naturally, then you kind of miss the point," she said.

The most obvious "freebie" that this site had to offer was its southern exposure, a rare find in a ski resort area where most lots face to the north. "So, we were able to use the sun," Sisson said.

Another "gimme" was the mountain breeze that sweeps across the valley and through the house in the summertime, keeping things cool and bug-free.

The inviting great room is ceilinged with cedar siding and rimmed with a bank of floor-to-ceiling glass doors that open to a wraparound deck with an overhanging roof. The entire room cantilevers out over the hillside, providing an island of privacy with open views that converse strictly with mountains and sky — not neighbors.

In the early stages of the design process, Sisson created a 3D model of the house, and tested it out in a computer program to determine what the exact dimensions of the overhanging deck roof should be. The idea was for the roof to act as a solar shade in summer, while still allowing light (and warmth) into the house during the colder winter months, when the sun hangs lower in the sky.

A lot of architects prefer to stick to the "shell and core" of the building they are designing, but Sisson enjoys working with her clients to do a lot of the interior design work, as well.

"I create built-ins, headboard features, all the cabinetry, interior finishes, and really dial those things in that relate to the architecture, so there is not one look on the outside and another look completely when you walk inside," she said.

The architect also pays close attention to a room's proportions. For example, she takes care that the space isn't taller

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Below: **Palmyra Peak is perfectly framed within a long, narrow two-story window in the rock-and-wood stairwell that cleaves the two wings of the house like a slot canyon.**



than its width. This gives the room more of a human scale. She also brings doorways up to the level of ceilings, which creates a sensation of openness.

Reached via a grated steel footbridge that spans the stairwell, the master bedroom is spare, tranquil, and almost temple-like. Its well-appointed bathroom features a Japanese soaking tub





Left: **Clean lines rendered in steel and glass enhance the guest bathroom.**

nestled beside a window with views of Palmyra Peak.

Downstairs, there is a guest bedroom with a built-in headboard that wraps all the way up the wall and over the bed like a wooden canopy; a cozy bunk room that can accommodate as many as six additional guests; a rec room and entertainment center with a built-in bar and a minimalist pool table; and a spare home office cantilevered over the hillside like a ship captain's cabin, with such gorgeous views that it must be hard to get anything done in there except watch the weather.

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kitchen island basks in the space like a steel-gray shark, while the countertop behind it becomes the backsplash, which becomes the shelf. It is a motif that repeats itself in other parts of the house.

Everything looks clean, and deceptively simple.

"It takes a lot of work to make it look so simple," Sisson said with a laugh.

LINEAGE MATTERS

As an architecture student in Miami in the late 1980s and early 1990s under the tutelage of Andres Duany and Elisabeth Plater-Zyberk, Sisson was exposed to the ideas of the Congress for New Urbanism, a planning and development approach that focuses on human-scaled urban design.

"Eventually, it became very Disney-esque," Sisson said. "And it's certainly not something I practice today. But it teaches contextualism."

Today, she's more compelled by the study of neuroscience in architecture. She attends the Academy of Neuroscience for Architecture's biennial conference in San Diego, and is fascinated by recent studies



that utilize the FMRI machine to visualize brain activity in order to test concepts that seem intuitive to a lot of architects, such as how a structure's shape, dimensions and materials impact the way we feel and behave inside of it.

The blending of architecture and neuroscience "makes so much sense," Sisson said. "We are responsible for people's health and well-being. We need to know if we are doing it wrong, right? And so do developers."

"It's not about the look that a mountain house should have. It's about being in the mountains. That's what is showcased in this house."





Below: Lea Sisson.
(Photo by Michelle Cardamone)

Sisson's work is also deeply influenced by her mentor Mickey Muennig, a pioneer of California's organic architecture movement who made his name in the rugged Big Sur area. Muennig, in turn, studied under Bruce Gough, the father of the Energy Star Program in Canada and a protégé of Frank Lloyd Wright.

Sisson doesn't really dwell on her architectural lineage and its direct connection to America's most legendary architect.

"He had his time and people look at that as the past," she said. "But his ideas still provide a way to really tie in the minimalist concept: let's make it really functional, incredibly functional. Let's make it look like it's rising out of the ground. Let's make sure it's facing the right direction for natural light and heat, but without all the woodwork and the organic look that people are sometimes put off by. When it's done like this, it becomes of today."

THE PUREST WAY



The well-appointed master bathroom features a Japanese soaking tub nestled beside a window with views of Palmyra Peak.

While Sisson has pushed the boundaries of the more traditional Mountain Village architectural aesthetic, she has also earned respect and admiration for her vision.

Recently, the Design Review Board reworked its standards to allow for more modern building elements, flat roofs and all.

Minimalism has its place in the mountains, Sisson insists. This house proves her point.

"Heidegger, one of my favorite philosophers, always talked about not seeing art or having art, but being art," she said. "And I think this captures the idea of being in the mountains, as opposed to being in a house in the mountains. It takes away the house part."

She perches on a stool at the steel-gray kitchen island, in the center of the home she designed, and considers the steel-gray clouds that fill the windows and the sky.

"I think to me, it's the purest way to experience the mountains," she reflected. "It's not about the look that a mountain house should have. It's about being in the mountains. That's what is showcased in this house."