

Best Residential Architecture Firm – Wyoming & Best Luxury Residential Project (Wyoming): Granite Ridge Residence



Ward+Blake Architects was built on a distinctive vision: Be provocative in thought, flexible in nature, and disciplined in execution. Following their success in BUILD's 2018 Architecture Awards, Amanda Green provides us with an insight into the firm, highlighting their innovative ways and how they strive to achieve excellence in the work they do.

Established in 1996, Ward+Blake has received recognition for architecture that is sensitive to its environment and successfully integrated with its surroundings. The firm creates buildings that are bioclimatically responsible, honestly expressed, technologically sound and artfully crafted. Amanda outlines the firm's pride in its incredible success.

"On the topic of success, Ward+Blake Architects are extremely pleased to be the recipients of the 2018 Build Architecture Awards. As we are a small firm in the Rocky Mountains in western Wyoming, it is especially gratifying to receive recognition of our work. We think the work speaks to specifics regarding geographic location, climate, and culture, and we always begin designing with these aspects in mind."

Ward+Blake offers full Architectural design services for residential and commercial projects of any scale. The firm focuses on site-specific design, energy conservation, and beauty derived from materiality and accommodation of its client's needs. Their clientele is international, from all walks of life.

The Granite Ridge Residence provided a veritable smorgasbord of design challenges, ranging from an irregularly shaped site that rises sharply from the front to the back, to a microclimate located at the base of Rendezvous Mountain that regularly produces annual snowfalls of two to three meters. Ward+Blake explored new to the area materials, such as board-formed concrete as an alternative to a masonry veneer, as it has the visual strength to stand up to the rugged alpine environment, while providing a subtle texture which catches the light filtering through the trees. The cedar cladding upstairs is a variation of indigenous log structures one encounters in the mountains, with the fine finish on the wood being a counterpoint to rustic native log work. The concrete form of the garage provides a strong foreground while the strength and rigidity of the material provides resistance to earthquake forces typically found in this location.

"Our design process begins with client input, it is then filtered by physical demands presented by the site and is further informed by elements found in the local building culture. This implies a linear progression, but, these pursuits happen simultaneously, and the hierarchy of design elements gradually sort themselves out" explains Tom Ward.

Obviously, this process is initially chaotic, but order is established once the hierarchy is set. In mid-process the technology demanded by the

design solution becomes apparent and it is then incumbent to solve these challenges while retaining the integrity of the initial design. This is where the rubber hits the road and an area where the firm feels they excel. While design is the foremost priority at Ward+Blake Architects, they feel that building science should never take a backseat as to how well the building serves its end user is a critical measure of a project's success. There is an absolute need to provide a reliable, efficient and comfortable environment and that never is given casual attention. The firm takes a conservative approach to Green Architecture such as utilizing ground source heat pumps as an elegant way to heat and cool a building. Using latent heat found in both the earth's crust and ground water is a very satisfying and cost-effective way to reduce energy consumption. Components such as super insulated building envelopes, high efficiency glass, and heat recovery ventilation systems retain energy used with in the structures and make their buildings use a fraction of the energy required only ten years ago.

"Our process is the same whether we are working in a rural or an urban context, in that we are always looking to place our structures in such a way that they speak to their location and respond to specifics of their site." says Mr. Ward.

Tom goes on to explain *"we are practicing in a relatively undeveloped portion of the country, the building vernacular is being challenged by building typology informed by technology and definitively toward modernism, and we are always attempting to fuse these influences with some of the building techniques that have been utilised here since people started homesteading in this area at the turn of the last century. The original homesteading settlers used cuts of sod as roofing to shelter themselves from the elements. This material was used because it was expedient to do so. We now use it for more conceptual reasons. It still shelters the structures from the elements, but it also slows the percolation of storm water runoff reducing the destructive effects of erosion. It places a building firmly onto its site by using native plant material. These plants also respond to environmental conditions such as rain fall, and the passing of the seasons, thus providing a dynamic quality to the structures. This design sensitivity is augmented using state of the art communication, data processing and mechanical systems, so that no function of the house harks back to before the last century!"*

Principal Mitch Blake explains *"Technology has been a real boon to our industry in that we are able to communicate with clients and fabricators all over the world to ensure first that the design meets our*

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client's requirements, and that there is tech available to produce and optimise each component of the finished design. We utilise BIM in the production of the construction documents, and it isn't uncommon to see electronic notepads replacing paper drawings on our jobsites. VR is the way of the future and modeling the building inclusive of its systems will become commonplace, while design, engineering, and construction time frames will become compressed. Certain building systems will become modularised, resulting in the use of standardised components." Tom Ward interjects "Hopefully someone will invent a new less cumbersome method of mixing and delivering concrete!"

Ward+Blake feels the goal of utilising this science and technology is to create better Architecture. The science and technology alone are not enough. Tom and Mitch agree that "Great architecture still requires an insightful use of intuition and an understanding of the inherent need for shelter and accommodation. The architype doesn't require re-invention, nor does it require pedantic references to the past. We feel great architecture lies in the grey zone where the two intersect. Breaking the box regarding architype and formulaic design will always produce a more relevant building."

Tom continues "Fortunately for us people still respond to natural light, great views, human scale, texture, colour and the myriad of other sensory inputs that compose the kaleidoscope of life. Thus, siting a building is still the first important set of decisions to make. This includes understanding the determinants that inform a buildings design, such as topography, view corridors, solar exposure, directions of prevailing winds, location of storm paths, type and season of precipitation, analysing these elements relative to a client's, building program are first steps employed by Ward+Blake Architects before pen touches paper or mouse touches pad."

Tom and Mitch go on to discuss that "as the building design fleshes out, discussions take place that establish various quality, performance and cost issues. Invariably, the concept of Green Design parameters works their way into the conversation. Metrics are applied, and appropriate technologies to employ are established. We try to consider a notion of Green Design into a project that does not have any known metric that can be applied-quality. We think of the quality of a building affects the life span of a building. What could be Greener and more planet respective that a structure that avoids being placed in a landfill after only a generation of use? Bestowing a building with this sense of quality in design as well as materiality will help keep it out of a landfill, as will

being mindful of an ability of the structure to evolve over time by being adaptable as ownership or technology changes over time. These ideas return to the design criteria governed by budget requiring the budget be analysed with respect to initial cost as well as life-cycle cost over time. We feel this conversation circles back to the Green content in a building's design and specification."

Overall, the firm has success, but is keen to draw on the past to improve itself even further over the years to come. In the 1960's, Erich Fromme coined a word that is being used more frequently these days. The word is Biophilic. It describes a hypothetical need interact or be closely associated with other forms of life in nature. This concept is gaining traction across the globe as an example of increasing awareness of the effect of humanity on the capacity of the earth's ability to sustain life. The principles of design embodied by the work of **Ward+Blake attempts to address this idea by rooting a building** to its site and providing tangible links from the Architecture to the Land. They think it will provide a sense of wellness along with tangible returns in building ownership.

A healthy mind, a healthy body and a healthy pocketbook are lofty goals to try and achieve by as humble a profession as Architecture, but they are worth accomplishing as far as Ward+Blake is concerned, and their goal is to accomplish this one building at a time.

