





Second Nature

Roth Faleide Architecture Turns
a High Alpine Retreat Inside-Out

by Sarah Goldblatt, AIA

A glass cube in the mountains. That is what Bart and Linda Crowder wanted when they envisioned a retreat for themselves. The couple's search for an architect to execute their vision started with the yellow pages and ended with the discovery of several projects by Roth Faleide Architecture that resonated deeply. When they contacted the firm and described what they wanted, architect Ron Faleide, AIA, was delighted. Here was the chance to apply the underpinnings of their practice to the consummate design challenge.

The owners wanted a house “where company doesn’t feel like they are tiptoeing around something precious — where you can walk in during any season — including mud season.” — Ron Faleide, AIA

Faleide and his Hamburg-based partner, Carsten Roth, approach projects from a historical and theoretical perspective that acknowledges and interprets architectural precedent, melds context and demands emotional response. The prospect of the pure geometric volume cast against the high-altitude landscape — sky, mountain and forest — provided the essential elements for the kinetic fusion of architecture and nature.

Although the Crowders have modernist sensibilities, they did not want a “glass jar.” Instead, they wanted to be

as close to nature as possible without direct exposure to the elements — a place for full sensory experience that also provided shelter and warmth. Programmatically, their needs were basic. “A place for us and then a place for other people [guests] to feel at home,” Bart Crowder said.

While the heavily forested 2.5-acre site, bordered by heavy timber homes and wood-clad cabins, nearly demands acquiescence to the tradition-bound mountain aesthetic, the architects chose an unorthodox approach to meet their clients’ wish for a place that would have a symbiotic relationship with the earth and simultaneously be removed from the daily way of living.

To achieve this objective, Faleide employs the classical idea of a plinth to “mediate between the found landscape and the ideal.” The first cube or “box” is therefore elevated above the ground plane on a poured-in-place concrete pedestal — just as one might be lifted on somebody’s shoulders for a better view. The spectacle? The evanescent snapshots of Mount Baldy through the columnar lodgepole pines. The floor-to-ceiling glass, oriented to the south and east, offers viewers an almost-cinematic experience of the diurnal rhythm of the earth.



This 22-foot-tall light-infused volume, constructed of steel, concrete and glass, is the container for the living and dining area. The kitchen seamlessly adjoins the open plan and is devoid of cabinetry to reinforce the notion of a weekend home free from weekday obligations. A loft-like second floor contains the Crowders’ sleeping area that shares the unobstructed views of the landscape over



Crowder House

Architect: Roth Faleide Architecture

Location: Breckenridge, Colo.

Construction Cost: \$640,000

Scope: 4,240 square feet

Function: Weekend retreat/
mountain home for a couple and
their guests

Owner: Linda and Bart Crowder

Contractor: Peoples Construction

Structural Engineer: GT Engineering

Interior Design: Roth Faleide Architecture

Lighting Design: M+H Lighting

Landscape Design: Roth Faleide Architecture

Photography: Tectograph (Roth Faleide Architecture)



and through a transparent glass balustrade. Necessary partitions enclosing service areas float under open web bar joists and steel decking. "The real walls," Faleide explained, "are actually the clearing in the trees. The forest becomes the walls. The glass is just expeditious to keep the cold out."

Warmth is provided by a simple wood stove, clad in soapstone. It sits

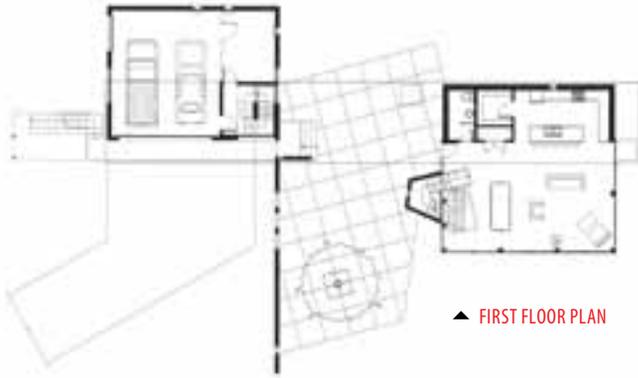
diminutively against the forested backdrop and assumes the elemental role of hearth. The slim black stovepipe runs up one of the 22-foot-high columns that divides each window bay and then disappears among the ordered rhythm of the lodge pole pines outside. Between the thermal mass of the soapstone, the radiant heat within the concrete floors and the natural warmth

of the abundant sunlight, no additional heating is required.

Shading from the trees and high summer sun angles keep the house cool, and excess heat can be exhausted through low-awning windows in combination with a natural cooling system that utilizes an adjacent stair tower to create a stack airflow effect.

Roth Faleide's design splits the program into two building volumes, placing the guest area in a second "box" that is offset but axially aligned with the first. The guest wing has its own point of access, a mudroom and articulated fenestration that captures views and affords privacy. The two bookends encompass nearly 4,000 square feet and are separated by a courtyard that becomes an outdoor room designed for entertaining. An elevated passageway dubbed "the tube" provides an interior connection between living spaces and appears to slice through each box like a fallen tree across a stream. Initially conceived as a simple interior link, the tube grew into a communal gathering space for the Crowders and their guests. The sleek rectangular form, clad inside and out in earthen gray fiber cement panels, also provides a sheltered path to the front door and serves to reinforce the axial relationship of the plan to what





▲ FIRST FLOOR PLAN



SECOND FLOOR PLAN ▲



Faleide described as the “geophysical reality of the site.”

The sequence of arrival and procession to the front door further emphasizes one’s orientation to the landscape and the symbolic release of day-to-day encumbrances. Visitors arrive at the far edge of the courtyard and travel through a concrete site wall and down a brief run of stairs — all under the direction of the tube overhead — which guides them to the front door. Once there, a sidelight offers partial glimpses of Mount Baldy and establishes the sensory anticipation of moving through the forest into a clearing where expanses of light and views will embrace one’s arrival.

Although the house is far from a typical mountain cabin, it does embody rustic features, particularly the raw quality of the gray concrete floors and countertops, unskimmed drywall that meets the floor and ceiling without trim and exposed steel structure. The lack of precision craft was purposeful. The owners wanted a house “where company doesn’t feel like they are tiptoeing around something precious — where you can walk in during any season — including mud season.” Faleide further explained that the “precision is in the geometry, not in the craft,” and adds that “a continued desire for perfection would make the house too precious.”

One small exception is the main staircase, which becomes the sculptural centerpiece of the house. Bart Crowder, a machinist, crafted the half-inch-thick stainless steel stair treads — each drilled with 160 holes that filter tiny shafts of sunlight. The stair winds its way between the glass cube and its corrugated cement board enclosure — between dark and light — heightening the experience of prospect and refuge as one ascends or descends.

The house’s geometric clarity, uncluttered sensibility and transparency provide the synthesis with nature that the Crowders desired. Bart Crowder shares the experience of reading a book in the living room in the middle of winter — the pages illuminated only by moonlight and its reflection off the snow — as just one example of the home’s transcendent qualities. ●

