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Sun Valley Surprise: Chalet So Spare

By CHRISTOPHER HAWTHORNE

Ketchum, Idaho

OVER the last couple of years the professional profile of Brad Cloepfil, founder of Allied Architecture in Portland, Ore., has risen as quickly as that of any architect in the country.

The firm's concrete, steel-mesh and glass design for the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, which opened in fall 2003, is well regarded. In New York it has proposed draping a new terra cotta and fritted glass over a building at 2 Columbus Circle, an idiosyncratic 1964 work by Edward Durell Stone that is now owned by the Museum of Arts and Design and has become the focus of a heated preservation battle.

Thanks to the Columbus Circle dust-up and praise for the firm's completed projects, interest in Allied Works, as Mr. Cloepfil put it, "has just exploded" recently.

But when he got a call four years ago from a prospective client in San Francisco, Mr. Cloepfil was something a bit less glamorous: an architect who had begun to show promise with a handful of spare, luminous designs in the Northwest but was still finding his voice. At that point Allied Works, which Mr. Cloepfil founded in 1994, had a half-dozen employees and exactly one residential commission to its name.

The caller was interested in having Allied Works design a weekend house on the edge of a mountain town, not far from the main lodge at Sun Valley. She is no mere weekend skier; an important collector of minimalist and other artworks, she is also a connoisseur of modern architecture. Her primary residence in San Francisco was designed by William Wurster, a postwar architect in Northern California.

The prospective client - who, for reasons of personal and family security, asked not to be identified - put together a list of potential firms with the help of Aaron Betsky, then a curator at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and now director of the Netherlands Architecture Institute in Rotterdam. She told Mr. Betsky she wanted somebody young and from the West, somebody who could design an important work of contemporary architecture for her that would also be a livable retreat from the city.

"She did it exactly the way you're supposed to do it" in looking for a serious architect, Mr.

Cloepfil (pronounced CLOPE-fill) recalled during an interview in the Allied Works office.

That's how Allied Works managed to sneak an aggressively contemporary house, with huge, blunt concrete walls joined to crisp expanses of glass, into Sun Valley, where the prevailing architectural style might be called hunting-lodge chic on steroids.

Despite Mr. Cloepfil's allegiance to Modernism and his client's to minimalism, the design is no Idahoan Glass House, a purely transparent object set in an endless landscape. Mr. Cloepfil, 48, said he was mainly interested in creating a residence marked by carefully controlled and mediated relationships between inside and out, between openness and privacy.

So while the high-ceiling living room has a huge window with views of Mount Baldy, the ski mountain, to the west and of a popular sledding site called Penny Hill to the east, in other areas the emphasis is on closed-off, introspective spaces. The two bedrooms on the ground floor (two more fill a modest, boxy second story) open onto small gardens enclosed by concrete walls punched through with small rectangular openings - Mr. Cloepfil calls them "apertures" - showing the landscape of sagebrush and aspens.

Inside, the dominant feature of Mr. Cloepfil's design, which has about 4,500 square feet of living space, is a series of expansive poured concrete walls. Nearly 12 feet high and almost perfectly smooth, and executed at some expense without the tie-rod marks that most concrete walls of such size include, they are set off by a roughly equal number of walls in white plaster as well as floors of light-stained oak and floor-to-ceiling glass. In winter, views of snow outside add to the minimalist sense of a limited, carefully controlled palette.

For all its luxe materials and custom craftsmanship, the house was no more expensive per square foot than many other new Sun Valley homes, Mr. Cloepfil said, because it includes fewer costly amenities.

From its earliest projects Allied Works has been known for an aggressive and inventive use of concrete, most notably in a Louis Kahn-influenced 2000 renovation of a World War I-era Portland warehouse for an advertising agency, Wieden & Kennedy. The client, for her part, owns a number of furniture pieces and a metal sculpture by Donald Judd. Mr. Judd's furniture is available at A/D Gallery in Manhattan, (212) 966-5154.

"There was a question I had to ask myself," the client recalled. "I said: 'O.K., you say you love this art. But can you live with it, in an architectural sense?' I wanted to see how to make concrete friendly."

Now, she said, "the main sense I have when I'm in the house is how calm it is."

That sense is furthered by the artworks she has chosen for the interior - by Dan Flavin and Kiki Smith, among others - as well as by the landscape design, which is by Lutsko Associates of San Francisco and is hard-edged but also a natural and generally subtle extension of the lines of the house.

Somehow, the design avoids feeling like a sterile art gallery or a cold experiment in cutting-edge architecture. The interior design, by David Easton of New York, includes Judd furniture as well as more recent, and more comfortable, pieces like a Paola Lenti woven chaise near the living room window. Ms. Lenti's chaises range in price from \$2,900 to \$3,380; they are available at Kurkala in Manhattan, (212) 645-2216.

In an odd sense it helps that there are other houses close by, a fact that keeps the house at the very least in conversation with more typical and earthbound pieces of architecture, keeps it from floating off into the stratosphere of purist abstraction. It sits in the middle of what is essentially a suburban-style subdivision, with gently curving streets and modest lots.

"There was this tension inherent in the project that I found instantly appealing," Mr. Cloepfil said. (Like many architects of his generation he uses the word tension with great energy and a certain fondness.) "The challenge was how to connect to the landscape, which is after all the experience that one goes to Sun Valley for, but also deal with this immediate neighborhood context."

He added: "One assumes when one hears 'Sun Valley' that it's going to be some spectacular property, 150 acres or whatever. But this site is not the typical Sun Valley."

At the very least it is not typical of the Sun Valley - or the Aspen or the Jackson Hole - of popular imagination. But the images may need updating. As ski towns all over the West become more crowded, at least a few firms designing residences for them are practicing a new kind of second-home architecture, one that takes nearby houses and even a fledgling density into account.

The Allied Works house in Ketchum is one of the more sophisticated, if more expensive, examples of this new breed. Like a middleweight boxer it is lean, muscular and sure of itself, even carrying a little swagger, but it doesn't take up much room. Sure, the neighbors got a little nervous when they saw all that concrete being poured. But the house - while it challenges the local emphasis on oversize nostalgic residential architecture, with its riots of rustication outside and beams the size of tanker trucks inside - is not as shocking as they might have feared.

"The house is very strong, and I love that," the client said. "But it's not hostile. It's not an angry house."

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