



# FORM, FUNCTION, TAO

**STRAUSS-WILSON RESIDENCE**

**LOCATION:** TELLURIDE, COLORADO **ARCHITECT:** TOMMY HEIN



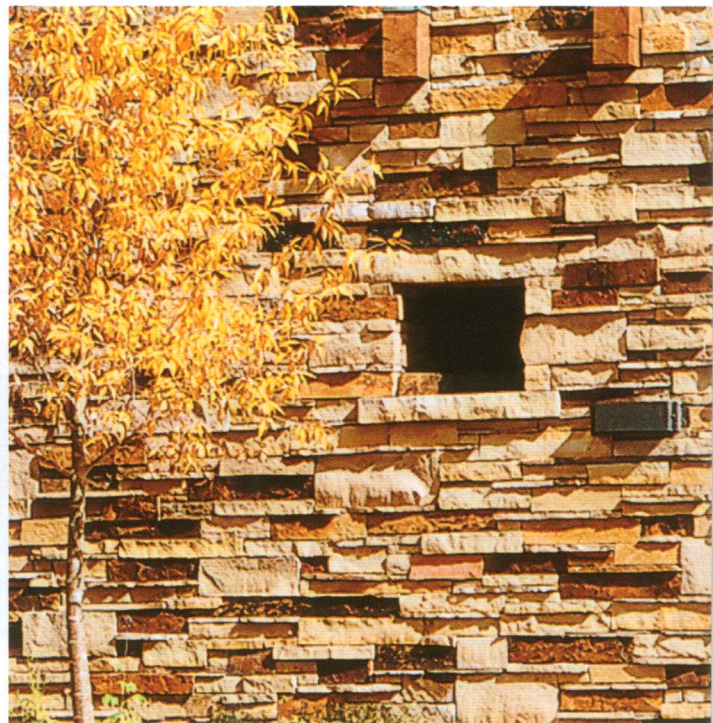
**ABOVE:** The wide curving driveway brings *qi* (subtle energy) into the generous motor court. "The steps were rounded as well to embrace the *qi* entering the house," explains Hein.

**ABOVE RIGHT:** The stonework of the residence evokes the texture of the Anasazi ruins at nearby Chaco Canyon.

Asked to describe the philosophy that informs his architecture, Telluride architect Tommy Hein points to the *Tao* ("The Way"): "The *Tao Te Ching* is very integral to my perception. Anything I design has that philosophical foundation." This ancient philosophy of the essential duality and constant flux of nature translates into a dynamic approach to design. Hein never begins a new project with a preconceived idea of what the house might look like but leaves it open to "the people, land, and processes." This openness in the design process allows it to evolve with a fusion

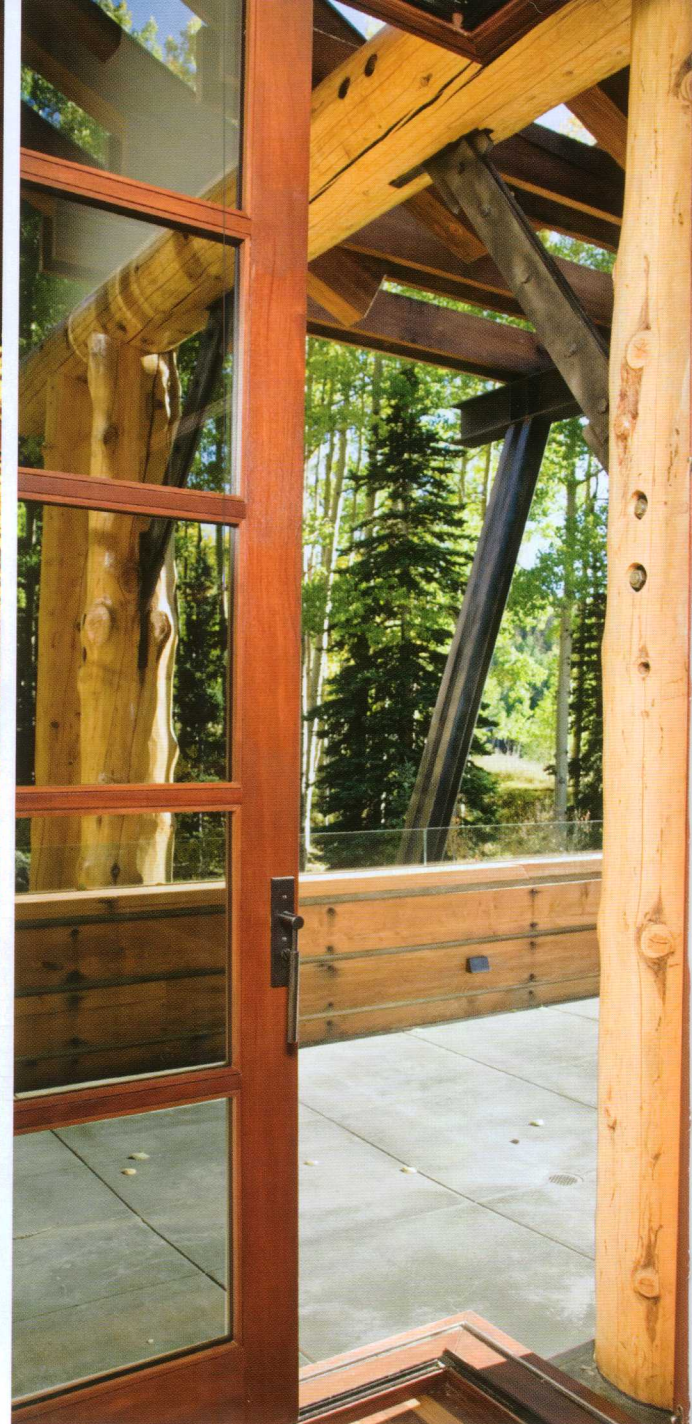
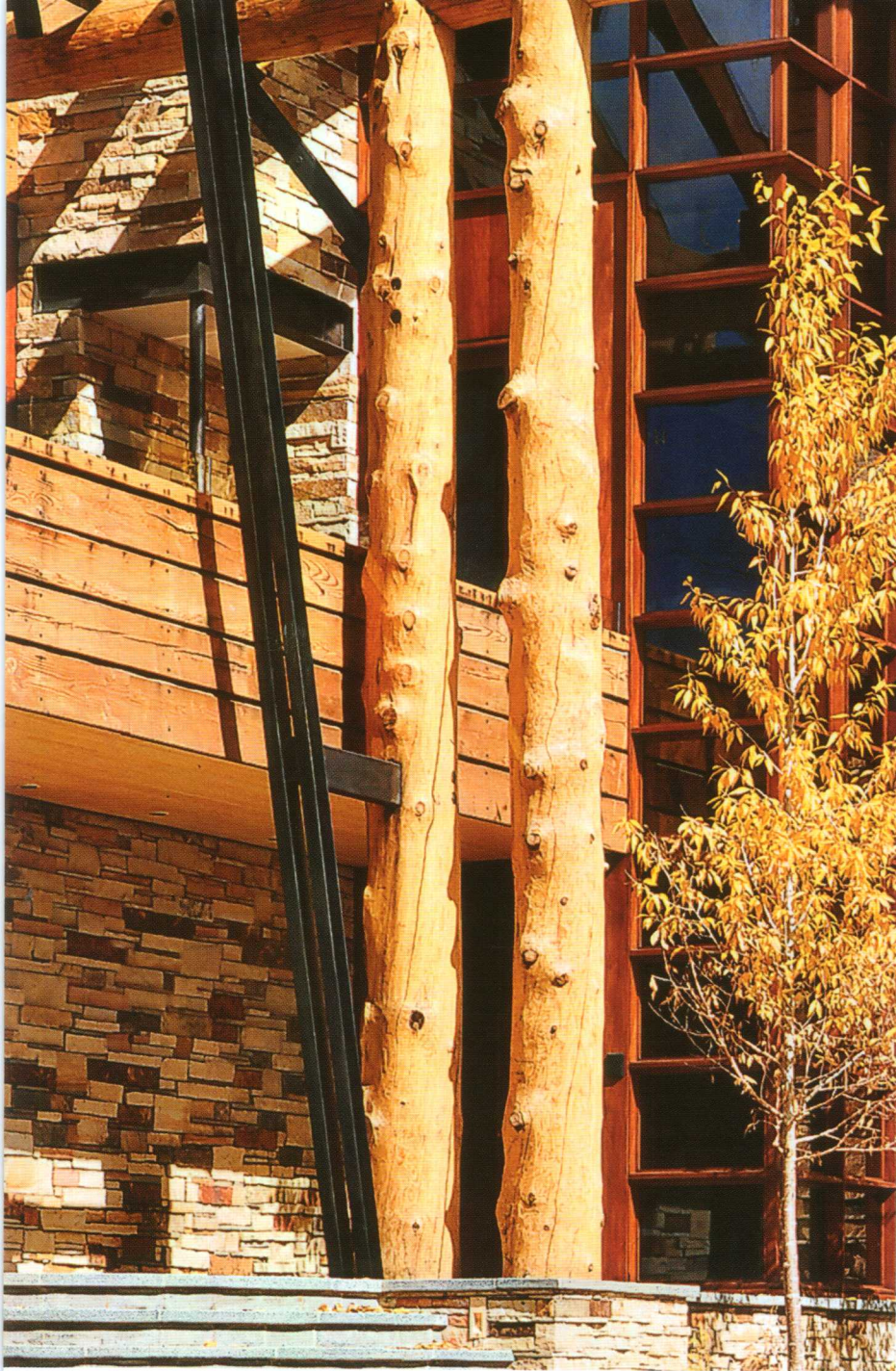
We pierce doors and windows in making a house, and it is in these spaces, where there is nothing, that the usefulness of the house depends.

—Lao Tzu



of influences, enabling Hein to explore diverse possibilities that relate and meld a structure to its site and context—climate, topography, history, regional vernacular—vis-à-vis the clients' particular needs and sensibilities.

Steve Strauss and Lise Wilson asked Hein to design a vacation lodge for their family on a wooded site with spectacular views of distant mountain ranges. Hein listened to his clients' desire for "natural balance" and "calmness" and looked to architectural traditions profoundly connected with the natural world: ancient



Pueblo ruins, National Park lodges, Frank Lloyd Wright's "natural houses," and the mountain shrines of ancient Japan. This fusion of related traditions gives the house a monumental character in keeping with the rugged grandeur of the surrounding mountains while creating a fluid statement that morphs between the idioms of a relativized architectural language.

The design embraces the duality of the primary modes of construction. The stone and concrete "earthwork," as Hein describes it, allows

the building "to grow from the natural landscape, while its steel-and-timber framing extend aerially to support the sheltering slate roof." Paying homage to the nearby monuments of the Southwest, the stonework evokes the texture of Chaco Canyon ruins. The rustic National Parks vocabulary also enters the home through the post-and-beam construction, broad overhangs, natural timber pergola, and inflected single-gable roof. The timber-frame elements of National Park style share an affini-

ty with the architectural features of seventh-century Japanese shrines (the protruding rafters of the roof are a quotation from the Ise Shrine, the oldest timber-frame structure in the world) and strongly recall the organic architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright.

In his site analysis, Hein conducts a preliminary feng shui study to understand the healthy flow of energy, or *qi* (pronounced "chee"), in a home's design. Hein works with the Form School principles of feng shui, which depend on intuitive insight, and



**FACING FAR LEFT:** The paired log timbers that flank the entrance are functional and symbolic. The structural supports recall the Japanese *torii* gate placed in front of temples and shrines to direct *kami* (spirits of nature).

**LEFT:** Screen-like mahogany windows evoke the simple geometric patterns of *shoji*.

**RIGHT:** The soapstone fountain and lap pool encourage prosperity from the *yin* properties associated with water, and balance the *yang* energy of the mountains.



emphasize the contours of the landscape to determine the orientation of the house most favorable to encouraging qi. As Hein explains: "The wide, curved driveway brings qi into the generous motor court. The steps are rounded to draw qi into the house. Protection is naturally formed as the site rises to the southwest." To reinforce the home's position, trees were planted and a berm was added to the south in the shape of a dragon. An elegant soapstone fountain and lap pool is positioned in front to encour-

age prosperity from the *yin* properties associated with water, and to balance the *yang* energy of the mountains.

While feng shui figures significantly in the structure's orientation, Japanese elements are more important to its design details. From windows and doors to custom built-in cabinets, Hein took traditional Japanese forms and "distilled them down to a modern essence." The resulting clean modernism was the synthesis of the clients' Asian and contemporary sensibilities. The

screen-like mahogany windows evoke the simple geometric patterns of *shoji*. The steel framework that supports the exterior pergola recalls the Japanese *engawa* (veranda), and the paired timbers near the entrance conjure a *torii* gate (traditionally placed at the entrance of a shrine to mark the boundary between the outside world and the sacred precincts). Hein's strategies for opening the house to nature by "breaking down barriers from interior to exterior" are key to the design. The rooms



**LEFT:** The spruce log timbers frame an expansive view of the mountains and create the feeling of an open-air pavilion.

**FACING RIGHT:** The corner windows erode the walls, opening the interior to the beauty of nature outside.

**FACING FAR RIGHT:** Hein based the mahogany doors and *tatami* (mat-covered) platform of the meditation room on historic detailing from traditional Japanese architecture.

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relate to the outside with expansive views through window walls, corner windows that erode the enclosure, and square windows that frame small scenes. The main balcony cantilevers over the lower terrace, extending the interior to the outside.

The consistent use of complementary materials throughout the house contributes to a sense of calm. Locally quarried stone is used for exterior walls and terraces as well as for interior wall planes. All of the timbers are recycled Douglas fir and sustainably

harvested spruce. (In its materials and economical vertically stacked massing, the house aspires to an ethics of sustainability important in a mountain region sensitive to the impact of development.) The calm achieved by the materials and details is carried further by the fundamental consistency of proportion, all of which relates to the *ken*, a Japanese system of measurement (about 3 x 6 feet) based on the *tatami* mat, sized for a reclining body. Hein explains, "This geometry is carried rigorously throughout the whole project.

It is the consistency of proportion that creates a sense of calm." The 1-to-2 ratio in proportions is carried through every element from large to small: the rafters are 6 x 12 inches; the window panes are 2 x 4 feet.

Tectonic consistency demonstrates as well Hein's "deep respect for modernism," where economy and essential treatment of materials accord with the Japanese aesthetic. The revealed joinery of the steel framework highlights the functional beauty of that material much as Japanese joinery



calls attention to its nature and function. Eric Hildebrandt, Hein's associate for the project, points to the duality of the functional elements: "While the linear tracteries of steel float around the telluric masses of stone, the anthropomorphic girth of the log timbers bears the weight of the slate roof back down to the earthwork." The nature of the cladding material varies according to the volume it protects: rough plank siding wraps the core; smooth mahogany and copper wrap the smaller volumes.

Duality also characterizes the home's interior space: openness and enclosure, light and dark, public and private space. The first level flows into a "cavern-like" labyrinth of rooms—wine cellar, bedrooms, playroom, exercise room, and meditation room—defined by portals and creating spaces that invite exploration while also providing a sense of shelter and privacy. The second level, by contrast, opens dramatically onto a vaulted "tent-like" communal space that recalls an open-air pavilion with

a massive stone fireplace and views of distant mountains. The great room flows seamlessly into dining and kitchen areas, with the lofty master suite on the third level.

The dialogue between contrasting forms and materials and the flux of opposites—volume and space, symmetry and asymmetry, rustic and refined—create a balanced composition of opposing qualities and forces on every level. That results in a dynamic architectural experience at once timeless and contemporary.