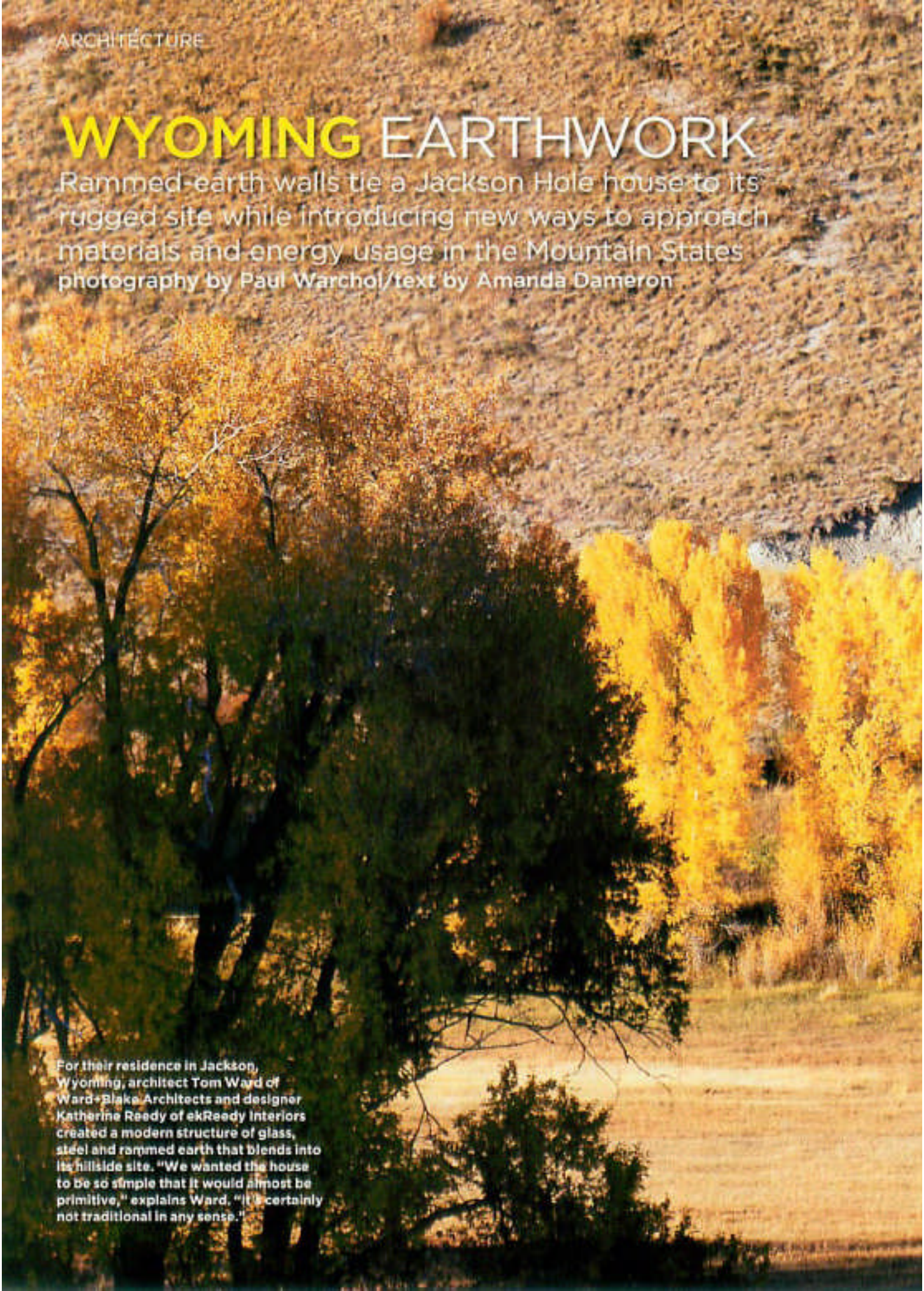
WYOMING EARTHWORK

Rammed-earth walls tie a Jackson Hole house to its rugged site while introducing new ways to approach materials and energy usage in the Mountain States

photography by Paul Warchol/text by Amanda Dameron



For their residence in Jackson, Wyoming, architect Tom Ward of Ward+Blake Architects and designer Katherine Reedy of ekReedy Interiors created a modern structure of glass, steel and rammed earth that blends into its hillside site. "We wanted the house to be so simple that it would almost be primitive," explains Ward. "It's certainly not traditional in any sense."

In the living-dining area, windows framing vistas of mountain and sky lend vibrant punctuation to the room's muted palette. "In the West," says Reedy (opposite, at the front entrance with Ward and their Newfoundland, Hector), "the landscape gives color to draw from." A Joan Weissman rug anchors the living area, where a pair of calfskin-covered Corbusier chairs are next to a custom cherrywood low table. A nineteenth-century Mayan granary ladder leans against the rammed-earth wall alongside furnishings from Cassina.

PORTRAIT: ANDREW HYSLOP

"I LIKE TO CALL IT A 'DIRTY MODERNIST' HOUSE," says architect Tom Ward, a principal of the firm Ward+Blake Architects, of the residence he created in Jackson, Wyoming, with his wife, interior designer Katherine Reedy. "Most people's perception is that modernism is sterile and somehow uninvolved. But it's the imperfect areas that I find intriguing. In this house, we left things ragged and rough and tried to bring a bit more to the table."

Composed of glass, steel and rammed-earth walls, the 2,300-square-foot house rests flush against a hillside and overlooks a valley carved by the Snake River. "The rammed-earth walls blend in with the dominating cliffs to the east," says Ward, a Jackson native who spent the early part of his career in New York. Made from a tightly compressed mixture of native soil, crushed stone and Portland cement, the rammed earth lends what Ward calls an "ancient component" to the house, which he balanced with large glass panels that flank the central living spaces.

Ward installed a radiant-heating system beneath the concrete-and-slate floor. "Rammed earth and radiant heat work independently," he says, "but they're kindred spirits." Both systems regulate the house's heating and cooling by integrating natural power. Depending on the season, warm or cool water courses through a tubing system beneath the floor, while the thick rammed-earth walls absorb the sun's energy during the day and release it incrementally. "The whole house is like a woolly mammoth," explains Ward. "It moves at a very slow pace, conserving energy as needed."

When it came to the interiors, Reedy, who heads the design firm ekReedy Interiors, took her cues from the organic qualities of the earthen walls. "The texture and stratified color add warmth and beauty to the interior," says the designer. Citing the "timelessness,

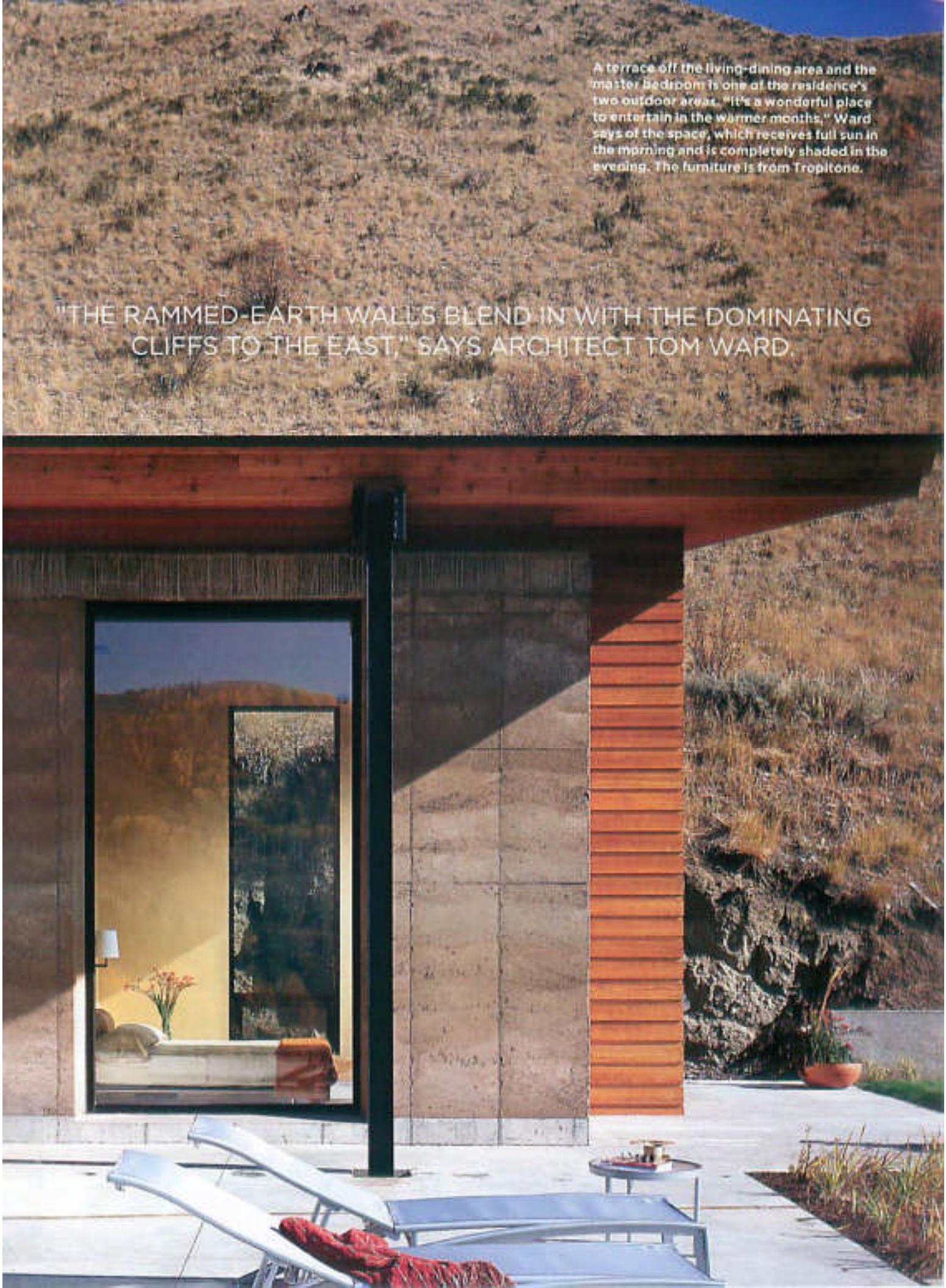
CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: A niche in the living-area fireplace houses a collection of cast-iron Japanese teapots; Santa Clara pottery is arranged on the low table. Reedy strategically placed the kitchen windows in order "to grab some sky," says Ward. Panels of glass border the master bedroom on three sides. "It's a great motivator to wake up in the morning," says Reedy.

quality and substance" of man-made objects, Reedy wove a common thread between Native American pottery and modern furnishings by Corbusier. She chose materials such as barracuda granite for the countertops and island in the kitchen to provide naturally occurring pattern and texture.

The master bedroom, situated at the easternmost point of the residence, is bordered on three sides by expansive windows unencumbered by draperies. There are no furnishings, save for a custom bed with a leather-covered headboard. "Our approach was to keep the bedroom a simple sleeping area," Reedy explains. "Restraint was practiced to maintain the room's tranquility."

Used to the demands of clients, both Ward and Reedy enjoyed the experience of working together on their own house. "The more you know a client, the more he or she is willing to share, the better the project will turn out," says Reedy. "We know each other, we know how we live. We share a common language."

If the couple's particular alchemy has broadened their design perspective, so, too, has watching Jackson change over the last twenty years. "When we first arrived, everyone was talking about log homes and cowboy furniture," Ward recalls. "Now people have a more sophisticated take on the West, and in the process it's gotten more interesting and a little less easy to define. This house is definitely a modernist piece, but it's not refined and it's not overwrought. The corners are crumbly here and there, but once you look beyond that, you realize it has soul and character, and it'll just get better and better over time." +



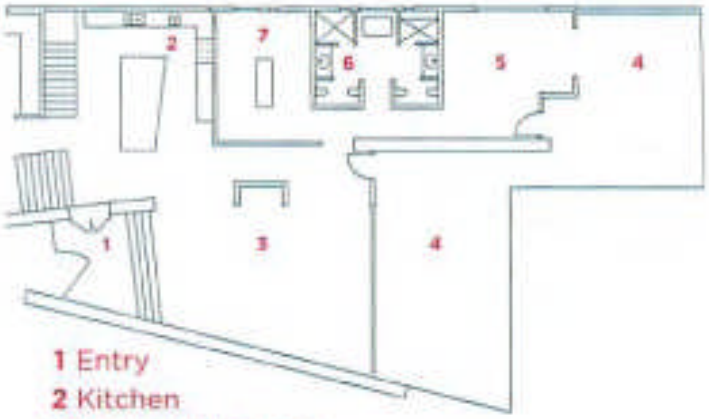
A terrace off the living-dining area and the master bedroom is one of the residence's two outdoor areas. "It's a wonderful place to entertain in the warmer months," Ward says of the space, which receives full sun in the morning and is completely shaded in the evening. The furniture is from Tropitone.

"THE RAMMED-EARTH WALLS BLEND IN WITH THE DOMINATING CLIFFS TO THE EAST," SAYS ARCHITECT TOM WARD.

From the terrace, sliding doors open to the living-dining area and the glass-framed entrance beyond. The resulting transparency is a counterpoint to the heavy rammed-earth walls.

FLOOR PLAN

Main Level



1 Entry
2 Kitchen
3 Living-dining area
4 Terrace
5 Master bedroom
6 Master bath
7 Closet

DESIGN DETAILS

- Rammed earth, a building material made of a tightly compacted mixture of Portland cement, soil and crushed stone, conserves energy in all weather conditions. "In winter, it slowly absorbs solar heat during the day," says Ward. "In summer, the eighteen-inch-thick walls provide relief from the sun." The process of creating rammed-earth walls can be time-consuming and labor-intensive, but the material cost is low.

- Concrete, though one of the best materials for a radiant-heating flooring system, can crack as it settles. Intersperse strips of slate to absorb pressure and reduce cracking. "Concrete slab shrinks constantly as moisture is pulled out of it," says Ward. "It wants to crack, and it usually will in the first year. Just allow the slabs to move, and then regrout the slate."

- Ward and Reedy's house has a butterfly roof, a good solution where there's a large amount of snow or rainfall. "In spring, the snow begins to melt, but temperatures go below freezing at night. You get a buildup of ice, which takes its toll on the building, and it's treacherous to walk around," says Ward. "The pitched shape funnels the water and redirects it to our landscape."

- Ward used Solarban 60 for the windows, a glass that diffuses direct sunlight, reduces heat gain in summer and directs energy into the house in winter.