

# wildly urbane

Concrete, steel and glass rise organically from the earth  
to create a spectacular home on the Montana prairie

By Julie Green • Photography by Darby Ask

“I came out here about 12 years ago, and it was pretty apparent that this was a rare place to be.”

— Home Owner

“Rare” is the perfect word to describe the extraordinary home located in the hills southeast of Billings. Constructed of integrated concrete forms and steel beams, and featuring expansive walls of glass, the structure takes on a contemporary, almost urban feel. At the same time, the home exudes the essence of the Montana landscape.

#### A private retreat

Located just 20 minutes from Billings’ city center, the property includes more than 240 acres of rugged, tree-lined hills and prairie land. The owners named it “Wild Plum,” and chose a home site high atop a bluff overlooking a magnificent, unspoiled basin. Distance from the city and the lack of human encroachment has left the large expanse of land looking much the same as when settlers first ventured to the Montana Territory.

It was this very sense of wide openness that first intrigued the owners, and ultimately led the couple down the path to building their dream home.

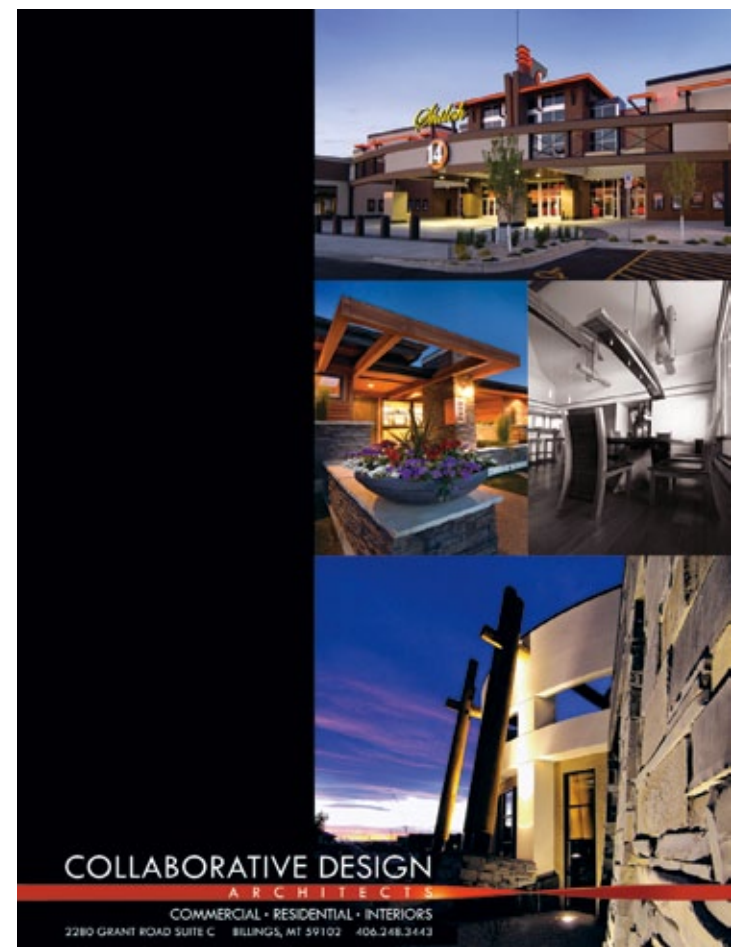
#### Polish with a purpose

The design started with an emphasis on how to make the home function best in the frequently harsh Montana climate. Siting was the first consideration.

“Most houses look west toward the mountains or town,” the husband says. “Unfortunately, that puts you in the path of the afternoon sun and in the face of the wind. Our idea was to face this house toward the southeast so that we’d get warmth in the winter and avoid



1] The home’s entrance is protected from the wind and weather. 2] The home was constructed of concrete, steel and glass. 3] Inside, the warm color palette mimics the surrounding landscape.



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being baked in the summer sun.”

Building materials were also important. The couple chose a unique combination of industrial-style components, including concrete, steel and glass. On their own, these elements seem raw and unrefined; but melded together in a beautifully articulated structure they evoke a protective and welcoming feel.

“We were mindful that we were building a home in a remote area surrounded by pine trees and native grass where wildfires can and do occur,” he says. The choice to forego the more common stick-built design in favor of concrete and steel was not only aesthetic, but practical.

Because of the unusual design and use of industrial materials, the owners hired Hulteng, Inc., an experienced commercial construction firm, to oversee the project.

“It was challenging,” said Shane Swandal, partner and co-owner of Hulteng, Inc.

As an example of the complexity, Swandal points to one of the main walls along the east side of the structure. Projecting 18 feet out of the ground, the wall leans away from the structure at a 15-degree angle, creating a distinctive architectural interpretation of the surrounding bluffs. “It took our cumulative expertise and a great deal of foresight to precisely connect all the components,” he said.

#### Flow and functionality

The interior of the home mirrors the same thoughtful attributes as the exterior. Tall ceilings and walls of windows in the main living area create a sense of spaciousness and flow. The open concept kitchen, great room and formal dining area enjoy unobstructed views of tree-lined hills. A warm-colored wash on the walls mimics the colors found outside and makes the space feel cozy in spite of its size and hard-edged construction. Sunlight streams in through windows and bounces off the stained concrete floors,

1] Made of soapstone, the wood stove is designed to hold and steadily distribute heat, rather than radiate it like a traditional steel stove. The home also has energy-efficient radiant floor heat and supplemental forced air. 2] The husband constructed the bar from a two-inch slab of walnut wood. The pendant lights above were created by the wife, a ceramicist.

3] The couple enjoys expansive granite countertops for cooking and prep work. Photo by Phil Bell. 4] The massive dining room table appears to hover in mid-air. In lieu of legs, the owners found a piece of pipe at a local recycling center, bolted it to the floor and attached the solid hardwood to the top.



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further enhancing the richness of the space.

"The owners wanted real honesty in the structure," Johnson says. "As we developed the design, the husband emphasized simplicity."

#### Hand-crafted finesse

From the main level, visitors can see the unique cantilevered staircase leading to the upstairs loft. The husband welded the metal steps, which seem to float in mid-air.

"The owner actually welded about 90 percent of the steel in the home," said Swandal. "When he told me that he wanted to

weld, I told him that I would allow him to do one, then I'd come and inspect it to ensure proper welds and penetration. He did it exactly as we'd told him to do it. It was perfect. He did an exceptional job."

The couple was hands-on, involved in many aspects of the project. Together, they even installed one of the massive exterior steel braces just outside the en suite master bath.

"The best part of the whole project was getting to know the owners," Swandal notes. "The husband is excellent at figuring out any type of tool; he was a great asset to the project."

**1]** The property boasts a natural spring-fed pond. **2]** Steel beams are exposed both on the interior and the exterior. The couple liked the appearance of the beams and the rusted patina which mirrors the natural colors of the surrounding hills. Photo by Phil Bell. **3]** The master bath won a national design award in 2008. Photo by Phil Bell. **4]** With glass doors that allow the light to flood in, the garage provides an art space for the wife and work shop for the husband. One of his current projects is a 1950 Willys Jeepster.

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#### Award-winning design

The many unusual and sustainable aspects of the home made it a stand-out design. In recognition of those exceptional elements, the National Kitchen and Bath Associations awarded Johnson first place in the nation for Best Sustainable Master Bath Design in 2008, and another first-place award for Best Sustainable

#### Kitchen Design in 2009.

Taking more than a decade to plan, design and complete, the home now nestles into the hills where its deep foundation rests, the modern form blending seamlessly and quietly into the ruggedness of its surroundings.

Turns out the owner was right. Wild Plum is indeed a rare place.

**M**