



RKD owner and architect Jack Snow created the Green Fin home to be truly eco-friendly.

# INNOVATORS

## THE

LOCAL ARCHITECTS GO BEYOND TYPICAL MOUNTAIN-RESORT STYLE

*By Traci J. Macnamara*



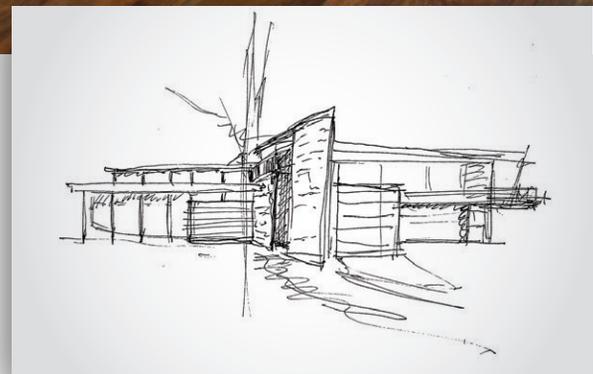
Thirty percent of the living space is buried, as is the entire garage. In addition to a photovoltaic system that generates electricity and a solar hot-water system, there's a cistern system for irrigating the yard and a green roof for water conservation and growing herbs and vegetables.

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## MIDWAY THROUGH A CONVERSATION ABOUT HIS

architectural philosophy and artistic influences, local architect Jack Snow spoke about getting his pilot's license so he could fly a plane to his new work sites, which now extend far beyond the Vail Valley. He offered a few matter-of-fact reasons to explain why having a pilot's license was necessary to his career, but the excitement in his voice belied such practicality.

Sure, flying a plane allows Snow to get from point A to point B. But one gets the sense that this man's work benefits far more from seeing the earth from a different perspective than from the increased mobility flying allows him as a busy architect trying to get quickly from one job site to another. The swooping lines and smooth, sculpted forms that surface in his work give that sense, as well.



Jack Snow's "five-minute sketch" is the basis for Green Fin.



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Snow and his wife, Sally Brainerd, established RKD Architects, Inc. in Vail in 1989. Since then, the small firm has designed numerous innovative residential and commercial spaces in the Vail Valley, Summit County and beyond — Tahoe, Telluride, Big Sky, San Francisco and Edina, Minnesota, to name a few. What doesn't emerge in these projects is an established style; rather, what surfaces in them is the work of a person who ideologically puts a few sticks of dynamite next to an established style and lets it explode into an artistic frenzy.

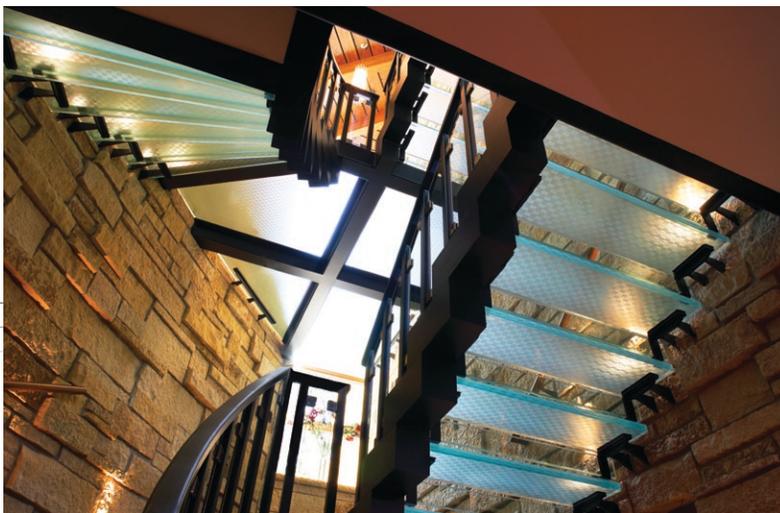
"I torture every carpenter as much as I can," Snow jokes, talking about his penchant for sloping walls and sculpted, flowing forms. "RKD's tag line is 'sculpted from the elements,' and even though we're coming up with novel things, none of it is unrecognizable or in your face in an off-putting way. A final product might be something that no one's ever thought of or seen before, but you look at it and think: that just fits here."

Creating spaces that fit within their natural surroundings is a hallmark of RKD's design, and Snow cites British sculptor Andy Goldsworthy as one of his inspirations in this regard. Goldsworthy considers "raw nature" his artistic medium, often creating works out of stones or leaves or sand, knowing that they will eventually be whisked away by waves or dispersed by the wind. RKD builds its clients' wants and needs into its designs, but Snow also seeks to create something that's site-specific and fitting within its environmental context.

The Green Fin House in Edina, Minnesota exemplifies RKD's sculpted-from-the-elements ethic and Snow's unique artistic approach. His genius sketch of the home and its environmentally-

friendly, or "green," features are what give the Green Fin House its name. Snow scratched some simple black lines on a piece of white paper to represent his idea for the place. What emerged in his conception of this tear down, re-build home is a stunningly balanced form with angled glass walls — and what looks like a huge, sculpted fin cutting a path to the front door.

The Green Fin Home is stocked with an array of innovative, environmentally-minded features including a solar hot-water system, a cistern system for irrigating the yard and a green roof for conserving water and growing herbs and vegetables. The masonry for the home was sourced locally, and the wood on the floor and ceilings was reclaimed from a flooded forest and recycled from old whisky barrels, respectively.



Snow, who also designs furniture, often juxtaposes heavy and light elements in his work. In the Green Fin home, chunky stone walls bump up against enormous, slanting walls of glass. And in his Rocky Mountain Residence, a curved wood terrace lightens the heaviness of the exterior's concrete blocks, bringing to mind the sculpted elegance of an Eames chair.

Although each of his homes morph into strikingly different structures, Snow admits that a common DNA defines them. The nucleotide bases for his designs aren't adenine, cytosine, guanine, and thymine; his double helix depends instead on sculpture, balance, natural harmony, and an evocative spirit.

## BEYOND THE YODEL

Kyle Webb of the Vail-based K.H. Webb architecture firm also is moving beyond what he considers to be an established style in order to embrace the things that define his work: a natural palette of materials; a clean, of-the-land approach; and site-appropriate design.

"Everyone has some idea about what architects in the mountains should be doing," says Webb. "But I don't think that every building around here needs to yodel. We take the time to get to know our clients and have realized that people are coming to us because they're innovators, too. They want a home that takes them beyond what's typical for this area."

Webb's current work extends from Nicaragua to Los Angeles to Connecticut, but he still enjoys the freedom of working within the limits of the Town of Vail, which has more relaxed codes than other planned communities in the area. In this way, Webb avoids creating within the bounds of a clearly-defined or homogeneous style to craft one unique home after another. And at the heart of each project, Webb puts his respect for the land first.

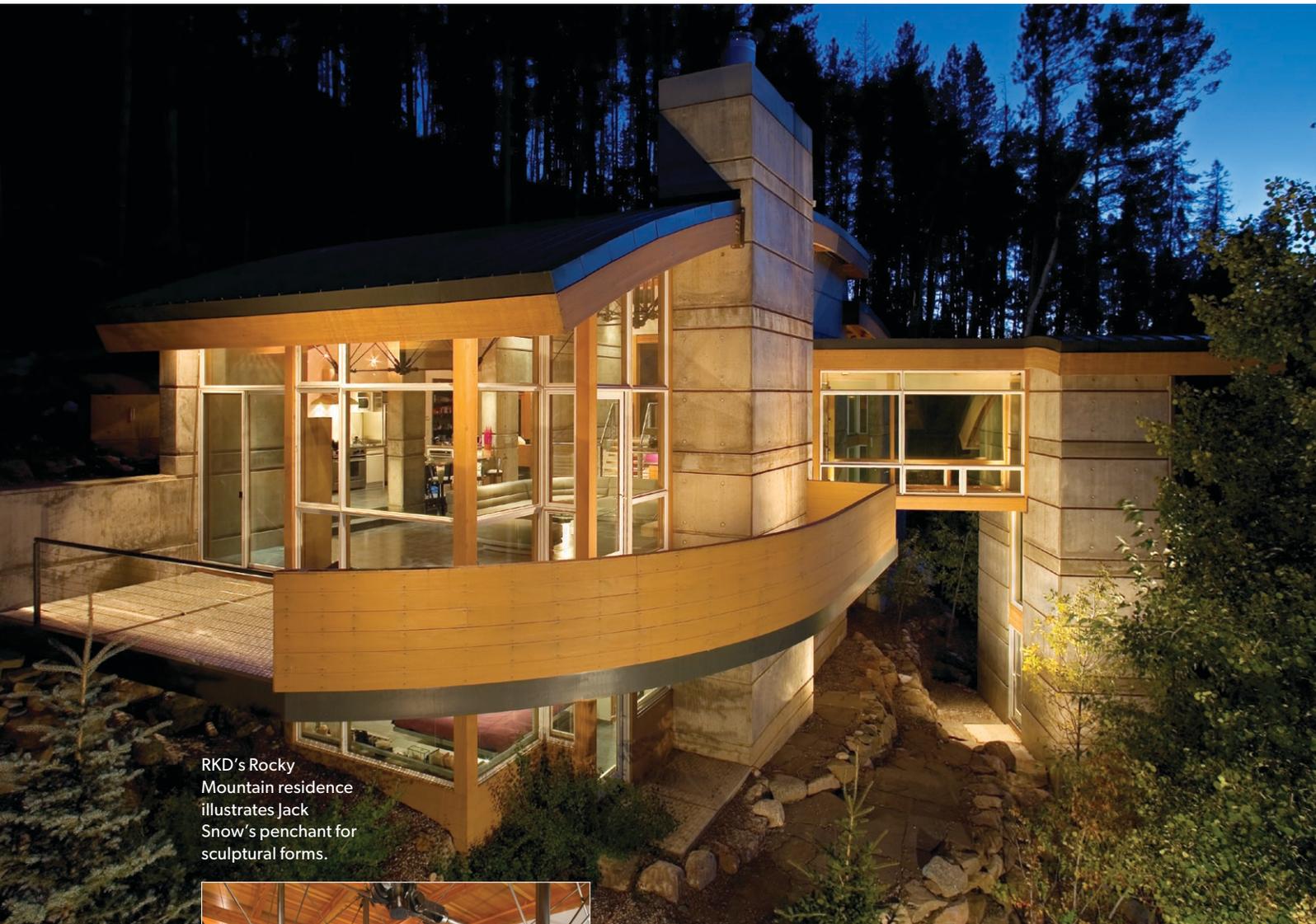
"Sustainability starts with how we treat our sites," Webb says. "We could cut into the land and pump it full of concrete, but whenever possible, I try to create something that fits within its natural surroundings. I look at what's there and then maximize the land instead of cramming a pre-planned design onto a space that it doesn't fit."

With such an ethic in mind, Webb has concocted several inventive solutions. In a Vail home named 2010 Home of the Year by Mountain Living magazine, Webb designed a living room that seems to leap from the backside of the house. A cantilevered terrace juts out towards a wide-open view of the Gore Range and extends

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Named by Mountain Living Magazine as the 2010 Home of the Year, the Vail abode designed by K.H. Webb Architects includes a "floating" living room that looks out at the Gore Range.



RKD's Rocky Mountain residence illustrates Jack Snow's penchant for sculptural forms.



over a swimming pool. But he didn't just design the home this way because it would look cool. He invented these features as a way to build around a tricky slope on the lot without leveling it.

Webb admits that while the word sustainability seems to be en vogue, it's something he's always embraced. And it's ultimately up to clients to determine how far they're willing to go.

"We ask them what they want. And if it's more natural light, more solar gain, green or recycled materials, or any other environmentally-conscious effort, we're right there with them," Web says. This attitude has allowed him to design homes that reclaim gray water for irrigation and use an array of local, reclaimed and recycled materials. "We make a conscious effort overall, and we try to see what people are willing to do. The solution might cost more in the short term, but the end result feels better for everyone."



Mike Foster designed this house on Forest Road to be nestled into the mature pine and aspen trees that surround it.



## LESS IS MORE

In his effort to create functional, livable spaces, architect Mike Foster has seen a shift from the “bigger is better” mentality towards a focus on smaller, more intimate homes that contain the same — or an even higher — level of detail than that of their much larger predecessors.

Foster began working with the Vail-based Triumph Development in 2007 to complete The Willows, a 19-unit condominium project. He worked with the initial design but then remained involved with the project until all of the owners moved in. Foster found it highly rewarding and insightful from a design perspective to be involved with a project from the time that the first line was drawn until the last picture was hung on the wall.

“That project opened my eyes to several important design aspects that will remain with me throughout my career,” Foster said. “Functionality has always driven my work, but now it is an even

stronger driving force. I understand more about how people develop spaces and connectivity and about how people actually live in spaces beyond their showroom appeal.”

Foster is also currently working with Triumph Development on a project to create some important future connectivity within the Vail Valley. The Town of Vail, Vail Valley Medical Center, The Steadman Clinic and the Steadman Philippon Research Institute (SPRI) hired Triumph to develop a new municipal building in Vail that will house chambers for the Town Council and municipal offices, a new medical office building for Vail Valley Medical Center, The Steadman Clinic and SPRI. Foster will be the project’s managing architect, and he envisions a new pedestrian bridge that will connect doctors with their examination rooms in the new building and their operating tables across the road at the Vail Valley Medical Center.

From Mike Foster’s less-is-more sentiment to Kyle Webb’s site-specific designs to Jack Snow’s sculpted, elemental forms, one common theme emerges. Each of these architect-innovators takes a single, simple idea and transforms it into a singular reality. Each in his own way, these architects embody what pioneering French pilot, artist, and writer Antoine de Saint-Exupéry meant when he said, “Perfection is achieved not when there is nothing more to add, but when there is nothing left to take away.” •