

078

WOOD CABIN

LOCATION
POLSON, MONTANA, USA

ARCHITECT
ANDERSSON WISE ARCHITECTS

WRITER
JAFFER KOLB

PHOTOGRAPHY
ART M. GRAY



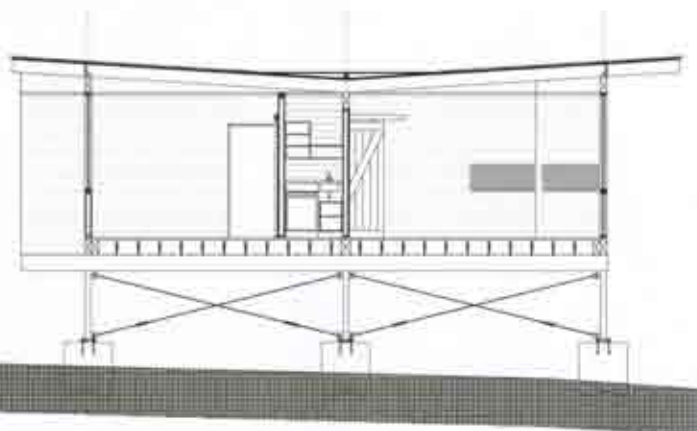
floor plan



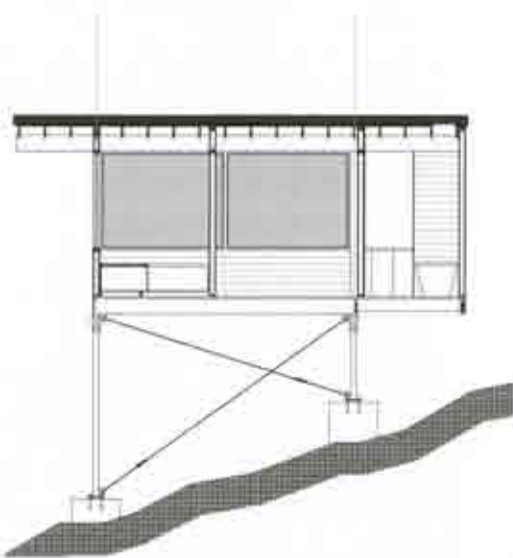
Previous page: The archetypal cabin in the wilderness evokes cherished ideas of communing with nature. Right: The unspoiled site impelled the architects to devise a building and construction system that touched the earth lightly. Below right: The cabin sits on a cantilevered deck supported by slim steel posts.

- 1 entrance
- 2 bathroom
- 3 living room
- 4 bedroom
- 5 kitchen
- 6 terrace

long section



cross section



In 1972, *The Foxfire Book* was published in America, documenting the lifestyle, culture and skills of rural communities in the southern Appalachian Mountains. The account was interspersed with personal narratives and heart-warming illustrations such as children watching their grandfather build a sturdy dining chair from scratch. Flipping through it, you'd be moved to try any number of the projects (the cover proclaims it will teach you 'hog dressing, log cabin building, mountain crafts and food... and other affairs of plain living') and be humbled that you probably couldn't. The book and its 11 follow-up editions (the most recent published in 2006) have sold nearly 10 million copies.

Assuming that most of those 10 million readers have yet to dress a hog or build a cabin, there is a market for, at least, the romantic idea of living in the wilderness and subsisting off the land. When I first saw Andersson Wise Architects' cabin on Flathead Lake, I thought of *The Foxfire Book*, and of the visceral reaction to places, ideas and lifestyles that connect so deeply to nature.

The cabin, in Polson, Montana, overlooks a large glacial lake and a 150-foot, craggy, grey granite outcrop nicknamed The Matterhorn. Set deep in the northern Rocky Mountains, the remote location immediately convinced the Texas-based architects that they had to come up with an alternative system of construction to suit the terrain. To complicate things further, nearby is a significant nesting area for osprey birds, and both the architects and client wanted to ensure they wouldn't be disturbed during the building process.

According to partner Arthur Andersson, the idea was to make a 'small insertion' into the landscape. The building itself was put together 'by hand': 'It was done by the building's caretaker, John McCain (not that one), a big guy from Minnesota who moved to Montana,' says Andersson. The builders constructed most of the elements off site, putting them

together in situ with minimal machinery in order to limit noise pollution. 'There wasn't even much sawing, it was mostly nailing. We conceived the structure as a kit of parts,' Andersson explains.

The starting point for the design was a simple structural system that was sympathetic to the location. Andersson designed a cantilevered deck, which generated a proportional system based on 8ft increments: the deck cantilevers out 8ft and is anchored by the 16ft-long main volume of the cabin. 'All the proportions are 8ft, which set up the bay for vertical divisions - there are 8ft ceilings, and 8ft screens, too. The contractor was not a real contractor, but the project turned out exactly

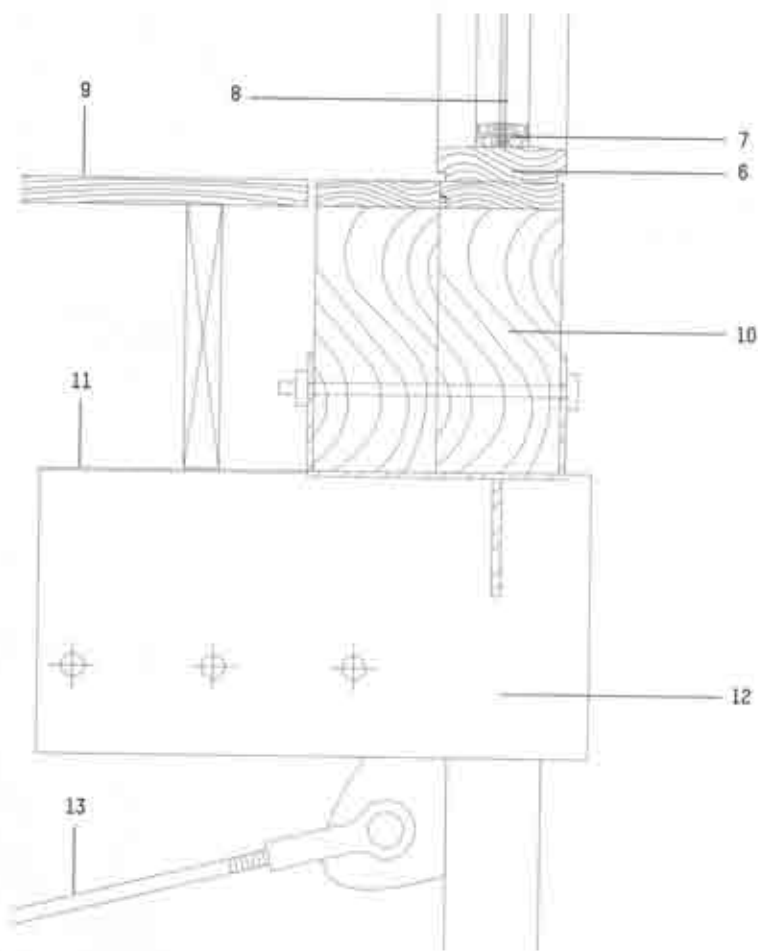
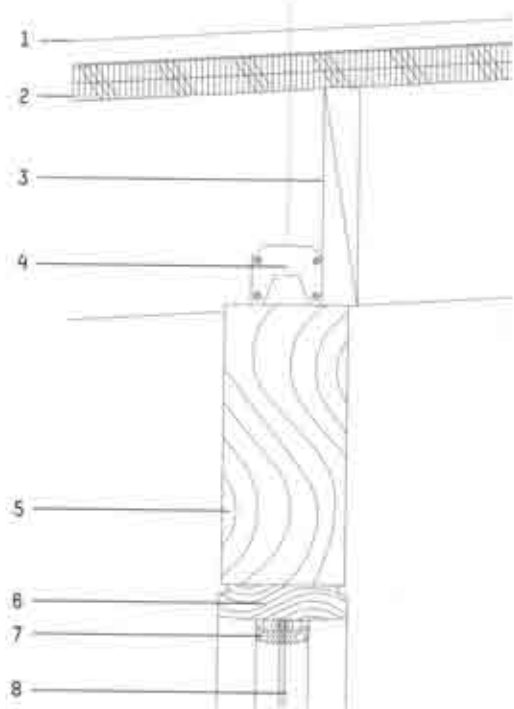
how I intended it,' beams Andersson.

This lodge, a guest house of a larger estate up the road, has a compact but highly atmospheric interior, a result owing to the choice of materials, building form and the way in which the cabin emphatically focuses outwards rather than inwards. Douglas fir walls dominate inside, mirroring the real fir trees unfolding in the landscape, while the structure consists of Parallam beams - a glulam made from recycled woodchips.

The simple metal roof is the main volumetric design strategy. Its two upward sweeps was based on the premise that this directs views outwards through the living room windows to The Matterhorn and lake beyond. 'It's a simple butterfly



LIKE A DELICATELY TETHERED BALLOON DRIFTING AWAY, THE CABIN SITS ON EIGHT SLIM STEEL POLES



detailed section through external wall

Above right Living room and terrace; the interior is emphatically focused on the landscape

Below right Walls of Douglas fir mirror real trees outside. Glulam beams made from recycled woodchips form the structure

- 1 corrugated metal panel roofing
- 2 two layers plywood decking
- 3 wood blocking
- 4 rafter clip
- 5 PSL beam
- 6 wood screen frame
- 7 wood stops
- 8 metal screen and frame
- 9 wood flooring
- 10 PSL beams
- 11 insect screen
- 12 steel structure
- 13 steel bracing rod



ARCHITECT
Andersson Wise
Architects, Austin,
Texas, USA

STRUCTURAL ENGINEER
John McCain

roof that has become jokingly known as the "Osprey-wing roof" round here – it really came from wanting the view lifted up and out," says Andersson.

With a single bedroom, living room, bathroom and small kitchen, the cabin is quite utilitarian, but makes a romantic gesture to the surrounding landscape. The structure is firmly anchored on one side and then steps out over the steep terrain below towards the lake. Like a delicately tethered balloon drifting away, the cabin sits on eight slim steel poles with the precipitous cantilever emphasising the drama of this move.

Steel accents and ipe wood siding nudge materials away from the strictly local, but work both in functional and aesthetic terms. 'The idea of this

retreat is that it's off the grid – not without power, but it isn't heated and there's no air conditioning,' says Andersson. Minimal insulation and seasonal temperature fluctuations meant that the exterior had to be particularly robust and ipe is a hardwood so durable that it can weather almost anything.

On building log cabins, the *Foxfire* authors observed: 'As our information grew, so did our realisation that there are almost as many ways to build a cabin as there are people who have built one.' When matched with the right designers, this process is imbued with a phenomenological humanism from aspiration to execution, creating a building that is as uplifting as it is simple.

