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THE MOUNTAIN MODERN ISSUE

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HOME

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# Steeling Beauty

IN CREATING A CONTEMPORARY FAMILY RETREAT, ARCHITECT  
GREG FAULKNER USES A DYNAMIC MIX OF WEATHERING STEEL AND GLASS  
TO FRAME THE FORESTED HIGH SIERRA LANDSCAPE

“The wilderness is such a rich place,” says Northern California architect Greg Faulkner. “It’s not like building on an urban city block, where you’re creating from nothing. Here you have context—trees, slope to the site, boulders. You’re not just creating a building; you have to respond to the site without destroying it in the process.” That philosophy is central to Faulkner’s work, exemplified in a recent project completed for a family near Lake Tahoe. The contemporary five-bedroom house alternates between forms sheathed in rusted COR-TEN steel and transparent walls of glass to capture the landscape, the light and the Western experience. >>

FACING PAGE: The front entry, located between the two wings of the house, is marked by floor-to-ceiling glass. Thermally broken aluminum frames, along with insulated, dual-pane windows, keep the energy bills down while still allowing for maximum views to the outside. A Douglas fir overhang offers protection from the winter snow and summer sun. “We often get asked about using flat roofs in snow country, but we’ve found they perform better than sloped roofs,” says architect Greg Faulkner. “They don’t shed snow, so the snow acts as a form of insulation in the winter and then melts.”

STORY BY **CAREN KURLANDER** PHOTOGRAPHY BY **VANCE FOX**





ARCHITECTURE BY **FAULKNER ARCHITECTS**  
INTERIOR DESIGN BY **JUDY WEIRICK INTERIORS**

**MOUNTAIN LIVING:** Did the clients have specific requests for you?

**GREG FAULKNER:** They just asked for a modern house with a lot of light and something somewhat understated. A lot of these developments end up with super-sized houses, so this one—even at 4,300 square feet—was a little more modest.

**ML:** Tell us how the site influenced your design.

**GF:** When I first walked onto the property I could see through the trees to the Pacific Crest. I didn't want to ruin that view with the house.

**ML:** So how did you lay it out?

**GF:** It's basically an H-plan. The public wing is one rectangular box, and the private wing with the bedrooms is on the other side. A glass connection space in the middle houses the kitchen and the entry. The two long legs of the H are rusted-steel boxes, and the space between them became the aperture to that view of the mountains to the west.

**ML:** Why did you put the kitchen in the center of the H-plan?

**GF:** We all know that everyone hangs out in the kitchen. So why not really make it the middle of the energy? It serves as a bridge between the two steel rectangles, so that everyone passes through. It connects to as many pieces of the H as possible.

**ML:** What drove the house's contemporary design?

**GF:** There was a fire in South Lake Tahoe two years ago, so we're doing a lot to protect our houses from wildfires. That's part of the reason we started with the metal cladding. But COR-TEN is designed to rust, and it has this rich, warm weathering character that feels alive, like wood. From a distance this house will resemble a wooden house so it won't feel out of place, and yet there's no maintenance; it's very tough.

**ML:** Was maintenance a consideration?

**GF:** Yes. We try to be very sustainable with our work, and if you can build maintenance out of a project, you save tons of money and chemicals and energy over the lifespan of a house, just by avoiding the every two- or three-year coating of oil [that a wood home requires].

**ML:** It looks like the materials palette — steel, concrete, glass — is virtually the same inside and out.

**GF:** It's one thing to see a lot of the outdoors, but if the environment you're living in is very different from the materials you're seeing outside the window, then you can't move to the outside in your mind. In a plan like this, you can [often] see parts of the wings that you're not in. So if some of those materials come in [your field of vision] and your eye is also going out through the glass, then you've really blurred the line. It's very freeing. >>



"If you can combine all of the movement and have it intersect both vertically and laterally, then you really have great energy," Faulkner says of the centrally located kitchen. A staircase, with custom perforated-steel panels and mesquite treads, links the one-story public wing with the two-story bedroom wing. Cabinets are made with eco-friendly ApplePly maple, and a freestanding concrete wall warms the space through radiant heat.



"I think some of the work we're doing is more like abstract art than modernism. It's a way of looking at building space without being confined to styles or rules."

— ARCHITECT Greg Faulkner

Large overhangs on the west-facing elevation reach out into the landscape, while expanses of glass bring the outdoors in. By laying out the house with the private and public areas on opposite ends, Faulkner was able to create flexible living spaces for extended family visits. An outdoor seating area offers a private spot to enjoy views of the adjacent Forest Service land.





The house's interior design, by Judy Weirick Interiors, features clean-lined furnishings and tactile fabrics in muted hues to soften the architecture's strong material palette. In the living room, walls of windows, structural steel beams and a board-form concrete fireplace are offset by an A. Rudin sofa and two armchairs covered with custom Kravet fabric. RIGHT: Faulkner framed the view with an additional layer by wrapping the front entry court and garage with a screen made from 10-inch steel plates standing in a domino-like line. "The only time you can see through them is when you're perpendicular to them," he says. "That's when you can see the Pacific Crest through the house."



**ML:** Why did you leave the structural steel exposed?

**GF:** We always say that all the systems should contribute to the aesthetic. It's more honest and real to expose what you're building with. It's kind of like the old Arts and Crafts approach to architecture, but with a modern vocabulary.

**ML:** These materials are very raw and rough. How do you keep the house feeling comfortable?

**GF:** We think of the people and the furnishings and the objects from their lives as a necessary layer to the environment.

**ML:** So the interior design complements the architecture?

**GF:** It tempers it. The interior designer, Judy Weirick, really did a good job of creating something that is sympathetic to the architecture. She used lots of tone-on-tone colors and not too much contrast, with soft leathers and soft rugs.

**ML:** Tell us about the asymmetrical pattern of the window grids.

**GF:** If you look at the landscape, it's not a series of straight lines in a grid. It's very additive. Plant colonies overlap and are organic and collage-like. That's the way our glazing is laid out as well. It brings some of the behavior of the landscape into the architecture.

**ML:** Why do you feel contemporary architecture is a good fit for this setting?

**GF:** One big reason is you can see through the middle of this house. By framing the landscape with a lot of glazing, you actually bring the environment in. I think modernism gives you more tools to use; you're not hemmed in by pitched roofs and traditional moves. You can really build something that's connected to the land. ●

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