

What is Mountain Architecture? The mountain architecture vernacular consists of bold, natural and textured buildings and materials. These buildings should functionally and aesthetically withstand rugged mountainous environments, as well as blend into the topography.

Mountain homes should take advantage of nature by bringing the outdoors in through ample amounts of glazing and natural materials, and by extending indoor living spaces to the outside (outdoor living rooms) with decks, terraces and other exterior areas. A home exterior should look like it has grown out of the site rather than being lowered down from a helicopter. It can take advantage of the surrounding trees, boulders and other landforms by incorporating them into the home and the outdoor living rooms, and designing around them. Interiors should have a good range of natural materials and forms. These are often more rustic than the typical home, and sometimes have an "old world" appearance. Designed tastefully, this will often give the home a "rustic elegance".



Mountain architecture is organically massed to taper down into the site. Multiple volumes conform to the existing terrain and are in scale with the existing landscape. Large, symmetrical, obtrusive building forms are often avoided. Some single story elements help keep a mountain home residential in scale.

Broad sheltering roofs appear to cascade down in steps or multi-level designs, and protect against winter snow, spring rain and summer sun. Roofs generally have a 4:12 to 12:12 pitch. Depending on the locality, there is little ornamentation. For instance, the rugged, bold architecture of Big Sky and Whitefish in Montana, Telluride, Colorado and Jackson Hole, Wyoming may often have less ornamentation and detail than buildings in Vail, Colorado and Lake Tahoe.



Architects who design mountain architecture most often utilize natural materials and warm, earthy colors. Roofs may consist of cedar shakes or slate, sometimes with copper accents. Siding is frequently cedar (boards, shake shingles or logs) and stone. Recycled barn wood is sometimes used for a more rustic look. If wood is to be stained it should let the natural grains show through. The stone should be bigger at the base to give it an anchored and structural appearance. Large mortar joints should be avoided in the mountain style.

In the mountains, columns, beams, rafters and other structural elements are bigger and bolder for protection against heavy snow loads. These are typically douglas fir and/or reclaimed wood, and can be built in timber frame or timber post and beam construction. Windows are typically kept to a minimum on the front elevation, while opening up to broad views on the back or view elevations, which many times have daylight basements to take advantage of the steep slopes. Windows typically have wood or metal clad (aluminum, copper or bronze) frames. These frames can have an aged patina for an older appearance. Garage doors are wood, many times in the carriage style.



Landscaping is also an important element in quality mountain architecture. Home sites should be designed for maximum privacy, minimal visibility, minimized grading and disruption of natural drainage. Sites are kept natural by containing water runoff, and enhancing the natural landforms and vegetation. Smart design should keep retaining walls to a minimum, both to preserve a natural look as well as save on costs. These retaining walls are most often natural stone. Vegetation will help these walls blend into the site.

Other landscape elements include native hardscaping (patios, walkways), and minimal walls, fences and gates. When these are incorporated they should look open and natural, and relate to the building. A good architect or landscape architect should know of some good tricks here for the benefits of privacy and the homeowner's personal tastes. Driveways are often natural materials such as stone, but are more cost effective with concrete (colored, stamped, aggregate), pre-cast pavers, or asphalt.



Mountain style architecture has similar elements to other vernaculars. These include Montana ranch, rustic western style, Adirondack, and historic logging and mining styles. Craftsman/Arts & Crafts, Chalet, Prairie, Japanese and even Tuscan elements can be incorporated into the mountain style if done tastefully.

Mountain Architecture generally occurs in the mountains of the West, and in pockets of the Northeast and Southeast. In the West, besides the previously mentioned Vail, Jackson Hole, Big Sky, Whitefish, Telluride and Lake Tahoe, other areas with mountain style homes include Sun Valley, Coeur d'Alene, Sandpoint and Priest Lake in Idaho, Aspen, Breckenridge, Steamboat Springs, Durango and Crested Butte in Colorado, and Park City in Utah. In Southwestern Canada, Whistler is by far the most popular mountain resort area, and hosted the 2010 Winter Olympics. Canmore in Alberta is popular with it's close proximity to Banff, and was the site of the nordic events when Calgary hosted the 1988 Winter Olympics.

For further information, please also see our blog post [Origins of Mountain Architecture in America](#).

Feel free to peruse more mountain architecture photos and renderings. Hendricks Architecture specializes in the design of luxury mountain style homes and cabins, and has been listed yearly among Mountain Living's top mountain architects. We try to add a little bit of soul into each home, to reflect the personalities and wishes of the homeowners. Most of the homes we've completed are in mountain resort areas throughout the West.

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