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Ironically enough, the very things that make Colorado one of the hardest areas to build in also make it one of the most desirable places to live. Areas within the Denver-Boulder metro area, in particular, are frequent on “best places to live” lists every year. Louisville, Colo., was ranked No. 2 on Money magazine’s “Best American Small Towns to Live” list and Denver showed up as No. 6 on Businessweek’s “America’s Best 50 Cities.” Its thriving technology sector no doubt has heavy influence on the region’s clout, but its natural habitat – harsh, yet beautiful – continues to be a major draw, as well.

“Colorado has extreme weather conditions,” explains architect Scott Rodwin, AIA, founder of design/build firm Skycastle Homes. “The nights are often 40 degrees cooler than in the day, and the summer temperatures can reach over 100 while winter temperatures dip below zero. That powerful natural environment can make Colorado a challenging place to build.

“We have a 130 mile-per-hour wind zone and a three-foot snow load in Boulder County,” he adds. “Between the wind, the snow, the sun and expansive clay soil, our houses have to be designed and detailed carefully, and built very robustly.”

The focus for the state and its residents is to build houses that equally embrace, protect and withstand Colorado’s environment. As a builder in the area since 2001, the 12-person firm of Skycastle Homes has addressed the unique needs of Colorado’s custom home market with houses that focus on quality and sustainability. Rodwin explains that homeowners in the Denver-Boulder region tend to have high expectations and often go above and beyond the already-stringent environmental codes set out by the state.

An Eye on Energy

The focus on sustainability often leads to homes that score well on the Home Energy Rating System (HERS). For instance, the firm recently designed and built the 3,300-square-foot Dineen Residence, which achieved a HERS 32, meaning it uses 68 percent less energy than allowed by code. The home’s radiant concrete floors, solar electric photovoltaic system and foam insulation all aided in its rating. The home also incorporated passive solar design with big southern windows featuring carefully calculated overhangs and “tuned” glazing. The meticulously designed house is meant to maximize the passive solar design while offering the best views possible.

“We spend a lot of time analyzing how the sun interacts with the house to find that optimal balance,” says Brandon David, vice president of construction. After that, Skycastle focuses on creating a superb envelope. “If you get the sun and the shell right, the mechanical system doesn’t have to work nearly as hard.”

Skycastle is constantly pushing the envelope on energy. Rodwin and his team of talented designers created their first Net-Zero energy, LEED Platinum home in 2008, and this summer they are wrapping up construction on a beautiful HERS negative-5 house that is targeting LEED Platinum and is expected to produce more energy than it consumes.

Living Naturally

The company's Gunang Mas Ranch is another project that highlights Colorado's sustainable culture. The 3,800-square-foot contemporary mountain home ranks at HERS 40 through its use of photovoltaic panels, foam insulation, Energy Star-windows and appliances, LED lighting and a high-efficiency mechanical system. It incorporates EPA Watersense certified plumbing fixtures, drip irrigation and Xeric (indigenous drought tolerant) landscaping to dramatically reduce water use.

Coloradans also like to see those environmental values reflected in the style of their homes. Skycastle Senior Designer Kirsten Snobeck explains that most clients look for a warm modern aesthetic that is still "distinctly Colorado." Materials such as stone, earth-toned stucco and heavy timber beams mimic the area's mountainous palette. "We have clients moving here from all over the country - they tend to have sophisticated contemporary tastes and want that blended with the raw natural beauty of the west," she says.

That compelling intersection is apparent in Skycastle's award-winning portfolio, which ranges from traditional to truly modern. "We look to make each house an authentic expression of our client's personality and aspirations," Rodwin explains. "We merge that with the unique characteristics of the site, and then work to make it as sustainable as possible. Finding the ideal balance point of all those goals is the art of what we do."