

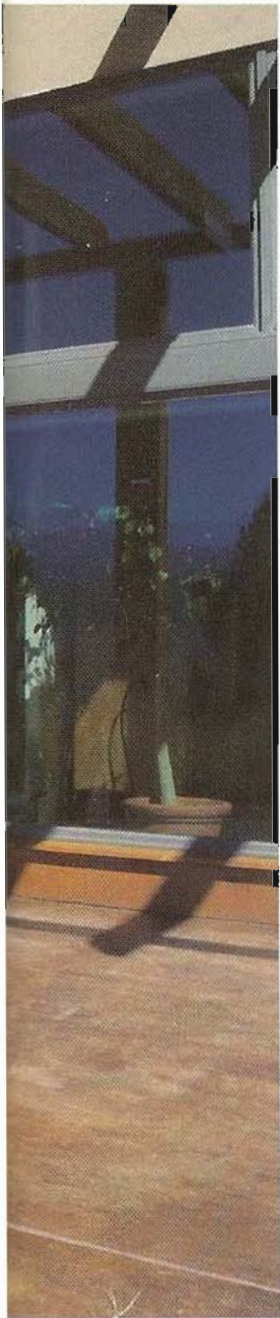
Aspen architect Willis Pember in front of Blue Moon Ranch in Missouri Heights. He designed the home with the landscape playing an equal role to the building.

# Echoing the land

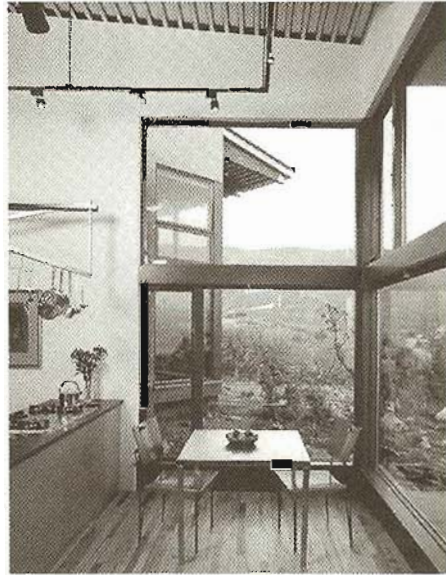
**ARCHITECT WILLIS PEMBER INTERTWINES THE HOME AND LANDSCAPE AT BLUE MOON RANCH**

BY KATIE REDDING





Pat Schneider



Robert Mirmiran

Simple details of Blue Moon Ranch's interior, like the kitchen area, are in contrast to its big architectural ideas.

As a consequence of gravity, all structures must be built in places. For Aspen architect Willis Pember, land is not simply something to construct a building on; rather it's an equal partner in a conversation. "The house is not an isolated object," he says. "You're constructing the landscape as the building grows — and then when your building stops growing, landscape is a process that keeps working on the building."

Pember's beliefs are immediately apparent in Blue Moon Ranch, where four simple boxes emerge along a winding road lined with sage, pinion pine and scrub oak. Made from steel, wood and sage-colored stucco, the home's exterior interlocks with its place on the land. The home's basic elements — the sweep of a descending roofline, unique shapes, and careful architectural details — are designed to both remember the landscape and create the sense of refuge desired by the homeowners.

Dressed in jeans, glasses and a Carhartt jacket, Pember is part Colorado outdoorsman, part artist, part philosopher. He speaks compellingly about his architectural philosophy as a reaction against that of

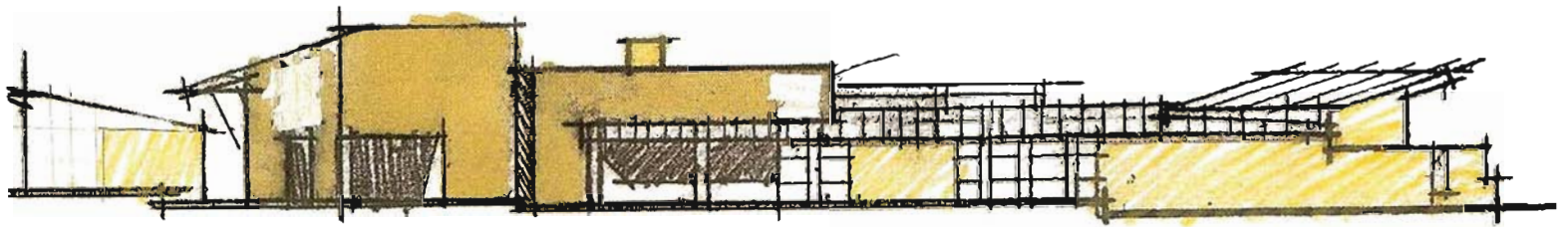
his mentor, renowned postmodernist Robert Venturi — and about his decision to move to Aspen, which was influenced by the work of modernist Herbert Bayer. Frequently, Pember apologizes for being too professorial.

He is, however, wholly an architect and has been for 16 years in Aspen. And for the past 11 years, he has been the principal of his eponymous Aspen firm, Willis Pember Architects Inc., whose philosophy he describes as "the revenge of quality over quantity." "I guess we feel a little insulted, or at least I do, personally, just driving around, you know, all this stuff," he says of the mansions that dot the landscape of the Roaring Fork Valley. "People build these outrageously gaudy houses. They're really just designed to impress on the street. And that diminishes the subject of architecture, to a large extent."

Blue Moon Ranch is, emphatically, not gaudy. More importantly, it takes care of its place, complimenting the landscape. Rather than excavate a small hill on the property, Pember built the house in a curve around it. To echo the land's undulations, Pember created four levels inside the house so that



View from an Architect





The dominant metaphor of the house is a repeating, diminishing echo that connects the void of the vast mountains to a human scale.

Bottom left: An architect's early sketch of what Blue Moon Ranch would look like and its relationship to the land. Left: The finished product incorporates a descending roofline and four levels inside to recognize the topography underneath.



Robert Hillman

walking through the finished structure, one remembers the topography *br>br>*

The dominant metaphor of the house is a repeating, diminishing echo that connects the void of the vast mountains to a human scale. Struck by the property's position on the edge of a two-sided drop with a clear view of the valley

floor below. Pember felt a keen sense that the structure itself should reflect its mountaintop location, and by extension, the echo. Nowhere is this more apparent than on the home's roofline, which is meant to represent the diminishing sound wave of an echo's return. Pember reduced each roof pitch, from left to right, until the final pitch — a word that also



Carefully thought-out details of Blue Moon Ranch's interior reinforce a theme of communication between land and building. The concrete living room floor extends outside to a concrete porch. Panes of glass throughout the home bring the natural setting indoors.

has a definition in the world of sound — is nearly flat and reposed to the land.

But in contrast to Blue Moon Ranch's big architectural ideas, the home's construction is simple. "There's not a lot of excess," Pember explains. Many of the details play a dual role as practical features, such as the tiny perforations in the steel ceiling that allow sound to absorb into an acoustic sponge, or the passive solar design that conserves energy.

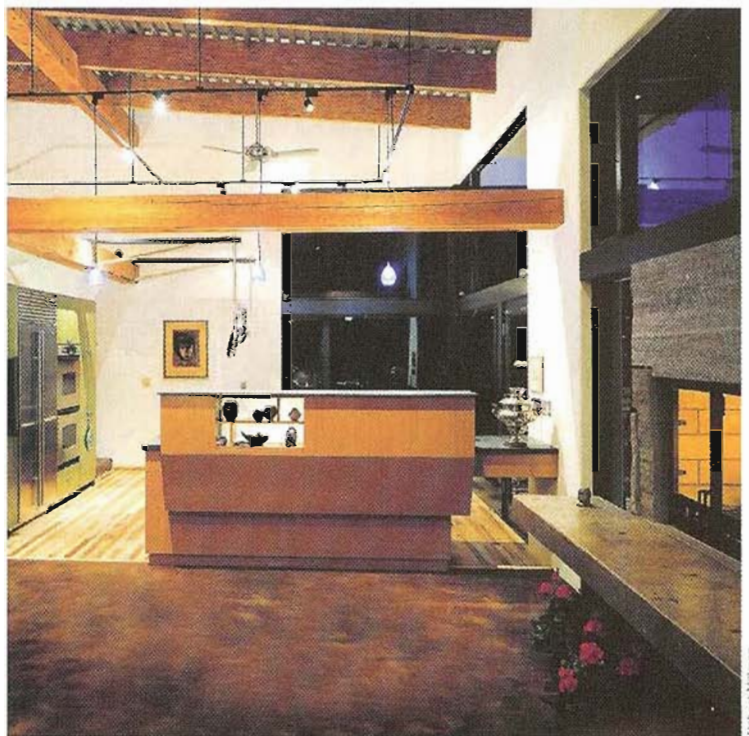
The details of the home also reinforce the larger theme of communication between land and building — both inside and out, Pember says. The living room's concrete floor moves out to become a concrete porch, the steel roof and wood beams fly out to become overhangs, and an exterior trellis pushes into the living room, adding texture. Panes of glass on the home's south-facing side leave the home exposed to its surroundings. In the home's center, a large social space is anchored with an indoor-outdoor fireplace set in the middle of an exterior glass wall. Mirroring hearths, inside and outside, are sprinkled with basalt rock extracted from the site — a detail that almost got left out but was added at the last minute, much to the satisfaction of the homeowners, Pember says.

Blue Moon Ranch was finished in 2002, alongside one of Pember's most famous public projects, the Wagner Park restrooms and clock tower. An experiment in building as exhibition, the restrooms feature a local history timeline and a solar-powered explanation of the building's green features. Pember also calls the building "green theater," noting that its public porches serve as stages for musical events.

Both projects won the 2002 American Institute of Architects Honor Award, and the Wagner Park project also won an award from the American Society of Landscape Architects, an unusual accolade from across disciplinary lines. ■



Robert Mitrani



Robert Mitrani