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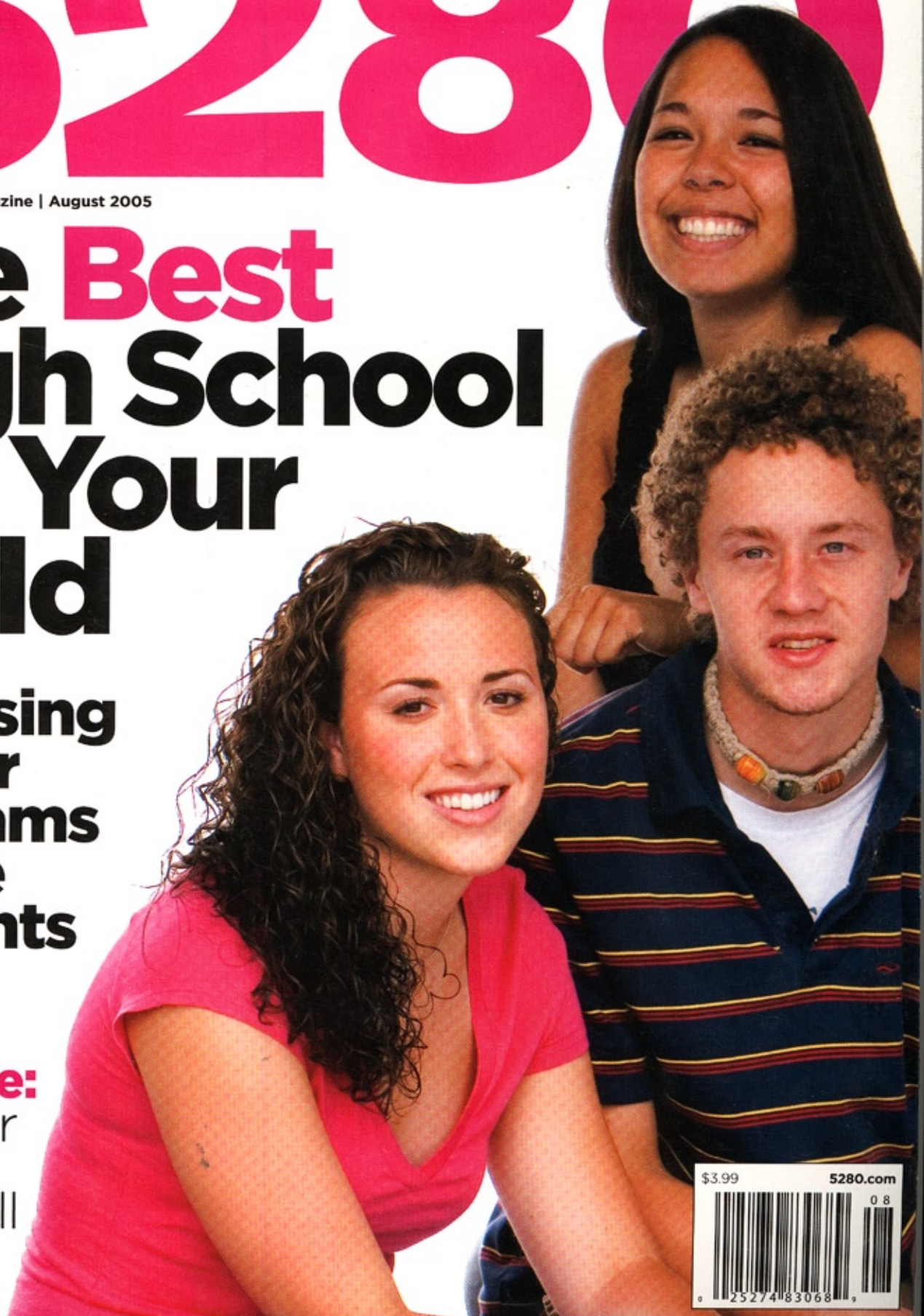
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Poetic Seeds



How nature's shapes and forces inspired this architect's Boulder home.
By Susan Moran
Photography by Todd Langley

BELOW The smooth, soft feel of stucco gives the walls a hand-molded presence. Vast use of glass opens the space to the courtyard outside. The couple's son Will's Blevins floor harp combines cherry and maple wood, offering tones they have used throughout the house, and that warm up the cool look of the concrete floors. Wood accents also add warmth, such as the fir ceiling and Baltic birch finply (a tinted plywood) window panels and furniture. The cobalt blue rug evokes Scandinavian design, which the Barretts love for its simplicity and minimalism.





David Barrett

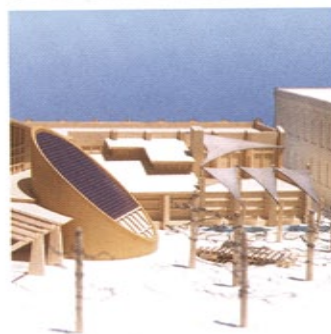
wears a black suit, and a silver stud in his left ear peeks out from behind strands of wavy gray hair. In the darkened room, he's flicking through slides: of the earth's spiral-shaped galaxy, an image of a carbon atom, shots of curved and graceful buildings. He quotes William Faulkner, Buckminster Fuller, and Jimi Hendrix.

It's a Thursday evening in Boulder and a crowd of environmental educators, donors, and parents huddle inside the Hotel Boulderado while a fluke late-spring snowstorm dumps a half foot of snow outside. They're intently listening as Barrett, an architect, describes his plans for a new children's nature center in Nederland. "We're all like sponges. We have the opportunity to connect with the planet, with the miracle of life," he says, scanning his audience as if to make sure they feel his passion.

Barrett, 57, has the effect of a hippie-turned-professional, another be-here-now former flower child finding refuge in Boulder. But his philosophical message and his structures have influenced many well beyond this spiritually seeking community. In 2002 Barrett was named architect of the year by the American Institute of Architects' Colorado chapter, and Barrett/Steele Architects received AIA Colorado's firm of the year award in 1998. Indeed, Barrett does seem to straddle both realms—heaven and earth. He lets the forces of nature inform his structural designs, which range from a Benedictine abbey in Virginia Dale, Colorado, to a residential campus in Estes Park for at-risk youth, to many urban and rural homes throughout Colorado and the country. While many other architects design solar homes that incorporate straw bales or some salvaged materials, Barrett uses nature's forms and forces as the inspirational kernel—what he likes to call the "poetic seed"—of his works. And he builds his homes with sensitivity to the scale and atmosphere of the neighborhoods and regions they fit into.

Take his own home in north Boulder. The house embraces the solitary remnant of an old orchard, nestled on the edge of a community garden in a relatively dense neighborhood hosting a mix of ranch-style and two-story homes. "We saw this apple tree and decided to wrap the whole house around it," says Barrett. Most rooms in the house face the lone survivor. "This tree changes every day. In the fall the leaves change colors and it gives apples. And it becomes a wonderful lattice for snow in the winter. In the spring it blossoms, then gives shade in the summer. We couldn't use the outdoors if not for that tree sometimes."

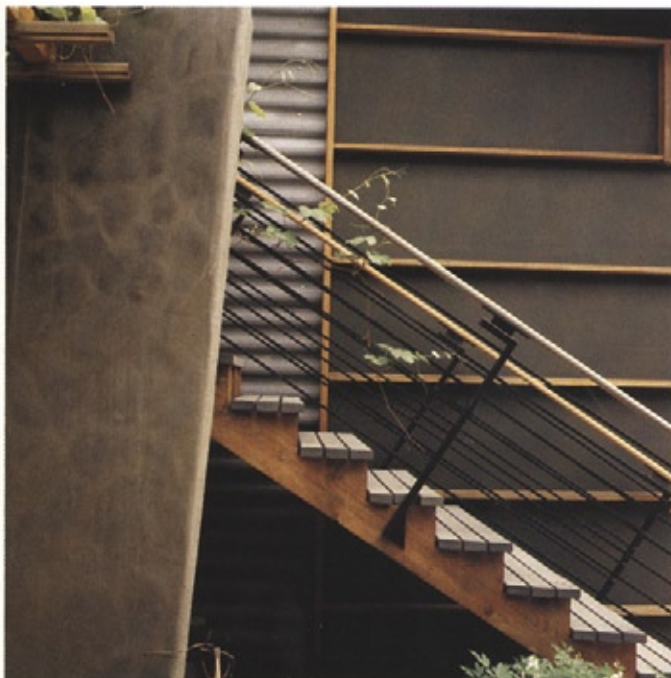
For his "Garden Home," as he calls it, the apple tree became the "poetic seed"—the organizing or life-giving principle and the soul of the project. Barrett typically finds some poetic seed for all the homes he designs. For instance, "Leafhouse," a leaf-shaped rural home in Missoula, Montana, was inspired by the autumnal shedding of surrounding trees' leaves and by the owner's desire to eventually die in the home. "Cloudhouse" is a home he modeled after lenticular clouds that commonly hover above Boulder County. Such organic shapes can present a design challenge, Barrett notes, as they embrace natural laws but seem to defy mathematics.



TOP, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT Barrett's designs: Cox streetscape; model of the Cloudhouse; Abbey chapel; model of the Dushanbe Cyber-Café. **ABOVE** The apple tree that served as the "poetic seed" for the Barretts' home. **RIGHT** The tiger-skin granite counter complements the vertical-grain-fir kitchen walls and maple Lyre stools. A concrete floor provides comfort in winter with hydronic radiant heat. The Barretts kept the concrete natural, with no pigment added; wax polish adds a shine and surface protection.







LEFT Artwork, mostly created by friends of the Barretts, fills the home, such as this painting, "The Release," by Boulder artist Jill Englebart McIntyre. The cherrywood dining table was designed by Boulder's Jhane Barnes for Bernhardt. Flower vases from Crate and Barrel. **ABOVE** The home's exterior incorporates cedar battens, green concrete Hardi panels, and corrugated concrete panels. Trex stairs, made of recycled material, lead to the unattached studio. The open lines of the stairway metalwork, designed by Boulder artist Michael Hibner, lighten up the concrete elements while casting shadows and providing texture.

When Barrett and his wife, Betzi, an interior designer and architect who works in his firm, designed and built their 2,700-square-foot house four years ago, they invited inspirations from their global travels into the design. The house blends the frugal modernism of Scandinavia, the handmolded and thick-walled feel of Mexico, and the bamboo trim and overhanging roof structures of Japan. The spiritual and physical centrality of the apple tree is also reminiscent of traditional Japanese homes, with their open passageways that look onto carefully tended rock and plant gardens. The thick stucco walls are broken up in places by rectangles of glass, large glass windows, and high-places window slits on the north wall, allowing for light to filter through the house.

Inside one finds few separate, enclosed spaces; the living room connects fluidly to the kitchen, which connects to the dining room, whose double glass doors lead right to the courtyard. Barrett wanted

Green Building Tips

David Barrett blends natural and artificial materials in his homes to preserve the environment and often to save money. The upfront costs can be higher than those of conventional materials, but in the long-term the eco-materials typically save homeowners money.

CHOOSE THE RIGHT ORIENTATION. When building new or adding on space think about how the sun can enter—lighting and warming—your home.

CREATE WITH WASTE. The Cempo walls are concrete forms made of recycled polystyrene packing material and then stuccoed inside and out. The decks are “treks,” recycled content as well.

USE PRINCIPLES OF THERMAL MASS. Exposed and polished concrete floors along with interior concrete walls and bancos serve to store the incoming solar heat, releasing it slowly into the night.

INSULATE THE ROOF. Placing insulation as high up as possible prevents heat loss.

CONSIDER CORK FLOORS. Cork is a sustainably harvested bark, and has a give to it that is easy on the feet and kind to falling objects.

USE WOODS JUDICIOUSLY. On their home's exterior, the Barretts used cedar for horizontal battens as well as wood on the protected to give a presence of wood.

the house to be a family home, one that offers privacy in bedrooms but keeps the couple and their 11-year-old son, Will, within eyesight and earshot of each other. And Barrett wanted his home and its materials—concrete floors, sturdy wooden dining table, stuffed couches—to be for the family and friends to sink into, not just look at. “Family life isn’t always gentle on a house,” he says. “We don’t want a house that’s so precious you can’t fully live in it. I want my home to be much more humane, tactile, friendly—not so precious.”

The Barretts also wanted to connect structurally to the existing homes in the area. “We didn’t want to be pretentious. And we wanted to respect our neighbors, not to be too flashy,” says Betzi, 48. Barrett encourages people to build homes within 4,500 square feet. Beyond that, he says, they often look obtrusive and wasteful.

Barrett describes his architectural style as a natural modernism that’s timeless and yet bestows a sense of place. “If we keep trying to respond to reality

around us and find poetic seeds to what’s around us, hopefully that can create timelessness,” he says. The problem with so much contemporary architecture, Barrett suggests, is that it rejects rather than welcomes its natural surroundings. “So many homes could be Anywhere USA. They have no real connection to place, to climate, to local materials,” he says. “And so they’re just about somebody’s imposed idea of what it should be.” He refers, with some despair, to the classic homes on large lots crammed up against each other,

boasting overwhelming two- or three-car garages that form the visual center, and with soaring columns framing the front door. “To me, that kind of home is wrapped around someone’s ego. It’s not human scale; it’s ego scale,” Barrett says.

He also frowns on using fake materials that try to look like, say, rocks or grainy wood. For his own home, he used an unadorned gray cement-floor terrace to overlook the west-facing courtyard that curves around the apple tree. “If you use cement board, let it be cement board, not wood. Don’t dye it, and be proud of it.”

It’s roughly four o’clock in the afternoon and Barrett’s son bursts through the back courtyard door carrying his skateboard. He smiles, says hi to his parents, and drops his board. Then, on his father’s suggestion, he bounces over to a classical harp perched in the living room near a towering cactus plant. He sits down and begins to pluck the harp’s strings. The angelic sound resonates through the home and silences the adults. When Will stops, David looks up from his window perch and quietly says: “That’s what this is all about. It’s not just about the materials and the space. It’s the life that fills the space.” ▲

Susan Moran is a freelance writer living in Boulder.



ABOVE The Barretts wanted to evoke the Caribbean in the bath, so they chose a backpainted glass counter that accentuates the aqua green hues. The vertical slit mirror behind the sink opens up the small space. Kohler vessel sink; faucet by KWC. **RIGHT** The shortened wall behind the bed allows northern light to creep over into the main room, which would otherwise feel too dark. The dipped wall also calls attention away from the center beam and makes the room appear more spacious. Wooden bedstands were designed by Schacht.

