



# 7,000 The of mountain living

How one Aspen home found its om.  
by Julie Comins Pickrell

**three years ago**, when Rick Crandall went shopping for an Aspen house with views—big views—he was repeatedly frustrated by what he saw. In his estimation, the available homes were insufficiently oriented to take full advantage of Aspen’s cornucopia of high peaks.

Then one morning Crandall got word that an undeveloped lot in Starwood had just come on the market. Spread over a high mesa above 8,000 feet, Starwood’s gated enclave is renowned for its views. An hour later Crandall was walking the property. An hour after that, he bought it.



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“I was looking for houses, not for lots,” he says. “But when I saw that view—that was it.” The dealmaker for Crandall was a 70-mile panorama from Independence Pass east of Aspen past Glenwood Springs to the northwest and out to the Flat Tops beyond. Along the way, the sweep picks up four Aspen area ski hills, three Colorado four-teens and a half-dozen other peaks only slightly lower in stature.

To help him create a house that would do the site justice, Crandall enlisted the services of Charles Cunniffe Architects. Cunniffe was already familiar with Crandall’s property, having worked up plans for the site’s previous owners. Crandall liked Cunniffe’s plans well enough to purchase them along with the lot. The two men then collaborated to reconfigure the original design to Crandall’s exacting specifications.

Cunniffe’s primary charge was to create a house that would effectively capture, but not compete with, the view. To achieve that, he and Crandall opted for a relatively spare architectural style Crandall has dubbed “Mountain Zen.” The new design would employ clean, sculptural lines, simple massing and what Cunniffe calls “an honest exposure of structure.” In the final iteration, the original plans for the house were expanded from 5,750 square feet to 8,250 square feet.

To create a building platform on the steep three-acre parcel, a massive chunk of earth had to be cut out of the hillside. No less than a million pounds of moss rock was trucked in from Utah to construct a 28-foot tall, multitiered retaining wall. In order to avoid running a driveway between the house and the views, the architect designed a car court with a gentle, soft approach that winds up to a circular drive.

Cunniffe’s design is so articulated to the vista that the apex of the home’s central gable perfectly echoes Pyramid Peak in the far distance. In fact, looking from the front door through the foyer and out the living room windows, you can see Pyramid’s dramatic form precisely framed by the home’s roofline, as if locked in some giant’s viewfinder.

Crandall first came to Aspen in the early 1980s and bought a home here in 1988. He moved to the area fulltime about 10 years later. When asked what kind of impact a front-row seat to all that grandeur has on him, he says, “To me, it connects with a positive, expansive view of the world, a spirit of boundlessness.”

Cunniffe’s efforts to maximize the view at hand are apparent. Expansive corner windows in the living room and master bedroom are without visible supports. The architect says he chose seamless corner glazing because it allows for greater uninterrupted sightlines. “It connects you to the view beyond. As soon as you put in corner posts, you get a bunch of different views—a view here and a view there. [Seamless glazing] really takes the blinders off.”

From the deck off the dining room, Crandall points out the peaks that rise above 14,000 feet: Conundrum, Pyramid, Capitol. An avid hiker, he plans to climb Conundrum. Pyramid and Capitol are a bit too technical, he concedes. Those he’ll enjoy from the comfort of the home he shares with his wife, Pamela Levy.

The vastness of the vista goes a long way in underscoring the home’s Zen motif—it all but insists you contemplate your place in the universe.

The home’s interior scheme, achieved with the assistance of interior designer Kathy Hansel, is a harmonious mix of exotic woods, cool surfaces and contemporary furnishings. Crandall’s passion for materials and textures shows up everywhere. The warm tones of ribbon mahogany ceilings in the foyer and living room effectively pull the lofty



Folding hunting chairs dating back to the Ming Dynasty accent a nook at the bottom of the circular stair.

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Ribbon mahogany ceilings and a paneled cherry fireplace bring texture and warmth to the large living area. The room's seamless corner windows were tricky to install but paid off in continuous views.

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space down to a human scale. A continuous flow of quarter-sawn cherry flooring in the living, dining and kitchen areas highlights the home's open floor plan. Kitchen cabinets, also of quarter-sawn cherry, offset countertops of polished Rhyolite—a striking, variegated material formed by volcanic activity.

A thick, dark slab of Mexican cocobolo wood that Crandall found on the Internet was made into a bar between the foyer and kitchen. In the main level powder room, a Robert Kuo mirror with repoussé finish hangs above the sink. On the opposite wall an antique wedding window Crandall bought in China now doubles as a medicine chest.

In the master bedroom, large squares of silk wallpaper were hung with the grain at 90-degree opposing angles, resulting in a subtle yet

dynamic patchwork. The teakwood marble in the master bath hails all the way from Pakistan.

Crandall's Asian predilections predate the style's emergence as a western design trend. They were cultivated over the many years he sat on the board of a Japanese software company. "I developed a strong cross-cultural relationship with the CEO of that company," he recalls. "One day we were driving around Kyoto—which has some very beautiful buildings that are unfortunately mixed in with a bunch of western crap, like having a McDonald's next to a temple—and I asked him, 'Why would you allow this to happen? Why let all this junk intrude?'" Crandall pauses for a moment before continuing. "He said, 'Because you won.'" We won, but they have beauty over there we don't even know."

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Quarter-sawn cherry cabinets in the kitchen are accented by countertops of polished Rhyolite, a product fashioned out of sedimentary rock formed from volcanic activity. Simple oversize door handles and drawer pulls are in keeping with the home's clean lines and uncluttered interiors.

The book-match dining table (below) is made from Makassar ebony.

More recently, Crandall has developed an appreciation for Oriental and Oceanic art as well. Cuniffe designed art niches in the foyer and above the spiral staircase to accommodate some large primitive pieces his client had acquired while scuba diving off Papua New Guinea. Two traditional Melanesian welcoming figures stand in curved niches near the front door. The niche over the stairs to the home's lower level houses a large wooden shield and a ceremonial costume used by tribesmen to contact their dead ancestors.

"I became fascinated with what the story is over there," says Crandall. "They have hundreds of mini-civilizations, each with their own language."

Some of the decorative accents in the house were sourced closer to home. Rice paper chandeliers over the dining room table and circular stair are by local artist Travis Fulton. Crystal Glass in Carbondale contributed sconces and a piece of art glass for the wine cellar door.

In a departure from the rest of the home's simple structure, the staircase is housed in a turret topped by an octagonal copper skylight. Its floor-to-ceiling windows grab lots of natural light. "I try to pay attention to design opportunities for a circular system," says Cuniffe.



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The family totem stands sentry at the wine cellar door, which features a custom stained glass accent. The main level powder room displays the owner's love of Oriental design, including a Robert Kuo mirror finished in repoussé, an ancient metalworking technique.

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“Whenever you have two stories or more, you want it to be very elegant, so you can enjoy the experience of that journey. It makes going up and down more pleasant.”

Of course no technology pioneer’s home would be complete without the latest in sophisticated gadgetry. Both the master bedroom and guest master have been wired for oxygen. Crandall says his wife’s Australian terriers can often be found sleeping under the oxygen tube by their bed, presumably enjoying the atmospheric boost. “I can bring this room down to [the elevation of] Denver,” he says with a chuckle. An automatic guillotine-style dog door between Levy’s office and the kennel keys off a signal emitted from the dogs’ collars. No more slapping of hinged plastic flaps. (“I may have gone a little over the top on that one,” Crandall says.) With the press of a button, the lower level sitting area transforms into a media room, complete with remote control blackout shades and drop-down movie screen.

The sitting area was also designed to accommodate two more of Crandall’s unusual possessions: a ten-and-a-half-foot family totem pole commissioned from the artist Duane Pasco and a fully restored antique banjo orchestra. Roughly the size of a jukebox, the banjo orchestra bangs out old ragtime tunes whenever the homeowner cranks it up.

Outside on the patio, a Zen water feature chatters over an arrangement of large black rocks. A well-worn path to the side of the house connects with the popular Sunnyside hiking trail. “I like that I can be on Sunnyside in about four seconds,” says Crandall. And presiding over it all is the steady, domineering presence of the entire Elk Mountain range.

Back around to the car court, four Lyman Whitaker wind sculptures stand at the center of the circular drive. The “wind garden” sends off visitors in appropriately soul-soothing Zen style, each of the tall metal sculptures receiving and dispatching the breeze in a different way.

This mountain home, it would seem, has indeed found its om. 🍷

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