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RENDERING: THE FUSION EQUATION

Tommy Hein Architects merges sustainability with history

WRITTEN BY Kathy Chin Leong PHOTOGRAPHY BY Chris Marona



Camping on property in Telluride, Colorado, Tommy Hein traces the arc of the sunrise. He waits for the sunset alpenglow when mountains are set ablaze with pinks, reds and oranges. For this architect, such an experience is how he connects with nature's rhythms to deliver a design that capitalizes on views and maximizes on terrain.

"I spend a lot of time discovering the uniqueness of a place," he explains. "I see where elk, bear and deer have matted the grass down. Animal resting spots are usually the best place for a living room. Animals have an innate sense of privacy and refuge."

The successful principle of designing "from the outside in" is how Hein has established one of the most prominent architectural firms in this resort town. "We spend a great deal of time in all seasons, at all times of the day, to understand the unique aspects of each site's microclimate."

With anywhere from six to 15 associates, Tommy Hein Architects creates downtown getaways to monolithic dream homes. Hein, 46, conjures up dwellings resulting in

a fusion of modern beauty and function. This is underscored with a sensitivity to nature and artistic threads that pay homage to historical roots.

"The West is a magical place. You wake up and never get bored looking at the valley," he says. While tempted to leave his downtown office to go for a bike ride on a sunny day, Hein stays anchored to his job, knowing crucial projects await. On this afternoon, Hein straightens up the curls of blueprints piled on his office table. It's a busy time, and he tackles every job as if he were building his own home. For that reason, a commission may last up to three years since he sees each project through to completion. "I have to do this. Details are very important to me."

Hein is admittedly a philosophical man. His Taoist background shapes his view of nature and the universe. He incorporates feng shui principles, having studied under a feng shui master for seven years. He admires the works of many





Opposite page, from top: Aerial walkways for the Bridge House in Telluride's Mountain Village, speak in dramatic and inviting tones. | Architect Tommy Hein spends abundant time at the site of every project to understand, appreciate and maximize each structure's relationship with its natural environment. **This page:** This ski house in Aspen, Colorado, is anchored by stone, glass and steel materials, and embraces a poetic panorama.



Clockwise from top: The roofline of the Sunnyside House project near Telluride mirrors that of the mountain peaks in the background, a classic Tommy Hein style point. | The tailored Dwyer residence downtown harkens back to Telluride's mining history. | From inside the Dwyer home, the family enjoys magnificent hillside views that change throughout the year.



architects, including Frank Lloyd Wright, Renzo Piano, Peter Bohlin and Robert Stern.

Customers choose him for his fresh approach. When Ira Chaplik came from Chicago looking for an architect, houses that consistently caught his eye just happened to be designed by Hein. "Tommy's work is truly original, nothing cookie cutter about it," says Chaplik.

Hein designed exactly what Chaplik wanted: a house



that resembles an old mill, reflecting the mining vernacular of historic Telluride. The house sits on a long and narrow 30- by 100-foot lot, and the exterior is made of dark steel for the beams and panels. Local stone and reclaimed barnwood are used inside and out. “The house has great lines,” says Chaplik. “When you are inside, all these little details that Tommy designed really come to life, and the house is incredibly interesting as a result of his efforts.”

While each Tommy Hein house is an original, certain themes remain constant. A roofline often mimics the movement of the mountain range and trees in the background. “My inspiration mostly comes from nature,” he explains. One house was derived from the idea of a sunflower. The home is designed from a single point and all the rooms radiate outward like petals.

Hein is also inspired by local history. Telluride is rife with water towers, mills and mines. According to Hein, the timbers of one of his houses will recall a forest. A steel walk bridge is reminiscent of those used in the mines. Buildings, he stresses, should take cues from their surroundings. Hence, he utilizes century-old themes and applies them to structures with a modern interpretation.

Passion for sustainability is evidenced through aptly placed windows and overhangs that introduce warmth as well as shade. Exteriors using barnwood absorb sunlight, heating spaces naturally.

He adds, “I can design a house that uses 50 percent of the energy as others the same size. We do this through site sensitivity as well as technology using triple-paned windows and insulation.”

Indeed, technology plays a huge role in production. The firm uses Google Earth to chart mountain peaks to a precise point for an ideal window height. In the office sit solid building models produced from 3-D printers.

All of this technology runs in the background because what Hein is really interested in are the people and their needs for comfortable dwellings. “Relationships with people inspire me to create spaces that enhance their well-being and promote personal growth.”

Hein has had much time to develop his architectural philosophy. Born in Chicago, “the Mecca of architecture,” at the age of 10 Hein knew architecture was his calling as he was already drawing make-believe floor plans.

At the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, pursuing an architecture degree, he got his first break coming up with house drawings for a developer. By the time he graduated, many of his blueprints had become realities, and local jobs came easily. But in 1992, Hein found Telluride’s Western charms irresistible, so he packed up his sketchbooks and flew here to establish his practice. Says Hein, “I changed my view from skyscrapers to the mountains of Telluride.”

His passion for architecture remains the same today as it was when he arrived. His aesthetic, he maintains, continues to evolve. “Every day I feel like I am still getting going even though I have been doing this for 25 years.”

So, after a quarter of a century of architecture, which is his favorite project? He smiles broadly and answers matter-of-factly: “The next one.” ■

Kathy Chin Leong almost declared architecture as her major in college, but was wooed by her passion for writing and journalism. Now as a regular contributor to WA&A, she feels she has the best of both worlds.

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