



ALIGNED WITH NATURE

When Dominique Gettliffe saw the site his clients had purchased in tiny Crestone, deep in southwest Colorado, he didn't see plains. He saw a vast ocean, waiting for a magnificent vessel.

WORDS: Rob Bowman • IMAGES: David Lauer



While Colorado is land-locked, the view of the San Luis valley rolls out endlessly from the shared space of the home. The setting sun leaves the land in dark, ocean blues. The face of the home rolls up and eliminates the boundaries that define indoor and outdoor. The distinction becomes arbitrary and there is no more inside and outside. There is just home.

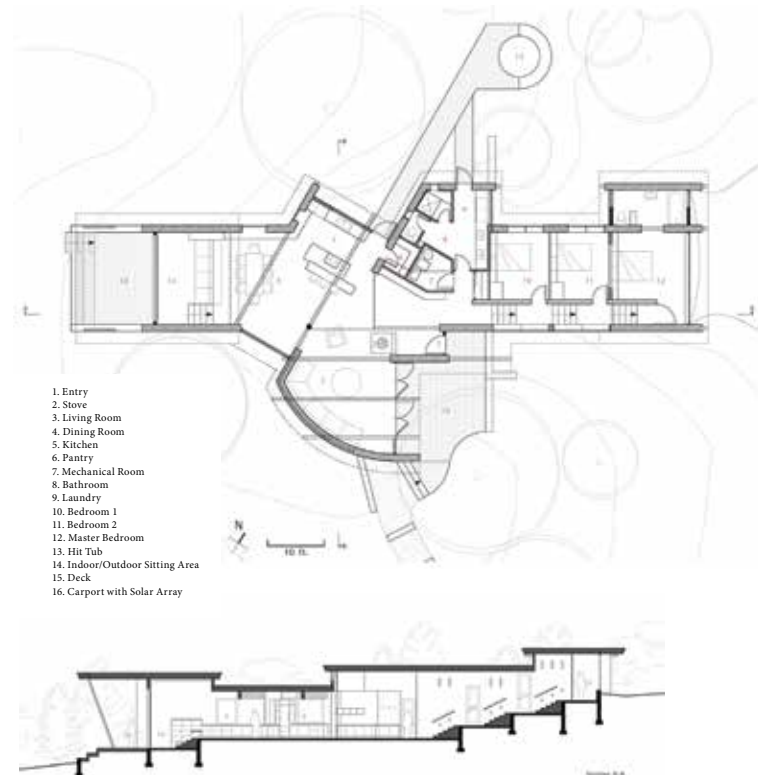


Gettliffe Architecture in Boulder was tasked with creating a getaway, a place for family and friends to unwind—in itself, not an unusual request. But this was not going to be another ordinary vacation home. Instead, they wanted a retreat that fit into the natural environment as discretely as possible, a place that would tie in natural forces, a place “where they could enjoy the beauty of the place, of the mountains and the valley,” said Dominique Gettliffe, “but also the beauty of the spirit of the place. They wanted to make it a gift for those they love.”

THE LOCATION

The Sangre de Cristo mountain range juts up suddenly out of the San Luis Valley. The homeowners wanted the home to take advantage of this area, yet not alter or destroy what made it special. While the family had a personal connection with Gettliffe, they also knew that he was perfect for the

“The alignment of the house allowed us to have very little impact on the gravity and flow of water around the home. This was very important to the owners who wanted none of the natural drainage to be disturbed,” said architect Alejandra Baltodano. The multi-layer topography of the home aids in this process, and the flow in the home mimics the land. Rainwater is collected and carefully routed to avoid accelerating erosion.



project. “We wanted to be connected to the sun as much as possible and to enjoy as much natural lighting that we could at all times,” the homeowner said. This desire well suited Gettliffe who came to Colorado to be part of the passive solar energy movement in the 1980s, which evolved into the green movement currently driving much of modern design.

Gettliffe and architect Alejandra Baltodano went to the site and immediately understood why the owners had fallen in love with the area. Gettliffe said, “There is a tension where the house sits between the mountains and the valley. The mountains are enormous and the valley is vast. It forms almost a sort of ocean view. There is a push and pull between these contrasts.” Gettliffe and Baltodano worked to design a home that stretched to connect these contrasting forces. “We observe all of these natural forces and integrate them into the

design of the building. A place where one can move through the fluidity of the space, both in and outside of the building. Horizontally, vertically, there needs to be a flow that matches the topography of the area,” Gettliffe said. That relationship to the topography creates a kind of dance between the home and the land. The house, while one story, has five levels in order to match the natural topography of the area. This gives the home minimal impact on the environment and changes the dynamic between home and the land. The house doesn’t lay on the ground so much as they each seem to be embracing.

INCORPORATING NATURE

The home lays along a line that flows down from northeast to southwest. The bedrooms are at the top of this flow line, buttressed by a curtain of 14,000-foot mountains, and the house rolls down the slope into areas where guests are more likely to be found, ending

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The house has a purposely inconspicuous profile and doesn’t raise above the level of the trees. This discrete shape helps to preserve the beauty of the area that attracted the family to the site in the first place. It goes beyond the silhouette of the house. The road stops far from the home, enhancing its seclusion.



Gettliffe and his team oversaw every aspect of the home. The unique shapes inside meant custom-built furnishings that accented the home and kept the natural flow. Preserving that flow also meant adapting the design as it was built. Zoellner from Modern Primitive was instrumental in pointing out opportunities for additional sunlight with discrete windows at the tops of some walls.

in an open hosting area, which opens dramatically onto that “ocean” view. The mountains delay the sun’s break and shield the home from behind. When the rays make it over the range, they do so at full strength and bathe the home in warmth. As the sun sinks into the horizon at the end of that vast view, the retreat wrings every last bit of natural light out of the day.

To fully utilize the light year-round, the home is aligned with special consideration for the Earth’s orbit and designed so that the sun will set in alignment with the long axis of the home every year on December 21—the first day of winter and the darkest day of the year. Every precious drop of sun is used, even when there is less of it available.

This attitude of conservation informs every design decision in the home, which is outfitted with energy-saving design, in both cutting-edge and archaic ways. The technology is as one would expect in a home of this quality and pedigree, with dual-flush toilets and high-efficiency water heaters. But the ancient methods are the most intriguing: The walls of the home are built from bales of straw.



Straw bale walls are common to the area and have been utilized for decades. But they haven’t been utilized with such bold and innovative features. The straw bales and stucco made for easily bendable materials and gave an easy grace to curving the walls. Its environmentally friendly material and malleability gives such a heft to the walls and makes it a wonderful resource. Paired with the energy-efficient and cutting-edge ideas filling the home, the materials and techniques make for a vibrant hybrid of traditional and modern to produce something entirely new. The entry wall exposes this unique construction method—a deliberate gap in the plaster covered by a glass panel shows spines of straw sticking through, a reminder of what naturally surrounds the home.



Images on this page: Courtesy of Gettliffe Architecture

THE MATERIAL

This technique, while not common, has extraordinary advantages and distinct aesthetic qualities. The heft of the bales makes for walls that can be as much as 16-inches deep. This depth creates a feeling of safety and comfort that perfectly suits a retreat home. The bales, covered in plaster and stucco, make for incredible insulation. The home maintains a consistent temperature with very little assistance, which comes from the home’s unconventional base. While it has a traditional concrete foundation, its interior is filled by a 2-foot-deep base of sand. Warmed by a passive and active solar system, it gently radiates heat through the floors in winter and retains the cool of the night in summer.

The home’s construction not only used unorthodox natural materials, but it also grew and developed, like a natural process. Gettliffe called on Tom Zoellner from Modern Primitive Design and Building to help the designs take form. Well into the design phase, the client looked at the sharp, dominant angles and requested something more cocoon-like. The team adjusted the design to include a long, curved wall. This wall gives the home a gentleness that defines it. The malleability of the straw bale technique redefines the feel of the project. It turns it into something closer to a heart, an organ of warmth and care at the foot of the mountains where family and friends gather.

THE HARMONY

The southwest wall of the home rolls up to optimize the light and the “ocean” view. This openness redefines the home and is able to transform from something secluded to something integrated into nature on a grand scale. This creates a synchronicity of not just the natural and the man-made, but also between nature and human beings.

The homeowners see the home as an escape—a place for family and friends to reorient themselves. The precise alignment of the home with the setting, not just of the site, but the mountains, the earth, even the stars themselves, makes it more than just a ship on an ocean of valley, tailed by waves of mountains. It serves a vessel that sails, yet anchors those who visit.



HELLO.



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As the bedrooms sit at the northeast end of the home, the morning sun serves as an alarm clock. However, the expansive mountains delay the light, allowing the family to sleep late.

Photo by Kristopher Lewis
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