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The only experience New Yorker Ron Gompertz ever had with architecture was building a bird house in seventh-grade wood shop. Then one day he found himself in Montana . . .

# Big Dog. Big Sky.

Wrapped with cedar slats whose hues match the tones of the surrounding high plains, the striking "View Silo" (designed by architect Clark Stevens) becomes a natural part of the Montana plain—as does the owner's dog, Keeper.

Project: Gompertz Residence  
Architect: Clark Stevens, RoTo Architects  
Location: Livingston, Montana

Tucked into an upper bank of the Yellowstone River, the tower gracefully merges with the sky, thanks to its light-filled "crown"—a rooftop viewing platform fenced with slats set two inches apart.



Ron Gompertz is not the settling-down type. Career changes—buying housewares for Bloomingdales in Manhattan, marketing the Alessi kettle to San Franciscans, and moonlighting as a ski instructor in New Jersey—kept him on the move for years. Then, in 1993, he found himself in Livingston, Montana. Having taken yet another career turn to establish Heyday Records, Gompertz was in Livingston to convince a store there to carry his indie releases. Upon discovering the extraordinary views in nearby Paradise Valley, Gompertz recalls, he got a strange feeling. "There was a protracted calm here. I found myself saying, 'I could feel at home in this beautiful place.'"

Gompertz was not alone. Many artists and writers had already settled in Livingston, a town of about 6,800, which promotes itself as the gateway to Yellowstone

National Park. Seven years later, when he decided to build in Paradise Valley, the idea that serenity could be found under Montana's fabled big sky remained foremost in Gompertz's mind. "When we started talking, Ron kept going on about being in the sky," remembers architect Clark Stevens, a partner in the Los Angeles firm RoTo, which designed Gompertz's 1,600-square-foot house. "At first I thought this was an abstraction, but it soon became clear that his intentions were quite literal."

Stevens, who was intent on promoting housing harmonious to this flat valley floor, was initially wary. "I proposed a horizontal form that sat on the alluvial riverbank and peaked over the ridge," he says. "But Ron convinced me that a relationship with the sky was just as valid as one with the river." And so the idea for the Gompertz "tower" was born. ▶

Ron and Michelle love to spend time in their living room, located halfway up the tower. The space wholly succeeds in bringing the outside in—even when the windows are closed.



Furniture with clean lines, like the Alvar Aalto C chair and the Blu Dot table, lets the view take center stage. From the windows in the master bedroom, Ron and Michelle can catch an early morning glimpse of the spectacular Absoroka Mountain range.

Although such structures have been part of the Montana skyline for decades—many neighboring towns are home to aging grain silos—Stevens was insistent that this tower would float in the atmosphere, not dominate it. Now, the first view of Gompertz's \$300,000 home from East River Road testifies to the success of that vision. From the highway, the house appears unexpectedly diminutive. As you approach it, the elements responsible for the tower's fragile stance on this grassy plain become evident.

Thanks to Stevens' deft window placement, it's possible to see through the house, right out to the sky beyond—the tower exhibits little of the weight of its agrarian forebears. The rooftop viewing deck, surrounded by two-by-two-inch slats that are the vertical continuation of the house's siding system, resembles a light-filled crown. These slats hide the weatherproofing, a red

asphalt roofing material, thereby adding motion to the exterior. Further enhancing this lightness is the home's small slab—a 24-foot square—and, on the river side, an exterior wall that curves inward not only to the north-eastern corner but as the tower rises. Thus, the top of the house narrows as it rises to the sky, a feature even more evident when the house is seen from the river. Along with the rich cedar color, which is weathering to a light chocolate brown with silvery highlights, these design elements produce a wonderfully subtle relationship between the 40-foot-high house and the glorious land that surrounds it.

Inside, the house operates as a multilevel viewing platform. An elevated walkway leading to the front door immediately introduces new arrivals to the sensation of being high above the ground. Visitors enter an

interior tailored to the house's pronounced vertical form. Below the entryway, a door opens, revealing a steep ladder that leads down to guest quarters. The rest of the first floor houses Gompertz's bedroom and office, which are two feet below the entry level. More stairs lead up to the living room and again to an airy mezzanine that houses the kitchen/dining area. Off this, another door opens to an exterior ladder that heads up to the viewing platform.

The verticality of the house—it's a long way up to the kitchen when you're carrying heavy grocery bags—would be a problem, if it weren't for the views. Visitors are too busy looking outside to be concerned about the stairs. At a recent party, guests sitting on the living room sofa set their gaze on the fast-running Yellowstone River. In the kitchen, other friends—Hollywood refugees,

decrying the state of the industry—stared at an elongated window resembling the letterbox frame used on TV for widescreen movies.

It's fair to say that in the Gompertz house, life and nature have become one, but achieving such fusion was not easy. Unspoiled views are hard to come by in Montana, and Gompertz's 14-acre site is no exception. Egregious examples of the contemporary suburban home are common on the small parcels of land nearby, so Stevens deftly mapped out the location of the remaining uninterrupted views and placed the windows accordingly. Inside the house, you still feel as if you're surrounded by unspoiled Montana: In the distance you can see Emigrant Peak rising about eight miles away.

These windows, unfortunately, come with one-inch-thick wood frames, which work to make the views ▶

Clever window placement gives the impression that there's nothing outside but unspoiled Montana scenery. The view competes with the crossword puzzle for Michelle's full attention.



## Dwellings

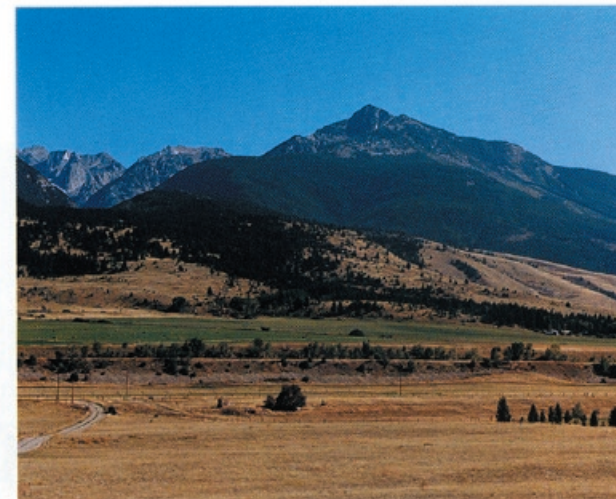


The Cinerama-style window above the kitchen sink makes dishwashing a much more intriguing task.

Stevens placed the narrow exterior cedar slats (at right) at different distances from each other, creating a variable texture that diminishes the massing effect of the tower.

outside appear two-dimensional, almost as if they were framed paintings. Without the frames, the difference between inside and outside would verge on the imperceptible.

Since the house's completion in 2001, Gompertz has been drawn back to the Bay Area to oversee the construction of a large office space for his new company, Mosaic Mercantile. Yet he remains dedicated to the idea of spending half the year in his Paradise Valley tower, along with his fiancée, Michelle Gantt, an art director for Barclays Global Investors Web Services Group. Although they like to take advantage of nearby Yellowstone, the couple comes to the house mostly to relax. "Who knows," he says, "we may even be here all the time." Enveloped in this spectacular sky, Gompertz may finally get to feel truly at home. ■



## New West Land Company

Clark Stevens hopes that the Gompertz house's complementary relationship with nature will inspire others to follow suit when designing houses here. Indeed, he's going one step further: The architect wants Montanans to "design the land" as well.

Driving through towns like Billings or Bozeman, the results of the state's unplanned subdivisions are sadly evident. Houses, rarely designed with any sensitivity to landscape, stand exposed on lots ranging in size from 20 to 40 acres—too small for agricultural exploitation, yet too large to be replanted in a way that might encourage the return of the natural habitat. What remains is a series of giant but arid backyards.

But in the Livingston storefront that houses his New West Land Company—a far cry from RoTo's offices in a converted brewery in downtown Los Angeles—Stevens is busy promoting planning strategies aimed to keep in check the suburbanization of vast tracts of this state. Local ranchers, ecologists, and others worried about the future of Montana love to wander in and discuss these issues with the 39-year-old Michigan native.

"New West strives to find the best possible outcome for the landscape," Stevens explains. "Generally, that's a mix of healthy land base, economic productivity, and cultural viability and vitality." Stevens

endorses conservation easements—parcels of land bought for tax write-off purposes and returned to nature—but he also wants people to mix with nature. "Humans belong on the land," he asserts. "We're not distinct from it."

Spreading plans out on a table, Stevens shows off his latest design for landscape development, covering 10,000 square acres outside Billings. The land nearest the mountains, which now serves as an elk calving area, will become a habitat preserve protected by conservation easements. But a corner parcel of 400 acres near the town services provided by Billings is slated to become a town site. About 280 acres will be actual development, with the balance used as urban parks and habitat corridors.

"This is a strategic move," he explains. "The sale of town lots will finance the purchase of enough land between it and the conservation easement to block any other development." Thus, 9,600 acres can be saved, thanks to the 400-acre development, and the town itself gains commercial value, thanks to its proximity to a natural habitat.

"Designing for land use means solving a different puzzle every time," argues Stevens. "But no one is doing it, not realtors or ranchers. It's a great opportunity for architects and planners." —D.H.