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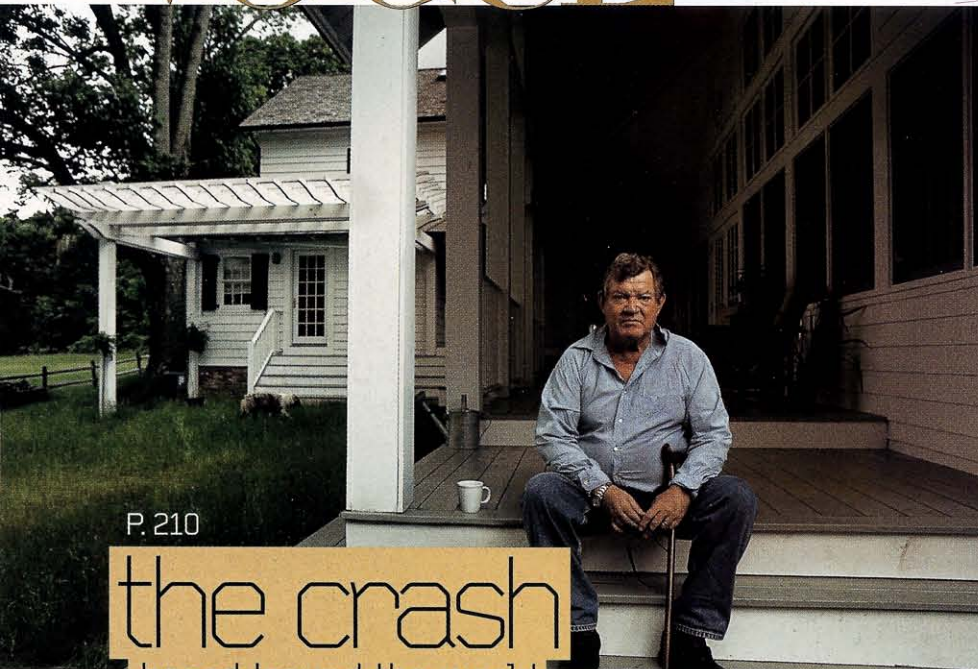
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the crash

heard 'round the world

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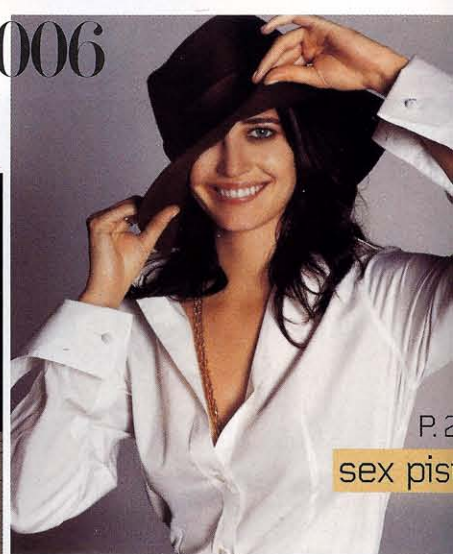
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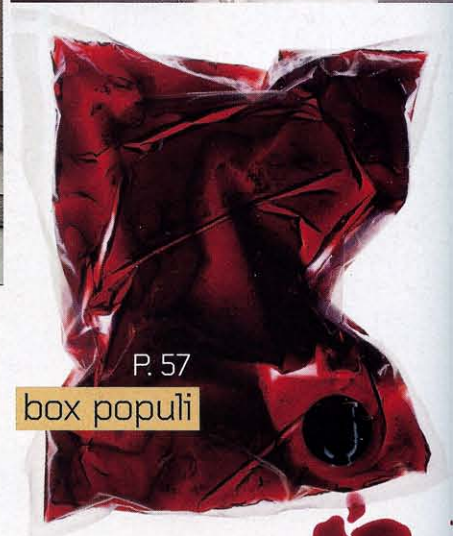
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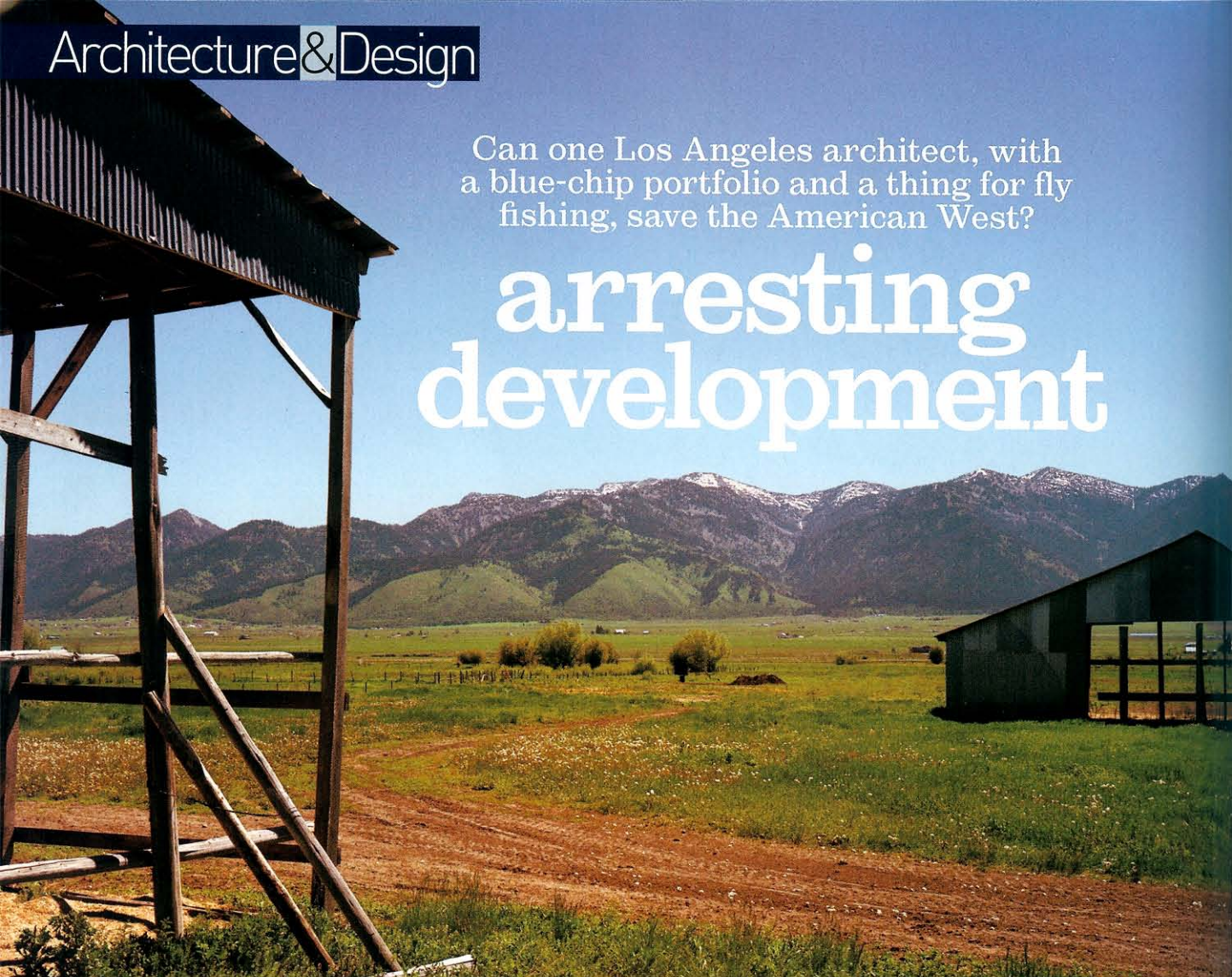


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Can one Los Angeles architect, with a blue-chip portfolio and a thing for fly fishing, save the American West?

arresting development



RANCHO DELUXE

The Jackknife Creek Ranch near Jackson, Wyoming, one of Clark Stevens's current projects. INSET: Stevens's silo-inspired Gompertz Residence in Paradise Valley, Montana.

ate last year, **Clark Stevens**, a partner in the storied Los Angeles firm of RoTo Architects—known for such outlandish design statements as building lap pools from discarded steel tubing—stood overlooking a lava plain on the island of Hawaii. Surveying a vast cattle ranch that soars 4,000 feet from the ocean to peaks covered with sacred Mamane trees, the architect looked like a misplaced nineteenth-century explorer. His white, wide-brimmed fishing hat had flaps hanging down the back of his neck. The skeet belt around his waist was stuffed with sketchbooks, colored pencils, and every scale of topographical map imaginable, along with such modern accoutrements as an oversized digital camera and countless empty water bottles. Reveling in his new role—designing and conserving iconic American landscapes so that they can attract natural habitat and housing alike—the blond, Harvard-trained 43-year-old was oblivious to the outlandish figure he cut. *a&d* >178



AGAINST THE GRAIN

Stevens used reclaimed pine from pickling barrels to clad the Gompertz Residence, which has commanding views of Montana's Absaroka Mountains.



But it had caught the attention of a roaming bull buffalo, and moments later, Stevens was running for his life.

Not all expeditions to discover what Stevens calls "the essential grains of nature" lead to such life-threatening encounters. Indeed, in early 2000, when he started the New West Land Company in Livingston, Montana, to promote his bold ideas for conservation and development, he downplayed his risk-taking personality, along with his years in Los Angeles. "I thought I might get shot if I arrived in Montana and started showing the RoTo portfolio around," he said. Luckily, Stevens—who grew up in Muskegon, Michigan, and spent much of his youth exploring the nearby Manistee National Forest—is blessed with a kinetic, storyteller's personality, a winningly hortatory manner, and a natural ease in the wilderness. It's been key to this cowboy architect's acceptance by ranchers and developers alike in the remote outbacks of Hawaii, Montana, and Wyoming. "What I want to see is not just a revival of nature," Stevens tells them. "I want a place where people know the land and each other well enough to start creating legends again." So far, they seem to be listening.

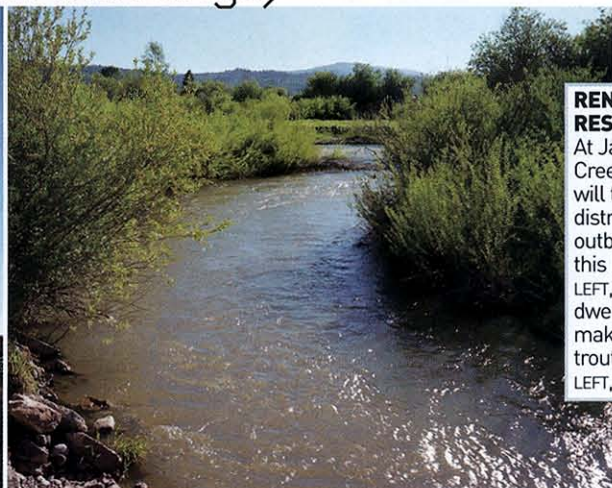
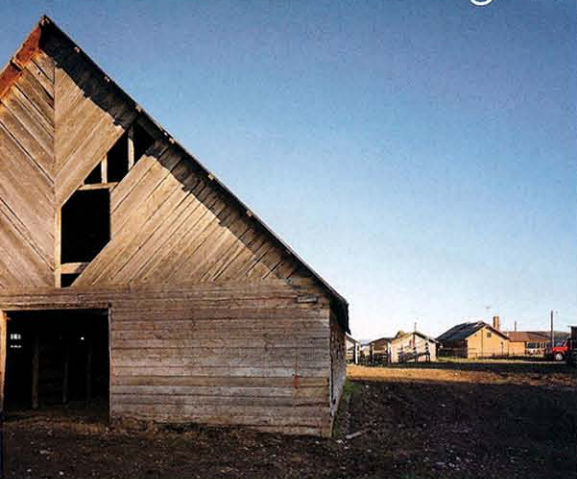
Seeking an escape from the RoTo office (housed in an old, downtown L.A. brewery), Stevens first came to Montana to fish in the late eighties. "There's no getting him out of the river," remarked Chris Allen, whose Stillwater Development Company is backing one of Stevens's current projects. "If he says he'll cook dinner, don't expect to eat before ten."

Driving around the Madison, Gallatin, and Paradise Valleys of Montana, Stevens came face to face with the rapid suburbanization of the West. It broke his heart. Huge cattle ranches, he says, have been sold off, many by owners looking to avoid estate taxes and pay for their own retirement, and then chopped up into small, predominantly ten-acre lots. New buyers arrived and built houses—often McMansions—but little else. Their private pieces of the West—too small for agriculture,

too large for most gardeners—helped produce an increasingly brittle landscape. And with little relationship to the land and its traditions, the new "urban ranchers"—many hailing from Billings and Helena, and from faraway cities like San Francisco and Tokyo—felt isolated. Many, in fact, have now left, leaving blight in their wake.

at the Jackknife Creek Ranch, about 30 minutes southwest of Jackson, Wyoming, Stevens will first restore the historic 210-acre property's natural landmarks: its tall willows and smattering of aspens, and, in particular, its intricate wetlands. "The Jackknife Creek will meander once again," he says of the severely compromised stream that goes through what was once a family cattle ranch. "A good meander and a steady flow is vital for healthy fish habitat," Stevens notes, mindful that nearby are the best counts of rainbow and brown trout in the entire state—a major selling point for the new, conservation-minded breed of owners that Jackknife is designed to attract. "We might even get back some native cutthroat trout," says the avid fly fisherman, whose aesthetic is more *A River Runs Through It* than Frederick Law Olmsted. Then construction will begin on a cluster of houses and apartments sited close to—and, in some cases, growing out of—existing barns and sheds. These elegant reminders of the past will be sited far enough for each to have its own private view of the ranch's recovered natural beauty, and behind it, the soaring 10,000-foot peaks of the Salt River and Caribou Mountains. "The idea is for everyone to have their own 200-acre view, yet be able to go ask a neighbor for a cup a sugar." *a&d* >180

"I want a place where people know the land and each other well enough to start creating legends again."



RENEWABLE RESOURCES
At Jackknife Creek, Stevens will turn distressed outbuildings like this barn, FAR LEFT, into modern dwellings—and make the local trout stream, LEFT, flow again.

With New West, Stevens fuses the roles of architect, landscape designer, land planner, ecologist, and developer. His ability to draw the best from architectural and landscape design—on a giant scale—isn't just an impressive new direction for an already lauded young architect (the American Institute of Architects singled out his undergraduate work for commendation), it could be a key to the future of the American West. He envisions a profitable, sustainable middle ground between reclaiming nature and simply cutting it up for housing—the existing development ethos that has decimated vast swathes of the American landscape. Stevens sums up his strategy with a seemingly oxymoronic tag: “conservation development.”

Sitting in his new office in Topanga, California, Stevens explains how he now draws on a scale determined not by the measurements of a room or a lot in, say, Pacific Palisades, but by the line on an endless horizon. The Jackknife project has unleashed his expansive nature, as has another much larger initiative, the 11,000-acre Hokuano Ranch in Hawaii, where Stevens spent weeks traversing roughshod across deserted plains and peaks, getting to

know every dip and curve of terrain, every tree and stream. “Your body registers things before you do,” he says of his rugged methodology. “You’re walking around cursing out the heat and wondering when a blister’s coming back, and suddenly a place grabs you.”

This is the moment Stevens pulls out his sketchpad. “I look for markers that show how a terrain works,” he says. “Then the drawings force me to dream up ways of making people actually notice what nature’s put there.” Later, back at his long cherry desk in Topanga, Stevens fleshes out the full potential of Western landscapes: A mix of satellite imagery, topographical mapping, and his own massively detailed sketches, the resulting two-dimensional spreads display the same intense love for nature—and crystalline vision—as an Ansel Adams photograph. But, in accordance with his dream of a new West to be shared and enjoyed, Stevens also puts people in the picture.—**DAVID HAY** a&d >182

Stevens’s aesthetic is more *A River Runs Through It* than Frederick Law Olmsted.



COWBOY ARCHITECT
Stevens, LEFT, at the Jackknife Creek Ranch. RIGHT, Stevens’s plan for the ranch, which combines cutting-edge mapping technology and old-school, hands-on surveying.

