

# BIG SKY JOURNAL HOME

Mountain Living and Architectural Design



# FEELS LIKE HOME

Old West meets New West at the  
Rock Creek Cattle Company

WRITTEN BY MELISSA MYLCHREEST

PHOTOGRAPHY BY HEIDI LONG



A small herd of what look to be Texas longhorns eye my truck as I drive by their pasture and climb a rise, the dirt road snaking up into the foothills. The cattle look right at home here, with scrubby grassland spreading in all directions and fencelines bisecting the terrain. And well they should; this landscape has been a working ranch for more than 150 years. Today, on nearly 80,000 acres of owned and leased land, the Rock Creek Cattle Company continues that legacy by combining luxury living with the still-extant ranch operation.

Leaving the cattle behind, I look up the hill, scanning for my destination: A 5,000-square-foot, recently built home. In such a wide-open landscape, I expect the house to be obvious. The fact that it takes me a moment to spot it is a testament to both the design-savvy of the architects, and the ability of the general contractor to carry out the project flawlessly. "CTA [the architect] did an amazing job," says Paul McElroy, the general contractor for the project and owner of Montana Build. "They made sure this home wasn't a scar on the landscape."

Nestled in a fold of the hill, the home is anything but ostentatious. One level, with dark wood siding, a stone foundation, and a mix of cedar-shake and tin roofing, the influence of the area's historical architecture is apparent. And yet, there is a distinctly modern feel, with clean lines and an elongated footprint. The design is rustic yet refined.

Inside, the modern influence becomes even more apparent. Unlike the many Montana luxury homes that rely on dark, heavy architecture as a way to reference Western traditions, this home opts to lean in



**Opposite page:** Nestled into the hillside, the home makes use of rustic materials — cedar shakes, tin roofing, stone — but composes them with a Modern hand. The result is elegant, yet comfortable. The home blends into the landscape well, a feel augmented by native plantings. **Above:** In the dining room, the designers took their color cues from the outdoor panoramic. The palette throughout is soft and subdued, a play of subtle hues.

**The fun challenge, Riker says, was to “design a house that has a Western vibe, but without all of those trappings.”**

a different direction. “The owners’ big goal with the house was not to be cliché Western,” says Thomas Riker of jamesthomas design. “They wanted it to be much brighter, more cheerful, no heavy wood, no antler chandeliers.” And yet, they wanted to maintain a strong connection to the landscape and heritage. “They didn’t want a contemporary house either though, they wanted it to be appropriate for the setting,” Riker continues. The fun challenge, he says, was to “design a house that has a Western vibe, but without all of those trappings.”

Between the architect, designers and builder, the challenge was met. “The interior of the home is a blending of styles,” says Jesse Vigil, an architect with CTA. “It melds clean line design and finishes with rustic materials and structure.” The dance between the two — rustic and modern — is just right. A striking off-white kitchen pairs well with the fir floors. Built-in benches and window seats display modern design, but are paneled with naturally finished lumber. A sleek glass hallway leads to a comfortable card room showcasing leather accents and distressed wood cabinets. The spare, clean lines of the trim and wainscoting are elevated by the addition of stone tile and Flatwillow rock veneer, harvested in Montana.

The attention to detail in the layout gives the home a cozy feel. “Some houses this size have these giant rooms, and they echo when you walk into them. Not this home,” says McElroy. “This has a real sense of livability.” A reading nook separates the master suite from the rest of the house, offering seclusion and quiet. Booth-style seating in the kitchen is welcoming and unpretentious. A sunken bar off of the great room allows guests to sit and look out to the 180-degree panorama over the head of the bartender, yet the feeling remains intimate and grounded.

A timberframe home, the residence balances the weight and heft of exposed beams with tremendous floor-to-ceiling windows throughout. The effect of so much glass is two-fold—not only is the home bathed in light, but visitors are

**Right:** The attention to detail makes this home truly sparkle: Carefully selected fine art by Montana artists, a palette inspired by the surrounding landscape, and furnishings that are at once refined and welcoming.







**Clockwise from above:** Throughout the home, timberframe construction is paired with elements of contemporary design. • Eschewing the typical dark wood kitchens found in many Montana vacation homes, the designers chose light colors and tile, reminiscent of an East Coast cottage. • A sunken bar affords guests a 180-degree view of the Pintler Range, as well as the Tom Doak-designed golf course.

also treated to incomparable views, layered into the distance: the home's 2,000-square-foot patio and outdoor living space in the foreground, the Rock Creek Cattle Company's Tom Doak-designed golf course at a short distance, and towering above it all, the peaks of the Pintler Range.

It is from this setting that the designers took their color cues. The palate throughout is soft and subdued, a play of subtle hues. "The views are so spectacular," says Riker. "And it's scrubby, open land, so we used lots of rusts and greens and golds and blues. The land, the sky."

It's in these tasteful and attentive design choices that this home really shines, and where the collaboration between architect and design team becomes apparent. "When we got involved, it was still in the plan stages," says Riker. "We were responsible for selecting all the finishes, the flooring, the bathroom tiles, the lighting plan, the kitchen. We were heavily involved from day one, which was great." Vigil agrees that the home was a success because of the early and ongoing involvement of the entire team: "Having the architect and structural engineer working together throughout the design phase are

key. We practice integrated design, and feel it is important to have all the design professionals, including the contractor, involved early in the project."

A hands-off client allowed the design team the freedom to conceptualize and create the home largely out of their own vision. Because the owners had worked with Riker and his partner, James Dolenc, previously on different homes, they trusted them enough to turn over the reigns completely. Based on their ongoing relationship, the designers understood the family's tastes and aesthetic, and detailed the house accordingly.

Although jamesthomas design is based in Chicago, they have designed several homes in the West. "For some reason, the West seems important to us," says Riker. "We're called to it." Having spent considerable time in Montana, the design team was able to draw on both their urban background and the more rugged vernacular of the West. Of this home, Riker says, "We went for sort of an East Coast, modern cottage vibe, then paired that with things like oil-rubbed bronze light fixtures, which are a little more rustic, but almost an urban industrial twist. We get the Western vibe and sensibility, but because

## NORSEMAN DESIGNS WEST

Makers of Fine and Rustic Western Furniture

*John* **Gallis**  
NORSEMAN DESIGNS WEST



*"You don't see us  
everywhere, and that's just  
the way we like it!"*

### Full Design Service Available

■ Private Residence ■ Ranch ■ Mountain Home ■ Corporate or Resort

3532 Cottonwood Avenue • Cody, Wyoming 82414 • 307.587.7777  
[www.norsemandesignswest.com](http://www.norsemandesignswest.com)

## Having spent considerable time in Montana, the design team was able to draw on both their urban background and the more rugged vernacular of the West.

we're in Chicago, we can bring another entirely different perspective to interior design."

One of the most striking aspects of the home is the integral role fine art plays in the overall design. So often the addition of art feels like an afterthought, but here, the pieces feel organic and essential. "We worked with a fantastic gallery in Missoula, The Dana," says Riker, "and they were such a huge resource for us. Almost all the art was purchased there." The art is what gives the home a distinctly Western feel; huge black and white photographs of horses and fences pay homage to the region's ranching heritage through a modern lens, as do contemporary paintings of American Indians, cowboys, and the landscape. Sculptural elements in metal and wood draw inspiration from the natural surroundings.

Built on a tight timeframe and constructed during the

harsh Montana winter, the home was a challenge and a pleasure for the entire team. And everyone involved shares the same success story about the conclusion of the project: the owner, whom most of them had never met in person, arrived to see the fully finished, fully stocked house, complete with soap in the showers, sheets on the beds, and food in the fridge. After a tour around the home, the client said "Looks great, and feels like home. Now let's go play golf."

On my way out, I stop to say hello to the longhorns, lounging by the fence. Beyond them, golfers tee up and swing. The dust from the road settles, the place goes quiet save for birds and grasshoppers. And a few hundred yards off, up a rise, nestles a house that embodies all of this; the colors of the earth, the clean line of the horizon, the shapes and heritage of the land, the old West and new West combined. ■



### TETON HERITAGE BUILDERS

HANDCRAFTED HOMES – LIFELONG RELATIONSHIPS

160 West Deloney  
Jackson Hole, WY  
307.733.8771

[www.tetonheritagebuilders.com](http://www.tetonheritagebuilders.com)

Photo by Karl Neumann

76225 Gallatin Road  
Gallatin Gateway, MT  
406.522.0808