



A MODERN COTTAGE & (CHICKEN COOP!)

DENVER FIRM TOMECEK STUDIO'S DESIGN FOR A SLEEK, GLASSED-IN COTTAGE IN THE BLACK HILLS IS BOTH IN AND OF NATURE

A Denver architect. Florida clients. A Utah builder. A Wyoming road trip. And a South Dakota location.

The story behind the construction of this Black Hills cottage was truly all over the map—but in terms of design, it could not have been more simple or direct. Located about 10 minutes outside Rapid City, the contemporary cottage (second home to a soon-to-be-retired but very active Florida couple) and a nearby chicken coop (home to about 30 laying hens) were designed by Denver architect Brad Tomecek on a stunning 12-acre site that includes woods, a hilltop meadow and a deep ravine.

“We wanted the cottage to fit in with the other architecture, including a traditional pole barn and gabled main house,” Tomecek says, “but also be very connected to the setting. We didn’t want a big white box sitting in the middle of nature.”

Homeowner Robert Hogan and his wife, Wendy, envisioned a little house à la Le Corbusier: “something architecturally distinctive but also utterly functional,” as Hogan describes it.

To achieve both ends, Tomecek designed a straightforward but striking rectangular cottage that he cantilevered out over a ravine, with floor-to-ceiling windows of varying widths on all four sides. “The idea of feeling like you were floating in the tree canopy was very powerful,” Tomecek says, “and the windows were inspired by the irregular cadence of the trees. Being

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inside is like chichi camping—you're sitting in a very contemporary house but there are chickens outside eating feed on one side and trees on the other. It's very calm and relaxing.”

“It's all glass, so one has the sense of being in a treehouse overlooking some woods and a wild meadow,” says Hogan. “There is a constant stream of wild turkeys, deer and other creatures that are usually hard to spot. The outside flows into the inside.”

Because it would be located on a remote site, Tomecek decided to control the quality (and shorten the time frame for construction) by having the house factory-built. He turned to Irontown Homes, a high-end prefab builder of 30 years' experience based in Spanish Fork, Utah. But that decision brought its own share of challenges. “A prefab home has to be built in modules,” says Kam Valgardson, general manager at Irontown, “and the floor systems need to be rectangular—you can't ship circles or triangles or other different shapes. And each module has to be pretty uniform, with a width of no more than 14½ feet because of state and federal Department of Transportation rules, so it can be craned easily and trucked down a road.” (For those trying to picture this, 14½ feet is about a lane-and-a-half on Interstate 80, where the two modules in this cottage did much of their traveling across Wyoming.)

Also, modular homes like this one have to be beyond sturdy in order to endure the



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long road trip. “They’ve got to be able to go through a pretty intense seismic event on the road,” says Valgardson, “so we overbuild them. They’re all wood construction, but the floor system is engineered wood so it can handle more stress and strain, and then we both glue and nail all of the wall sheeting and the like. We actually built some homes in a neighborhood hit hard by the (6.7-magnitude) Northridge earthquake in 1994 in Southern California; though a lot of the surrounding homes were destroyed, our houses just slid off their foundations intact and were able to be re-used.”

Irontown, following Tomecek’s designs, installed virtually everything in the house—“windows, flooring, mirrors, towel bars, appliances, toilets,” says Valgardson. “The only things we can’t install are items that fall on what we call ‘the marriage line,’ where the two modules meet.”

That was challenge enough. There was also the matter of actually getting the house to the site. Each module weighed about 30,000 pounds, was 12 feet wide and 64 feet long, and had to be trucked on an 18-wheeler with a long, flat bed. That’s a lot of truck to manage, “so we look at satellite images of the route and measure everything out just to make sure the truck can actually get to the site,” Valgardson said. Once it was there, it took a 175-ton crane only a few hours to place the modules on their steel foundational frame. Then they were “stitched together—half the living area to half the living area,” as Tomecek says, and an on-site team worked on finishes like metal railings. [Note to William: Brad sent me a video of the placement of the modules, which might be fun to refer to on your site.]

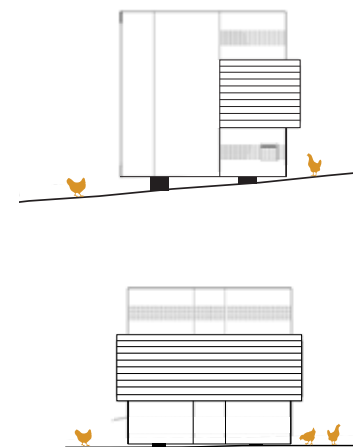
The result is a form-follows-function-follows-form space, one that has won numerous architectural awards and



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“MY DESIGN PROCESS IS BASICALLY ME TROUBLESHOOTING MY LIFE,” RIBIC SAYS. A HUSBAND WHO COMES ACROSS A DRESSER COVERED IN HIS WIFE’S JEWELRY MIGHT NORMALLY LOOK FOR A DRAWER TO HIDE IT ALL. BUT RIBIC INVENTED A COLLECTION OF MAGNETIC PEGS THAT ATTACH DIRECTLY TO A MIRROR AS A CLEVER WAY TO DISPLAY THEM.



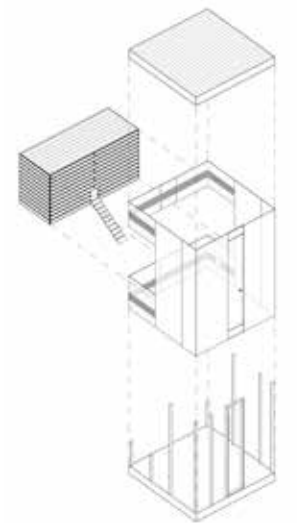


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citations. “We sleep in the bedroom, shower, then work in the main area,” says Hogan. “Wendy works at the kitchen counter, and I have a small desk. We finish each day with drinks on the deck. It is a superb work space that turns into an entertainment space when I turn off my computer.”

But the cottage was not the end of Tomecek’s work: He also designed a modern chicken coop—“one worth looking at”—to replace a dilapidated one already on the property. “We thought of it experientially, not just as something to look at but asking, ‘What does it do to the site and how does it interact with what’s around it?’” says Tomecek. “We liked the idea of doing a very contemporary take on a very functional piece of agrarian and utilitarian architecture.”

First, Tomecek’s team researched chicken coops to learn what they needed (nesting boxes, roosting poles and an area for the birds to walk around in, among other things). They had to consider ventilation and how to make egg gathering easy. The result is a 10-by-10-by-10-foot, translucent, perforated polymer cube, with a wooden nesting box insert. “We wanted it to be very clean and pure and to contrast well with nature,” says Tomecek. At night, a single lightbulb



in the coop gives it the appearance of a glowing box amid the Black Hills’ deep, vast darkness.

Day or night, the views from the cottage are so spectacular that the homeowners decided not to embellish their interior walls with art. As they told Tomecek: “Why would we want to look at something else other than what we’re looking at right now?”