

A Taos architect shows that you don't need a big footprint to have an expansive home

Living Large

Architect Rye Lemons remembers doing what he calls the “squint test” when a home he was working on near Taos was close to completion. Driving to the site one day, he stopped where the road overlooks the small agricultural valley where the house sits among alfalfa fields and semirural land. From a distance, the long, narrow, single-story structure looked just like another humble farmhouse or barn. In other words, it fit right in. “I wanted to be sensitive to that,” says Lemons, owner of the one-man firm Rise Architecture and Design in Taos.

Up close, however, the traditional Northern New Mexico style gives way to a less expected look. Roofline variations, exterior wall insets, wooden posts, and a slight change in grade seem to divide the linear structure into component parts. The clean, whitewashed feel of bright white stucco adds a universal, timeless quality, hinting at kinship with Mediterranean, classical European, or prairie farmhouse architecture. “I love how the blue sky is even more blue against the white. It’s all so crisp, strong, and simple,” Lemons says.

In fact, many of the elements most compelling to Lemons also appear in agrarian structures—strong lines, unembellished use of materials, and distinct sculptural and functional qualities. These sturdy edifices—along with more traditional Southwest architecture—are among the influences that tend to linger at the edges of his mind as he designs. The same can be said



Taos-based architect Rye Lemons appreciates New Mexico's openness to “rethinking the norms”—in this case infusing the agrarian vernacular architecture of a simple white farmhouse with the slightly unexpected.



of the great National Park Service lodges built in the 1930s through the Works Projects Administration, which Lemons first admired on camping trips growing up. Not that a career in architecture was even on his radar in those days.

Raised in Fort Worth, Texas, Lemons was headed in the direction of recreation, parks, and tourism until partway through college. With roommates studying in the architecture program, his interest was stirred. He went on to Virginia Tech, where he discovered his “tribe” and earned a masters degree in architecture. The school emphasized a Bauhaus-style approach, combining art and craft with technical skills, and incorporating hands-on experience in metal, wood, printmaking, and ceramics. “We needed to understand materiality, density, process, and how it all goes together,” Lemons says.

Following graduation, Lemons joined the Aspen, Colorado, firm of Cottle Carr Yaw (CCY Architects). He remained there for nine years, working on a range of high-end residential and commercial projects. “It was a great training ground for the fundamentals of the profession, and at a scale and quality level that was really fun,” he says. Yet being part of a team entails an inherent distance from the totality of a project, and at a certain point Lemons knew he wanted to be intimately involved in the entire process. He wanted to see a design vision through from “day one to day end.”

In 2013 he set out on his own. His experience vacationing in Northern New Mexico had led him to purchase a small adobe house in Arroyo Seco north of Taos a few years back, which he’d been renovating on weekends. Wearing many hats, he now works from there—with projects in New Mexico and Colorado—and also plans to open an office in Santa Fe this year. “I’m the marketing person, the IT person, the bookkeeper, draftsman, client liaison,” he says, smiling. “It’s more responsibility, but there’s a continuity that I enjoy.”



Clockwise from top: The clients wanted a low-maintenance home with straightforward use of materials that could be handled by local professionals: plain concrete and red oak floors, plaster, metal, and pine. Architect Rye Lemons. A cozy reading nook off the master bedroom.

Opposite, top and bottom: Seen from above the agricultural valley near Taos where it sits, a family vacation home fits comfortably into its environment. Simple materials and design are both functional and beautiful. A slightly stepped design creates pod-like areas, each with cross-ventilation and its own outside door, for privacy and a strong connection between indoors and out.



Lemons aims at “somehow initiating and fostering delight, so a house is not just a structure but truly has a sense of place.”

After working in Colorado, Lemons knew that Northern New Mexico would present familiar kinds of climate and site challenges. He understands designing a roof to shed snow, for example, and how landscaping works in arid terrain. He was also drawn to the region’s diverse population and what he calls its “horizon mentality—very positive, forward-thinking, and independent. People can come here and just be themselves,” he says. “Architecture in New Mexico almost demands that you rethink the norms.” While the area’s traditional building approach represents an important inspiration, Lemons is interested in the “wisdom of vernacular without a nostalgic adherence to it,” he says. “I say yes to the spirit of the vernacular and its logical response to the environment, but I don’t mimic what’s come before.”

To interpret that spirit in a way that meets a client’s specific needs and desires, Lemons asks nuanced questions: How do you want to live in this house? What is your daily routine? “If there’s a simple solution or a complex one, I usually go toward simple,” he says.

For a recently retired Albuquerque couple, their responses led to a unique second home and extended family gathering spot near Taos. The couple wanted a low-maintenance house with a blend of traditional and contemporary elements. As the wife describes

their vision: “We both really like the idea of the way prehistoric pueblos were accretionary—you have a pod and then add another and another.”

Lemons translated that concept into a common living, dining, and kitchen area and a single long hallway opening to two bedrooms, an office/work space, and two and a half baths. At just under 2,000 square feet, with a separate small pottery studio and a detached garage, the home was designed on a human, relatively modest scale, yet “somehow it lives large,” the architect says. Contributing to the spacious feeling are seven-foot-tall doors and ceilings that rise to nine feet. Generous windows take advantage of the home’s long east-facing axis and mountain views.

Despite a focus on straightforward materials and clean design, Lemons always aims at “somehow initiating and fostering delight, so a house is not just a structure but truly has a sense of place.” In the year and a half since their home was completed, the owners have continually experienced that sense of delight. One lovely surprise: Because the east and west windows in the kitchen and living room face each other, a gentle reflection of color-filled skies is mirrored in the opposite windows at sunrise and sunset. “That’s pretty cool,” the husband says. His wife sums up their feelings about the home: “It’s an absolutely gorgeous space.” *

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