

## Owning The Views: Architecture, Consumer Self Restraint and Zoning

By Todd Wilkinson, 5-31-06

Back in the late 1990s, a pink flare blazing the palette color of "Pepto-Bismol" was fired across the skyline of Durango, Colorado.

There, a pair of property owners decided to paint their home pink on one of the most prominent ridges above town -- much to the horror of longtime locals who considered it an act of aesthetic heresy.

Indeed, it has been an unspoken rule not only in Durango but also across America that no one is supposed to violate pieces of common rural landscape which hold communities together visually.



But welcome to the modern West. In recent years, every element of private property has been boiled down to an economic value and any zoning that might dampen that value now comes replete with a price tag, a lawsuit or a proclamation that liberty has been lost.

Who owns the views in our communities and does any entity have responsibility for preserving them?

This was a question I posed recently to students at Montana State University where I was invited to deliver a talk to budding building designers in the school of architecture.

The name of the class: "Personal Ethics." It was taught by professor Lori Ryker, one of the leading thinkers in the West when it comes to the topic of compatible architecture.

One of Ryker's academic brainchildren is a concept called "Remote Studio" in which students are removed from the urban college campus and submerged in wild and pastoral agricultural settings. Besides bringing their portable sketchbooks, Ryker loads them up with western literature ranging from the writings of Wallace Stegner to more contemporary observers.

Ryker has sometimes met with resistance from colleagues who believe it is the job of the university foremost to churn out young men and women competent in the technical and more generic aspects of architecture. Some of them pay little heed to the more intellectual questions of suitability as an expression of honoring "place".

Such meditations are considered too touchy feely for those who regard architecture with a practical vo-tech objectivity when pondering a new construction job. Indeed, interpreting architecture from a holistic approach is too activist, too close to swerving into the terra incognita of "liberal arts"; and too progressive so as to risk attracting the wrath of provincial legislators who scowl at the notion of spending public dollars filling students' minds with radical ideas like "green building".

Even if Remote Studio isn't always appreciated in Bozeman, big picture thinkers in American architecture recognize its value in interpreting the West's rural vernacular. Which is to say, better understanding and appreciating the broader language and dialects of architecture -- yes, fully comprehending the reasons why pioneer families made the decisions they did when, where and with what materials they used in building their homesteads.

Architecture can be a grand statement about personal ego. It can also be a vehicle for personal reflection and prostrating the footprint you bring to something larger.

Remote Studio, in the eyes of many, is a cutting edge concept. Ryker, along with her partner, Brett Nave, is trying to foster a larger Westwide discussion through the formation of *Artemis Institute*. Architecture students from across America now can spend a semester in Montana exploring the concepts of Remote Studio and receive upper level college credit.

As Ryker notes: "The Remote Studio provides an alternative educational program of architecture which challenges the primacy placed upon Cartesian conventions of methodology, objectivity, abstraction and process to allow students to explore their own creative directions as they are tied to the world around them."

However, when it comes to actually promoting compatible building and a good taste which respects community values such as common views, such is an ethic that arguably cannot be mandated by government in the simple sense. The first point of recognizing the sacredness of landscape begins with the conceptual ideas of the client and the collaboration that occurs with an architect as blueprints are put together.

One could assert that a very important element of the Codes of the West is this -- spelling out that when newcomers move to a place inhabited by others, be it Europeans in native homelands; Easterners (or west coasters) barnstorming the inner West; or suburban pilgrims seeking their own lifestyle vision quests by erecting ranchettes in former farm and ranch country -- they are expected to at least acknowledge local customs.

If they consciously choose to ignore these customs, then it is their choice but they do it at their own peril and at the risk of engendering community scorn. Yes, suffering a little social shame can go a long way.

But if you have the money to build something big, hey, why not do it?

The pink trophy home in Durango is no different from the 8,000-square foot McMansions of Montana; the neo-baronial log castles of Wyoming and Colorado; the adobe mega-casas of the Southwest or even the poorly sited mobile homes pitched into the middle of otherwise unending natural views. [For a glimpse of the latter, drive through Gillette, Wyoming, the boomtown service center for oil and gas production and coal mining occurring on the western prairie].

Is it a pompous and aesthetically elitist presumption to even think about compatible building design as something less than a socialist plot? Perhaps. Or perhaps not. Imagine the West if an "anything goes" approach to planning and zoning were adopted as standard protocol.

The paradox of Libertarianism, the religious belief that freedom to make any choice automatically means MORE OPPORTUNITY for self expression, is that eventually the clutter produced by compliant Libertarian-driven anti-planning and zoning may all end up looking like the same mess. Is there not a tyranny that accompanies those who have no aesthetic threshold imposing their will upon those who do?

Should the fate of sacred "viewsheds" in a community be left up to those who have no regard for them? Should the desire of one person who aspires to have property values appreciate by leaving a landscape more aesthetically attractive, naturally, be held hostage to the junkyard operator?

Theoretically, some will tell you the free market eventually cleans up blight but "the market" does not always have a human brain sympathetic to pretty vistas built in to it. The market can come up with the value of a sunset falling upon a soothing green plain but how much would it cost society if citizens were required to buy out every developer who is color blind and who believes his backyard cluttered with used tires is a work of art?

So let us ask again: Who owns the views? To be honest, I was impressed by the passion and intellect of students studying to be architects in Ryker's class at MSU, who took a whack at the question and who are thinking about the big picture.