



Minimalism on the Madison

West Coast modern simplicity highlights
views of the Madison Range in Ennis

BY ALEX TENENBAUM | PHOTOGRAPHY BY KARL NEUMANN

ROLLING DOWN THE DRIVEWAY to Gale and Dok Arvanites' newly remodeled spread on the Madison, you wonder what, if anything, was redone.

A squat brown house, a smaller guest house and a barn – all of them covered in dark wood siding, all of them displaying the sleepy, featureless architecture of Montana in the '80s, despite having been built only a decade ago.

But then you notice the garage doors on the main house. The look is subtle, so it takes a minute, but yes, each panel really is a thin frame of metal – finished dark to match the siding – outlining a large pane of frosted, textured glass. The doors are actually stacks of a dozen hinged windows hanging down to the floor. The look is industrial, sophisticated and modern, and perhaps the last thing you'd expect to find at the end of this driveway.

"We had to find a way to transition," says Dok. "How do you take a country kitsch house and make it very modern and contemporary without offending the neighbors, and yet still making the outside hint at what's inside?"

The landscaping, too, is subtle in its movements toward an urban, industrial look. Planting beds with nothing more exotic than wood mulch and piney shrubs are defined by thick, impossibly tall steel edging that's been welded into straight lines and boxy angles.

The steel is a rigid foil for nature's soft, flowing lines. As the natural grade strolls down toward the Madison, the steel drops off in stiff, even increments to meet it. These sharp, formal lines lead the visitor around the protruding garage to a wildly modern outdoor living space – more contemporary, even, than the garage doors and landscape suggest.

The mahogany deck is light and clean, blank wood slats that show no evidence of nails or screws. Above an expansive flat roof seems to float as much on the afternoon breeze as on its single steel support beam. This is the home's exterior signature, and hidden from neighbors and passersby, it's the Arvanites' own little secret.

From the deck's western edge, the earth falls away into a meandering creek fed by an offshoot of the Madison River and a gushing year-round spring. Here, in the fall, brown trout swarm in the thousands to spawn.

Just beyond, tall grasses bow to the wind's applause and stretch out to a distant curtain of cottonwood trees shrouding the main channel of the Madison. And beyond, the gently rolling valley runs headlong into the hulking stone faces of Fan Mountain, Cedar Mountain, the Sphinx and Taylor Peaks.

For the last 25 years, the Arvanites' have come to the Madison Valley each summer to fish. Dok, a



certified fly casting instructor with the Federation of Fly Fishers, is retired from the large commercial construction firm he and a partner established in Los Angeles. Gale is an artist and a sculptor.

Every summer, they'd rent a house, living and fishing and falling more in love with the place. Dok

says it reminded him of home. He grew up in the Adirondacks in upstate New York, and though he moved to Los Angeles to pursue a lucrative business, the way he puts it, "You can take the kid out of the country, but you can't take the country out of the kid."

"Having grown up in a rural environment much like this, I'm mindful that I'm the newcomer, the outsider," he says.

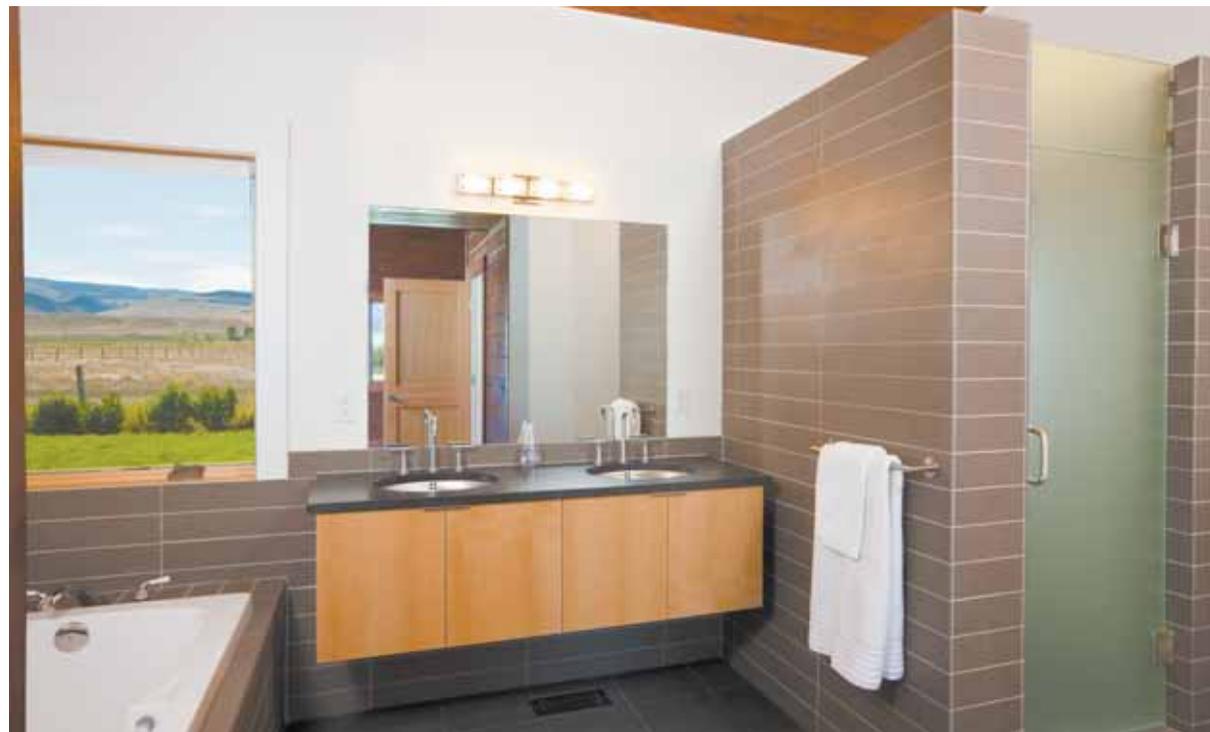
He remembers going home after moving West. His California clients were wearing \$500 scarves and driving expensive cars. The father of his girlfriend at the time was an Adirondack logger, and he remembers driving with him, hauling a huge load of timber. He asked what the man stood to make for the long days of work. "Oh," he said, "I ought to clear \$300."

The contrasts between rich and poor, rural and urban, earthy and pampered, woodsy and chic have defined Dok's life, and now define his home.

"We knew immediately we were going to change the house considerably," he says, but it was a



Opposite page: A flat, outstretched roof hovers over a mahogany deck, framing the view and providing shelter for the comfortable outdoor living space. Above, minimal decoration, and an abundance of white bring flashes of bold color — like the leafy green couches and dramatic blue accent wall — directly in the spotlight. Left, spanning the kitchen and the great room, windows hang from the wall like frames around organic masterpieces. Sandblasted granite counter tops and grainy blond woods are far from rustic, yet the look is elemental and reflective of the landscape.



Even the bathroom takes advantage of the generous views surrounding the house.

“You go into people’s houses and they’ve hung elaborate paintings of what’s right outside their windows. I’ve never understood that,” says Dok. “Why not just look outside?”

The white is so crisp and so pervasive, you get the sense that any splotch of color must be deeply significant. And it’s true.

Every instance of color is a reflection of the Madison Valley’s palette, bringing the natural world without into the manicured and angular world within.

The blonde of the wood floors, with their meandering linear grain, are a continuation of the valley floor that sways with tall yellow summer grasses. The sofa and chairs, upholstered in a leafy green, embody the communes of cottonwood trees on the banks of the Madison. And the gray of the ceiling calls to mind afternoon clouds, churning and heavy with rain.

The boldest use of color appears on the accent wall against the stairs, pulling a dark, majestic blue up from the walk-out basement and thrusting it into the center of the space.

“I remember a doctor friend of mine saying how the Madisons are the darkest mountains he’d ever seen,” Dok says.

The imposing peaks at sunset take on this same deep, amaranthine blue.

The kitchen features sandblasted black granite countertops and sleek cabinets made by the craftsmen of Dovetail Construction. Long, counter-to-ceiling windows frame the views that Dok and Gale’s guests would barge through a bedroom to see.

On the other side of the great room, opposite the wall of windows, is a built-in desk. It seems to be built specifically for the purpose of distracting the worker with a dazzling view of the outside world, even when the serious task of fly tying is at hand.

The wood burning fireplace is notably void of stone, encased instead in a smooth and cream-colored concrete. Wood storage is tucked around the corner to the left, easily accessible and almost entirely hidden from view.

The floating hickory staircase falls effortlessly through the middle of the room, leading the visitor down to a walkout basement with a cozy home theater and stylishly lighted pool table.

And while the interior remodel is stunning, and the thematic elements of light and place carry throughout, the Arvanites don’t expect their improvements to do much for resale.

“The house was only a few years old when we started. The money we spent was purely for our enjoyment,” Dok says. “We did this house for fun, and the builder and the architect really made it a wonderful experience.” ☺

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Minimalism on the Madison full year and a half before construction began.

Dok and Gale wanted to live in the house for a while before making concrete plans for the remodel. They watched how they and their guests used the space. They studied the sun and how the windows would catch the light and where dark spots in the home developed throughout the day.

The view of the creek and the peaks drew crowds to the back corner of the house long before the renovations.

Where the deck is now was once a small porch hemmed in by thick log supports. And just inside, in what is now the kitchen, was a spare bedroom with small windows. Not very conducive to hosting company, but this is where company ended up.

“People would get up in the morning and grab a bowl of cereal from the kitchen — which used to face the barn and the road and everything except for the view — and they’d go through the little bedroom and out to the porch,” Dok says. “We never wondered where our guests were. They were either in the kitchen or cramped out there on the porch.”

When they were sure of what they wanted, they shared their vision with local firms PLACE Architects and Dovetail Construction.

Construction began late in 2008, and today when you walk through the front door, a long, white hallway bursting with light draws you in.

The main room is white. Enveloping white.

White trim on white walls with white dropped ceilings that seem to hover weightlessly in the glow of the natural white light filtering in through a wall of windows.

The overall effect is light and airy. Stark minimalism with so much white and so little in the way of decoration almost forces the eyes to pour over the landscape.



Drop ceilings, cable railings, partial walls and a service bar help define the space while allowing light to carry through an airy and unobstructed expanse.