



# Sky

# Country

# Big

A compact house in Montana lives large, thanks to skillful design and rooms that bring in sweeping vistas.

by William Weathersby, Jr.  
Photography by J.K. Lawrence



A central passageway runs the length of the house, connecting all the main living spaces. The dramatic pitched ceiling is tempered by recycled Douglas fir cross beams that delineate the rooms.

# Warm details and organic materials create a well-crafted sense of space.

Most homeowners naturally prize a room with a view, but Laura and Jim Johnson planned their entire house in Big Sky, Montana, to embrace the spectacular vistas of evergreen forests and mountain peaks. "From the minute you step through the front door," Laura says, "the layout and architectural details compel you to walk toward the great room, come forward to the windows on all sides, and then out onto the deck to enjoy the beautiful landscape that surrounds you. There's a wonderful sense of flow to the procession of spaces."

Retired empty nesters, the Johnsons split their time between a home in Minnesota and this 2,400-square-foot Montana retreat. The house-proud couple credits the success of this custom house design to a close working relationship with architect Kelly Davis, with whom they have collaborated on five building projects, including the renovation of their 1863 Greek Revival-style house.

"Laura and Jim both have a strong interest in architecture and are very savvy about details like building materials," says Davis, of Sala Architects, based in Stillwater, Minnesota. "This was our first house project together from the ground up, and it was great to work closely on every decision, from window placement to the hues of wood stains."

Avid skiers ("We're out there six days out of seven," says Jim), the Johnsons decided to build in Big Sky because of its many alpine runs and cross-country trails and the area's low-key resort atmosphere. Laura and Jim desired a compact, low-maintenance home that would seem light-filled and roomy whether they were spending a weekend by themselves or surrounded by friends and family, including two grown children and three grandkids. And because they love the outdoors, they wanted their house to provide a connection to nature that went beyond static views.

After walking their one-acre lot with Davis, the Johnsons spotted a perfect vista upon which the entire two-bedroom house would focus: two pine trees framing a picture-postcard view of Yellow Mountain and the snow-capped Spanish Peaks beyond. "The house is a study in forced perspective," Davis explains. "It's a long, narrow building that is very axial. When you walk inside you can see clear through the entire length of the house out to the deck and the mountains."

Though compact, the house seems quite large thanks to its architectural plan. From the front door to the end of the deck, a central circulation route runs 112 feet. Beneath its pitched roof, this double-height core area functions like the nave of a church, framed by lower-height spaces along both sides for living, dining, and the kitchen.

The unusual deck also plays with perspective. It functions like the prow of a ship, running perpendicular to the great room and narrowing from 12 feet to 4 feet at its apex. "It is more of a catwalk or observation platform than an outdoor room in itself," Jim says. Supported by tapered concrete piers that echo the massing of the chimney, the structure also serves as a canopy for a ground-level deck with whirlpool tub that opens off a lower-level spa bathroom that includes a cedar-lined sauna.

Another trick of the eye is provided by a 25-foot run of cabinetry, including an inviting window seat that runs the length of the western wall of the great room and melds into the adjacent kitchen. "Introducing overscale elements in a small environment creates a big visual impact," says Davis.

Laura and Jim say they wanted to avoid some of the clichés they've seen in other mountain homes and lodges, such as massive fieldstone fireplaces or split-log details. A diminutive sculptural fireplace is clad in red-hued stucco and angled between



Space-saving window seats function as furniture in the great room, above, and the dining room, upper right, where a built-in cherry wood buffet matches the kitchen cabinetry.

The exposed kitchen, right, features concrete work surfaces tinted with a hint of pink over custom cherry cabinets. Equally durable black fireslate tops the breakfast bar. Clerestory windows allow sky views and open electronically for optimal ventilation.



windows on one side of the great room. Its finishing touch is a hearth of St. Croix limestone quarried from a site near the Johnsons' Minnesota house. "It's a connection to our roots back home," Laura says. Helping the bottom line of the construction budget, which was \$200 per square foot, flooring is a combination of low-grade oak and acid-washed concrete.

Environmentally conscious, Laura and Jim worked with the architect to employ recycled woods found from a local supplier. The posts and beams are recycled Douglas fir from a historic Chicago warehouse. The galvanized sheet metal ceiling is punctuated every two feet with battens, or strips, of redwood recycled from pickle barrels.

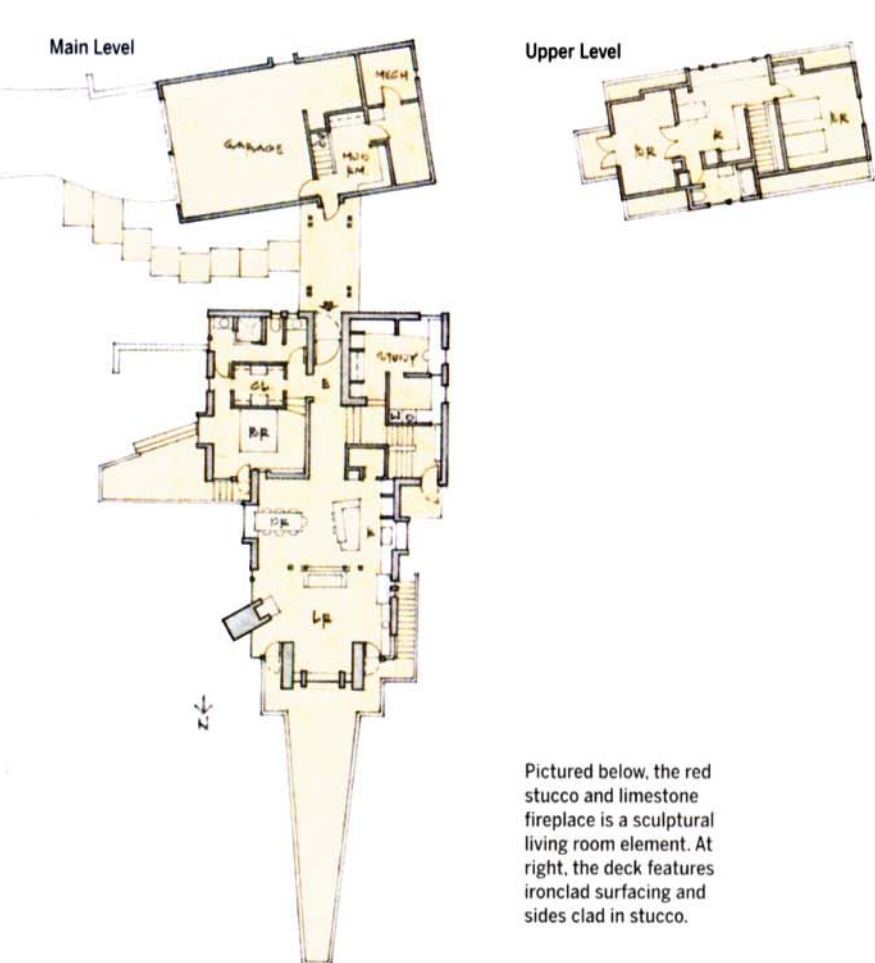
Helping to insulate the house, which is heated by a radiant in-floor system, 16-inch-thick exterior walls are constructed of concrete block filled with Styrofoam pellets and covered with stucco. Other interior walls are plaster with a mottled finish. "The thick, textured walls with rounded corners achieve an adobe feeling we liked," Laura says.

A 1,000-square-foot apartment above the garage, separated from the main house by a covered walkway, accommodates frequent guests. The annex is set into the hillside to preserve the feeling of the natural setting. Perched in the cradle of the mountain ridges, the Johnson house is a well-crafted home base for the family's outdoor adventures in Big Sky country.

*William Weathersby Jr. is a senior editor at Architectural Record. Based in New York City, he often writes about residential architecture and interior design. He has written for such publications as Metropolis and Elle Decor.*

**Architect** SALA Architects  
**Interior Designer** Engler Interior Design  
**Builder** Coyote Creek Construction





Pictured below, the red stucco and limestone fireplace is a sculptural living room element. At right, the deck features ironclad surfacing and sides clad in stucco.



#### A MONTANA WOOD EXPERT

Though their house has a modern feeling and clean architectural lines, Laura and Jim Johnson wanted to incorporate in it details with the warm patina of aged wood. Doing some legwork on their own, the Johnsons discovered a local company, Big Timberworks, that specializes in construction with salvaged woods. Located in Gallatin Gateway, Montana, the outfit was founded 21 years ago by Merle Adams, a general contractor's son who studied forestry before setting up his own design/build shop. Equipped with a sawmill and a 20-person woodworking team and supported by a nationwide network of salvaged wood suppliers, Adams creates timber and wood framing for homes, barns, lodges, and other projects in Montana and 21 other states. Handsome flooring, siding, paneling, doors, and furniture is constructed mostly from recycled fir, redwood, cedar, oak, longleaf pine, eucalyptus, and cypress.

Some of the Douglas fir for the Johnson house trusses came from a historic Chicago warehouse, while additional wood was secured from more than 20 truckloads salvaged from World War II-era warehouses in Portland, Oregon. The pickle-barrel cedar detailing was found in Louisville, Kentucky. "The Johnsons took a big interest in learning more about the various woods we stock," Adams says. "They really seemed to enjoy the process of selecting the materials that would stand out at the center of their home."



# Sources.

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**Architect** SALA Architects,  
Minneapolis, 612-379-3037

**Partner in charge** Kelly R. Davis  
**Architectural team** Kelly R. Davis  
and Timothy Old

**Interior design** Talla Skogmo,  
Engler Skogmo Interior Design,  
952-746-2007

**Builder** Coyote Creek Construction,  
Bozeman, MT 406-580-3100

**Engineer** Morrison-Maierle,  
Bozeman, MT, 406-587-0721

## GENERAL SPECIFICATIONS

### recycled timbers

Big Timberworks,  
406-763-4639,  
[www.bigtimberworks.com](http://www.bigtimberworks.com)

**windows** Pozzi,  
800-257-9663,  
[www.jeld-wen.com](http://www.jeld-wen.com) and  
Marvin, 888-819-2470,  
[www.marvin.com](http://www.marvin.com);  
Velux, 800-88-VELUX,  
[www.velux.com](http://www.velux.com)



**pillows** custom African Kente cloth

**cocktail table** Baker Knapp  
and Tubbs, 800-59-BAKER,  
[www.bakerfurniture.com](http://www.bakerfurniture.com)

**ottomans** Coach, 888-262-6224,  
[www.coach.com](http://www.coach.com)

**tub chairs in window** Kirk  
Brummel, 212-477-8580, with  
fabric, Coraggio, 800-624-2420,  
[www.coraggio.com](http://www.coraggio.com)

**ottoman between tub chairs**  
Kirk Brummel, 212-477-8580, with  
fabric, Pollack, 212-627-7766,  
[www.pollackassociates.com](http://www.pollackassociates.com)

**lamps by tub chairs** Holtkotter,  
[www.holtkotter.com](http://www.holtkotter.com)



**built in bench fabric** Henry Calvin,  
888-732-1996, [www.henrycalvin.com](http://www.henrycalvin.com)

**pillows** Pollack, 212-627-7766,  
[www.pollackassociates.com](http://www.pollackassociates.com)

**chair by fireplace** Milling Road,  
800-59-BAKER, [www.bakerfurniture.com](http://www.bakerfurniture.com), with fabric, Donghia,  
212-925-2777, [www.donghia.com](http://www.donghia.com)



## DINING ROOM

**host chairs** Bauer, 843-884-4007,  
[www.bauerinternational.com](http://www.bauerinternational.com), with  
fabric, Stout

## KITCHEN

**stools** Keilhauer, 800-724-5665,  
[www.keilhauer.com](http://www.keilhauer.com)

**floors stained concrete** Kemiko,  
903-587-3708, [www.kemiko.com](http://www.kemiko.com)

## LIVING ROOM

**sofa, matching chairs,  
and fabric** Baker Knapp and  
Tubbs, 800-59-BAKER,  
[www.bakerfurniture.com](http://www.bakerfurniture.com)

**end table** custom design and build  
**end table lamps** Christian Liaigre  
through Holly Hunt Showroom,  
Chicago, IL, 312-661-1900  
[www.hollyhunt.com](http://www.hollyhunt.com)

