



Living High

By James M. Williams

Clean air, clear skies, four seasons, great restaurants, fun shops, interesting galleries, spectacular vistas, enchanting foliage, outdoor activities and a connection to nature, not to mention great architecture...Alpine Living!

What is the architecture of Alpine Living? In Aspen it is estate mountain ranches, in Jackson (not "Jackson Hole," according to the locals) it has a western flavor, in Midway it's a Swiss theme, Park City an old mining town, Yellowstone has grand lodges and rustic cabins, in Sun Valley rustic cottages and at Sundance, mountain homes.

Alpine Living comes at a price. Having designed hundreds of custom homes of all styles and sizes and in various locations I became aware of this. As of a few years ago you could build a nice home in the valley starting at \$100 per square foot. Building on the bench the cost increased to \$150 per square foot. If you were to drive up the canyon and building in Park City the starting cost was \$250 per square foot. Just up the road in Deer Valley it jumped to \$350 and could easily be \$500. Homes we design in Aspen start around \$1,000 per square

foot. Aspen is one of the few places where a contractor's work vehicle is a Lamborghini (license plate, "change order"). Architectural fees range from 6% to 10% and a million dollar fee in Aspen is not unheard of.

The driving force behind the architectural design of an alpine or mountain home is snow. Snow dictates a thicker roof structure which results in a deeper fascia or exposed rafters and a standing seam metal roof. A stone wainscot helps to keep wood siding above the snow levels thus preventing it from rotting. Roof pitches, gables, dormers, covered entries porches and decks, etc are used to direct sliding snow away from doors and other living space.

Designing for snow drifting and ice are always a challenge. I was once criticized for using steel beams in a large exterior deck. The steel was used to support large timber joists. The steel beams were supported on steel columns. By thoughtful detailing, all of the steel was concealed with wood or stone.

I was told by the owner that the Old Faithful Lodge in Yellowstone was all wood construction and that if they didn't use steel I shouldn't have too. Months later, after winter had set in I was invited up to the home for a visit. They took me out on the back deck where there was an ice cycle two or three feet in diameter weighing a few thousand pounds resting on the deck, not to mention several feet of snow! They wanted to thank me in person for having installed the steel.

Fireplaces are not only functional but are often places to display works of art. The fireplace (mantle and chimney) can be large decorative





sculptures as well and are typically the main focal point of the great room if not the entire house.

Natural, durable, timeless materials such as wood, stone, concrete and steel are the materials of choice in any mountain home. How these materials are used, their proportions, textures, orientations, quantities, etc and how they capture natural light and define space all help determine the homes character, artistic qualities and architecture.

A well conceived mountain home is designed specifically for the site on which it is located and has a sense of belonging to the site. It takes advantage

of everything the site has to offer, views, protection from wind, solar gain, to only mention a few.

Alpine Living has its challenges and comes with a price, but it is well worth it. Some of us can only experience it temporarily on a weekend jaunt or vacation, while the truly fortunate are able to building for themselves and enjoy the benefits year around.

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