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# BUILDING AWE

Architect Brian Sipes designs solutions for better living

BY KIMBERLY NICOLETTI



**B**rian Sipes believes architecture helps shape the human experience. Through Sipes Architects in Minturn, he strives to create a sense of wonder and awe within clients as he accentuates natural surroundings through inspirational building designs.

In general, Sipes views the world as a “design problem,” and for him, design is everything — it’s the thread that weaves the

natural environment, architecture, landscaping and interior design together, resulting in a cohesive whole. It’s why, when people step into one of his commercial, sustainable residential or remodel projects, the building feels good.

“Architecture is so much more than the surface aesthetics,” Sipes says.

While studying at University of Kansas, one of his professor’s philosophies became deeply

ingrained in him; he learned to measure his success not only by how well a home or building functions and flows, but also by the statements it intuitively makes.

“Architecture should be silent until spoken to, and then it should be very articulate,” Sipes says, quoting his college instructor.

Sipes has called the Vail Valley home for more than two decades. He joined the team at Zehren

and Associates in 1995, and then took a position in Denver at Rowland + Broughton in 2011. In 2014 he moved back to the valley and opened his own firm, Sipes Architects. Last summer he made the firm a partnership with Todd Biekkola, who he’d worked with previously.

“We have similar design philosophies, the same work ethic,” he explains. And perhaps just as important, they’re

WHEN THE SUBJECT OF LINKING A GONDOLA TO BEAVER CREEK AROSE, HE ENSURED THE PROJECT BENEFITTED AVON. AT THE TIME, MANY PEOPLE SIMPLY WANTED TO CONSTRUCT A LARGE PARKING LOT, BUT HE RESISTED THE IDEA; HE WANTED SKIERS TO SPEND TIME IN AVON AND CONTRIBUTE TO THE ECONOMY RATHER THAN JUST DRIVE THROUGH THE TOWN.

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*During his tenure  
at Denver-based  
Rowland +  
Broughton, Sipes was  
principal designer  
and architect for  
the remodel of this  
private wine room  
in a home in Aspen.  
Originally a dark  
stone-veneered  
room, the team made  
it modern and light.*

*OPPOSITE:  
Architect Brian  
Sipes remodeled  
his own home in  
Minturn to be  
more in line with  
his design  
philosophies.*





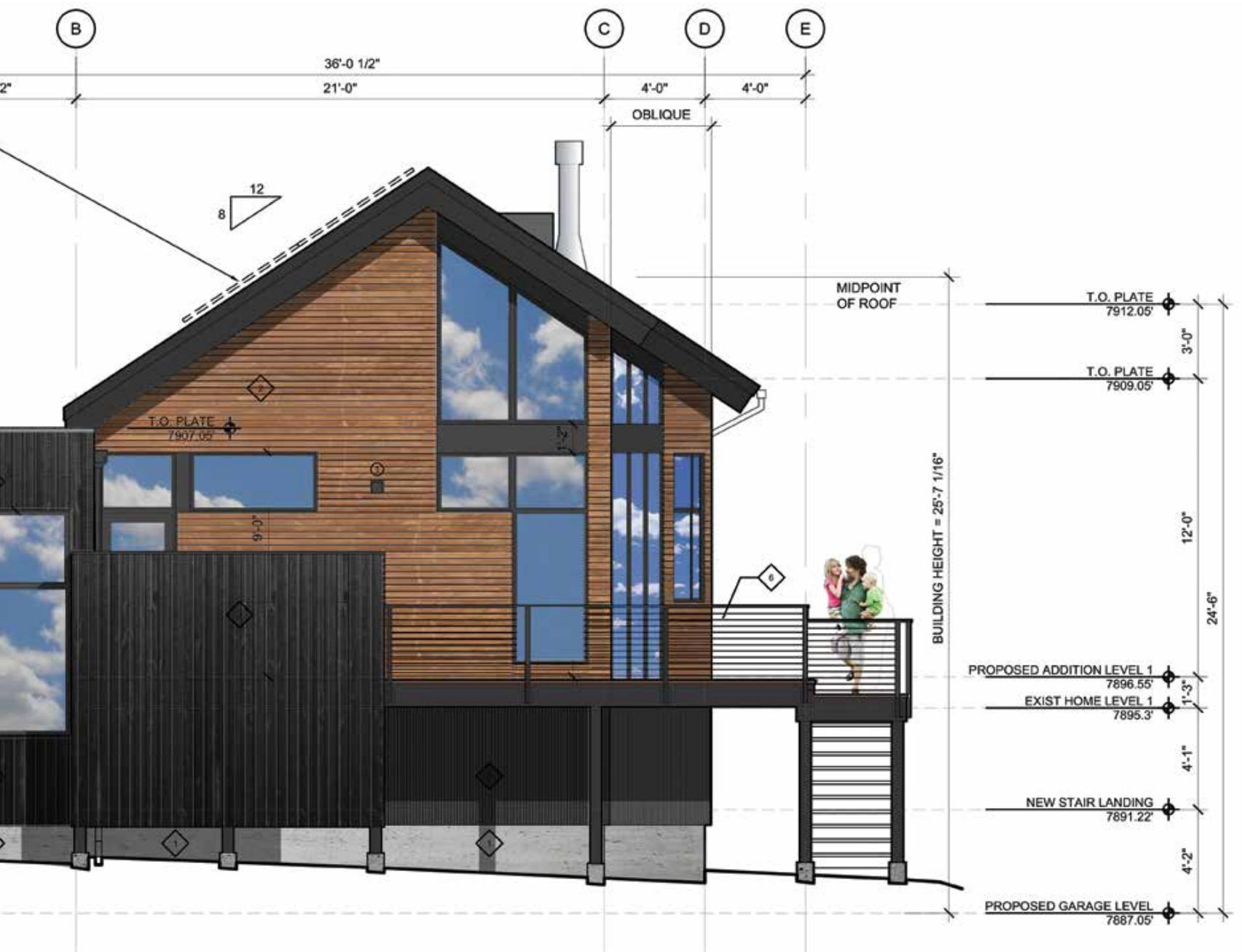
*For this project along the river in Minturn, an older log cabin received a modern addition for increased living space.*

both Midwesterners of Scandinavian descent. “We are hoping to continue to grow and add one or two talented designers, plus an office manager this year.”

## PROCESS OF EXPLORATION

He wants his projects to generate “ah-ha” moments, which usually emerge as he delves deeper into the three-dimensional form, always considering better ways to design it.

“I don’t come to any predetermined solution quickly,” he says. “I explore. (It’s the difference between) finding more difficult solutions versus the easy way out.”



One simple example involved hanging a painting opposite a window, which allows light to alter the visuals of the art throughout the day.

“There are lots of little things to think about that aren’t manifested in the drawings,” he says. “You just have a feeling, which becomes that beloved little thing, like natural light through a window that does something.”

Another example came in the form of Manor Vail Lodge. Rather than adding adjacent rooms next to the lodge, he asked, “what if we build over the existing structure?” The result: New spaces with incredible vistas that didn’t end up obstructing neighbors’ views.

Sipes also played around with

space vertically in a home in East Vail. Sipes had to wrestle with the problem that half of a main living space required it to sit 2 feet higher than the other half of the living space, due to the garage underneath. He broke up the space with one stair and gave the higher side a higher roofline. His clients love it because it separates the room into a kids’ play area and an adult hang out, all within a shared, open room.

“My greatest joy is manifesting clients’ dreams, and hopefully

inserting a few more dreams,” he says.

One way he accomplishes this is through sustainability; he tries to utilize every opportunity to introduce sustainability, while integrating it in a way that benefits clients.

In adding to Walking Mountains Science Center, he designed three buildings scattered around the perimeter of open space, rather than just one large building; the layout mirrors the center’s emphasis on the importance of the environment.

“  
CURIOSITY IS THE FUEL THAT  
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When Sipes served on Avon’s Town Council for eight years, he thought critically about how any development would impact the entire community. Concerning affordable housing, he questioned what “affordable” means: Sure, contractors could build less expensive houses quickly, but he looked at the bigger picture, questioning whether lower-income housing in Gypsum was ultimately “affordable” when so many jobs and services required a substantial drive up the valley.

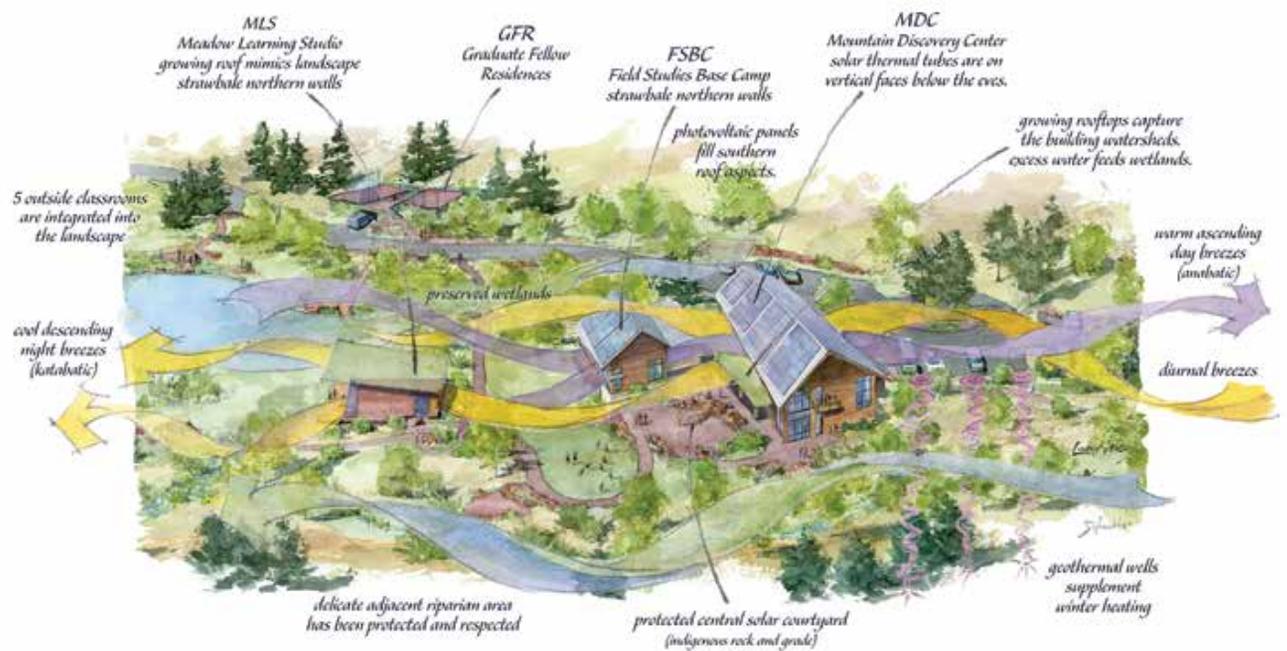
When the subject of linking a gondola to Beaver Creek arose, he ensured the project benefitted Avon. At the time, many people wanted to simply construct a large parking lot, but he resisted the idea; he wanted skiers to spend



time in Avon and contribute to the economy rather than just drive through the town.

It is Sipes' deep exploration and concern for clients, the community and the mountain environment that drives his passion to seek unapparent solutions. It's also his love for new challenges, new people and new experiences — such as traveling to various countries to understand others' points of view — that maintain his motivation to see, and point out, beauty in the world.

“Curiosity is the fuel that drives our practice,” he says. “I hope I never lose my curiosity and sense of wonder. There's just so much in the world to learn that we should never, never stop learning.” **VVH**



While a principal at Zehren and Associates, Sipes was the architect of record and LEED champion for the Walking Mountains Science Center in Avon. The sustainable campus was the first commercial building on the Western Slope to achieve LEED Platinum.