

residential
architect

JUNE 2007

off the
map

brett w. nave and lori ryker
blaze a new trail amid the rugged
beauty of rural montana

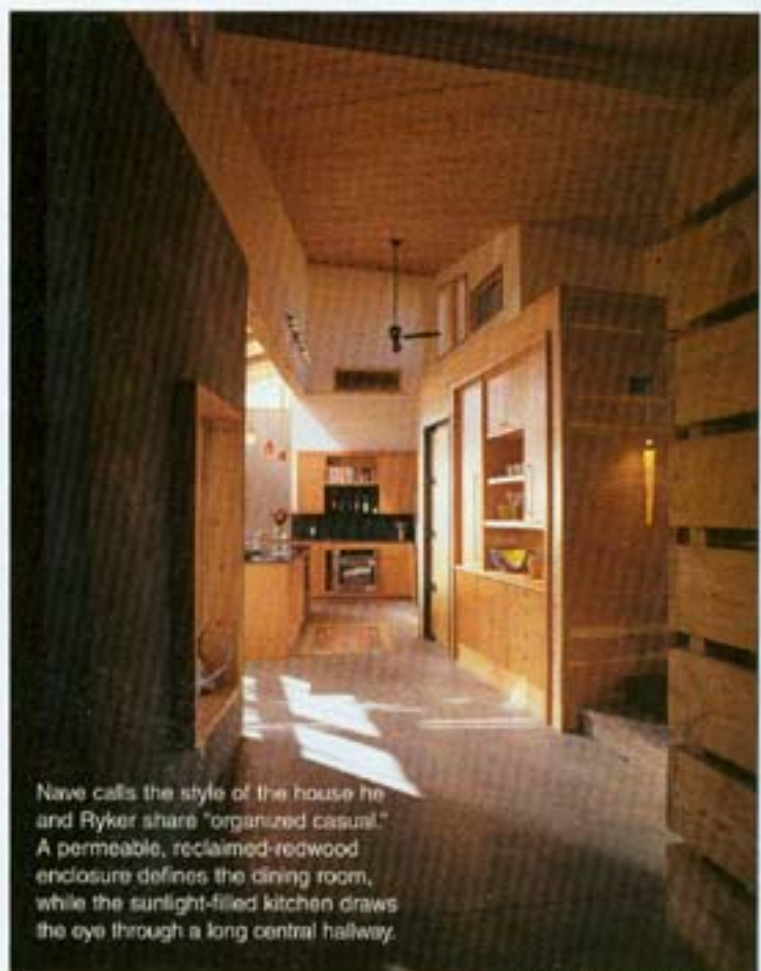
affordably green / building tensions /
value equations / shopping lessons /
design finds / el dorado's fabrications

www.residentialarchitect.com

*in the
middle of
nowhere*

"you can do something
you think is right and
not necessarily what
you've been taught."

—brett w. nave



Nave calls the style of the house he and Ryker share "organized casual." A permeable, reclaimed-redwood enclosure defines the dining room, while the sunlight-filled kitchen draws the eye through a long central hallway.

Photos: Audrey Hall Photography

Mockbee invited her down to Auburn, Ala., to learn more about his and Coleman Coker's work in the rural South. "Doing the book gave me faith that you could be in the middle of nowhere and create great architecture," Ryker says. From Mockbee and Coker, Nave adds, "we learned that you can do something you think is right and not necessarily what you've been taught."

Attracted by Montana's sweeping natural landscape, the couple, who were married in 1996, knew they wanted to settle there. But first they left Alabama for Portland, Ore., where Nave landed a job working for Brad Cloepfil, AIA, at Allied Works Architecture — another firm practicing outside the mainstream of American architecture at the time. After Portland came a move to Texas so Ryker could work toward her Ph.D. in architecture at Texas A&M, her undergraduate alma mater. In 1998, they fulfilled their original plan. Ryker got a job teaching at Montana State University in Bozeman, while Nave worked for a nearby firm.

learning by doing

Ryker's Ph.D. studies focused on the complex emotional and intellectual connection between creativity and the natural environment. As a teacher, she decided the best way for students to understand this relationship was to embark on an immersive design/build course in the wilds of southern Montana. She created a for-credit program called the Remote Studio, in which a group of students designs and builds a public structure over a period of several weeks. Led by Ryker, they live near the site, staying in loaned housing and eating communal meals. The students read

assigned texts and engage in campfire discussions on ecology, art, and philosophy. "The primary goal is to give the students a hands-on experience of the backcountry and for them to become more invested in it," she says. Though the students receive course credits at MSU, the program is actually run through the Artemis Institute, an independent nonprofit set up by Ryker.

Many Remote Studio alums go on to work for Ryker/Nave Design, the firm the couple started in 2000. They currently employ a staff of three, as well as a moral-support team of two dogs, two cats, and a duo of ducks. The low-slung, organic-modern office — designed and built by the firm in 2005 — is attached to a solar panel-topped workshop for fabricating furniture, cabinetry, and other custom items. "Our projects don't have many off-the-shelf objects," Nave says. At one point the firm built all its own designs, under his direction. "We started as design/build because build takes longer, so it helped support us at first," he explains. "Also, we had a hunch that it was the only way to really explore sustainable building." Since then they've found a few local builders whose craftsmanship meets their standards, so they've phased out the "build" portion of their practice.

But Nave was right: their tenure as general contractors did help them in their quest for sustainability, a cornerstone of the practice. "We learned how to create a deviation or an efficiency — not necessarily for economy, but to save energy," Ryker says. A recent Shield River Valley, Mont., house included straw bale walls, at the client's request. Standard straw bale construction isn't ideal for Montana's weather and seismic

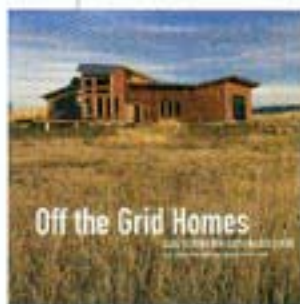
reading matters

In addition to her monograph on Mockbee/Coker Architects, Lori Ryker has written two books on sustainable design. *Off The Grid* (Gibbs Smith, Publisher, 2005) presented building strategies for reducing

dependence on conventional energy systems. This spring its sequel, *Off the Grid Homes* (Gibbs Smith, Publisher, 2007), hit stores.

The new book provides a more in-depth, hands-on look at resource-conserving tech-

nologies, including photovoltaics, geothermal heating, rainwater collection, solar hot water, and wind turbines. Ryker explains these systems through six case studies of homes designed by Ryker/Nave; David Hertz, AIA; Arkin Tilt Architects; and others. Photos, floor plans, and handy illustrations complement her clear prose, and a list of builders, technicians, and manufacturers rounds out the usual project credits. —*m.d.*



*in the
middle of
nowhere*



Photos (above and top): Paul Wierchel Photography

From a distance, the Hall Residence and Studio in Paradise Valley, Mont., reads as a grouping of smaller out-buildings. The house reflects Ryker and Nave's penchant for mixing refined surfaces, like smooth plaster walls, with rougher ones, like exposed posts and beams.



Audrey Hall Photography

“you can design sustainably and it does fit in a budget.”

—lori ryker

conditions, so Nave and the home's builders devised a hybrid system of straw bale insulation and post-and-beam structure. At an under-construction Wyoming house with two rammed-earth walls, he and general contractor Mike Cantalupo experimented with different percentages of water, Portland cement, and earth to find the right mix for the climate.

sustaining notion

Ryker and Nave's own house, also built by the firm and finished in 2005, serves as a laboratory for environmental concepts. It sits just a few steps from the entry to their office, eliminating the need for a gas-guzzling commute. Like their other work, the house is oriented for optimum solar gain. A rooftop rain collector harvests water to reuse for landscape irrigation. Reclaimed materials, such as massaranduba kitchen counters made from leftover floorboards, fill the 2,300-square-foot building. Radiant heat supplements the passive solar system, and nontoxic Icynene insulation keeps the interiors toasty during harsh winters.

An appraiser recently told the couple their energy-efficient heating and insulation systems added monetary value to the home. That was exactly what they hoped to hear. “There's a cultural trend lately that's assigning value to sustainability,” Nave says. “I think the change in the client mindset is starting to make a difference.” Cost-saving techniques, such as thickening some of the walls and covering them with grout for a poured-concrete look, helped limit the home's construction cost to \$205 per square foot (including an assumed contractor fee). While certainly not cheap, that's a pretty fair price for a completely

custom home. “You can design sustainably and it does fit in a budget,” Ryker says. Still, she and Nave do deem certain areas worth splurging on: They used long-lasting plaster instead of fragile drywall, for example, and they didn't skimp on their landscaping.

The two feel lukewarm about LEED's points-based green building rating system. “We both have issues with the quantitative approach,” Nave says. Still, he adds, “If we were doing a planned community, we would try it.” Their own intuitive, place-based approach to sustainability has many fans. Ryker's speech at this year's Structures for Inclusion conference in Charlotte, N.C., was rated by attendees as one of the most popular lectures on the program, according to conference organizer Bryan Bell, founder and executive director of the nonprofit Design Corps. “She's interested in the emotional side ... in getting in touch with nature,” he says.

Ryker and Nave also believe sustainable design extends to supporting local businesses as much as possible. Until about three years ago, they had trouble finding sources for environmental building products in Montana, Wyoming, Idaho, and the Dakotas, but a nationwide surge of interest in green building has made that task easier.

Every architectural choice Ryker and Nave make is a considered response to the spectacular, unspoiled environment in which they live. That environment responds back to them, shaping their lifestyles and points of view. “You are naïve to think you're at the top of the food chain when you're living here. We have bears and rattlesnakes,” Ryker explains. “It really teaches you to recognize you're part of the place.” ■



Photographs: Courtesy RykerNave Design

The dynamic, faceted walls inside this on-the-board commercial project in downtown Livingston, Mont., showcase the firm's sculptural approach to space.