

Viewed from across one of the property's three spring-fed ponds, the elegant Modernist residence "looks like a houseboat," says lead architect John Umbanhowar. Weather-resistant ipe wood cladding distinguishes the upstairs master suite. An open two-level deck just off the ground floor family room includes a sunken hot tub in which, Umbanhowar says, "you feel like you're sitting in the surrounding water."

IN BIG TIMBER, MONTANA, A POND-SIDE RETREAT IS POISED SERENELY ABOVE HISTORIC FLOOD LINES

FLOATING MODERNISM

STORY BY **NORMAN KOLPAS**
PHOTOGRAPHY BY **GIBEON PHOTOGRAPHY**



ARCHITECTURE BY **HUGHES UMBANHOWAR ARCHITECTS** INTERIOR FURNISHINGS BY **MUSE ENTERPRISES**
LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE BY **RAYMOND JUNGLES** CONSTRUCTION BY **HIGHLINE PARTNERS**

FOR 10 YEARS, A DOUBLE-WIDE TRAILER SERVED AS HOME BASE FOR THE OWNERS OF THIS 2,000-ACRE VACATION PROPERTY NEAR THE TOWN OF BIG TIMBER, MONTANA.

Finally, after much contemplation of the ideal spot for a permanent residence, they decided on a cottonwood-sheltered clearing that overlooks a spring-fed pond near Big Timber Creek and offers breathtaking views of the Crazy Mountains. Further consideration, however, revealed one major challenge: The site occupies a hundred-year-flood plain, meaning that future spring melts could inundate the ground floor of anything they built.

Architects John Umbanhowar and Scott Hughes devised an ingenious yet simple solution: a structure that rests atop a 30-inch-tall porous plinth that safely elevates the lowermost finished floor well above the highest projected flood line. “The worst-case-disaster scenario we imagined was almost beautiful,” says Umbanhowar, “with the house seeming to float out there safe and sound above all this rushing water.”

Even more beautiful is the design created by Hughes Umbanhowar Architects, a firm known for a Modernist style that emphasizes “pure, clean, large unfettered spaces in which we baldly express the materials we use,” according to Umbanhowar. In this case, they devised a 3,800-square-foot structure, constructed by Highline Partners of Bozeman and Big Sky, conceived as two interlocking spaces—a long, one-story wood-clad expanse intersected by a two-story “wedge” to form a T shape.

To delineate those spaces, they chose materials that express the natural beauty of the local surroundings. The hallway that runs the entire length of the main floor, for example, is paneled in weathered pine boards repurposed from snow fences, creating the feeling—especially in summertime, when sections of the window wall are slid open—“that you’re walking down the

wood-slatted porches of Main Street in a frontier town, with your spurs clanging away,” Umbanhowar says.

Limestone blocks and slabs—from the entry steps to the stacked fireplace surround in the TV room to the pathway leading across the pond—look just as they did when they were extracted from a quarry in Harlowton, only 45 miles away. In fact, the larger slabs still show ripples from the streambeds in which they were originally deposited millions of years ago. On the upper floor, trims and overhangs of bonderized steel, coated with an anticorrosive solution that gives it a rich earthen finish, harmonize with warm-hued ipe wood siding that visually defines the master suite.

Throughout the house, however, sweeping expanses of insulated low-emissivity glass predominate. Framed in weathered mahogany, the windows showcase incredible views of distant peaks, surrounding landscapes and the property’s impressive water features.

To marry the architecture to its wild setting, the homeowners enlisted the help of Raymond Jungles, a Miami-based landscape architect known for designs that celebrate water. In collaboration with Pond and Stream Consulting in Bozeman, Jungles widened the pond nearest the house, giving it a more natural shape, then added two more ponds linked by a rambling stream that keeps water freshly circulating through a series of small cascades. Boulders sourced on site, riparian plantings, native shrubs and grasses and many of the property’s existing trees were also incorporated into the design (with help from Sandi Blake of Blake Nursery in Big Timber), resulting in a new landscape that blended easily and quickly with its native surroundings. “Within a year, the landscaping looked as if it had always been there,” Jungles recalls.

The result of all these efforts—both outdoors and throughout the interiors, which were furnished with eloquent minimalism by Michelle Andrews of Muse Enterprises—fulfills a goal that John Umbanhowar describes as consistent with a primary aim of the Modernist style. “This home,” he says, “is supposed to seem as if it has come out of the ground naturally, and has been and will be there for a while.” ○

RIGHT, TOP: A dramatic four-sided fireplace is located at the intersection of the main floor’s two axes: one contains the home’s public spaces—including the great room, pictured here—and the other includes the family room, children’s bedrooms and kitchen. RIGHT, BOTTOM: The sod and pebble roofing of the downstairs bedroom wing allows the views from the upstairs master suite to blend seamlessly with the landscape beyond.



THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM BELOW, LEFT: Local limestone slabs step up to a pivoting front door framed in weathered mahogany. In the master bedroom, a rotating Fireorb steel fireplace hangs from the 13-foot ceiling. Above the bed is a Spider sconce by Serge Mouille. In a corner of the downstairs family room, window walls can slide open to the waterside deck. FACING PAGE: Limestone steps rise from the foyer to the central fireplace.



LANDSCAPING AU NATUREL

Miami-based landscape architect Raymond Jungles shares his expert advice on how to achieve a natural look in your own garden.

GO NATIVE "Get to know the plant material that is either native in your region or thrives there," says Jungles, who adds that "this knowledge is critical" to gardening success.

KNOW THE SITE Understanding drainage conditions and the orientation of the sun toward various parts of the garden will help you ensure that you place the right plants in the right locations.

CHOREOGRAPHER "Work out how you want to circulate through the garden, how you'll see what you want to see," Jungles advises, noting that the positioning of trees is most important.

BE MINIMALIST "Use large amounts of a few plants and repeat them," Jungles says, adding that "nature paints in large brushstrokes."

GET A CONSULT Find a landscape designer or architect whose work you admire, and buy a consultation. "Most people can afford at least that. Planning is some of the best money you can spend on your garden."



"THIS HOUSE IS MEANT TO BE A VEHICLE FOR EXPERIENCING WATER IN MULTIPLE WAYS."

JOHN UMBANHOWAR


“WHEN THINKING ABOUT THE HOUSE,
OUR BIG IDEA WAS THAT IT SHOULD FEEL LIKE A RAFT.”

JOHN UMBANHOWAR



FACING PAGE: A limestone pathway leads from the garage to the entrance. THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: The landings leading to the master suite have expansive views that, says the architect, “make you feel like you’re in a tree house.” Many of the existing surrounding trees were incorporated into the landscaping. The Bulthaup kitchen’s oak countertop can be pulled into the hall for extra dining and entertaining space. Weathered wood siding evokes the region’s vintage ranch buildings.



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