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Las Brisas Hotel in Acapulco, Mexico. Photo by Slim Alstrom, 1968





Photo: Draper White

With its new book, **Connection**, Basalt's CCY Architects has created a visual conversation about design and the land.

# DESIGN DIALOGUE

WORDS: Alison Gwinn

Just look at the cover of CCY Architects' new monograph, *Connection*, and you'll immediately realize that this is not going to be your typical architecture book. The cover image—a verdant shot through an aspen and pine forest, with the slender angles of a home peeking in from the side—speaks to the firm's reverence for site and deference to nature.

"We liked that image because it's not obvious—it has nuance and unexpectedness to it," says John Cottle, CCY principal. "Nature is the primary focus and how the architecture adapts or fits to that."

But why a monograph—and why now? CCY actually created a much smaller, self-published book about 20 years ago, with the goal of eventually following up with a more robust book. About five years ago, the time seemed right to start thinking seriously about it.

The CCY team sees the monograph as having several purposes: To teach. To share the firm's work. To elevate the conversation about design's intrinsic link to place. And to help the firm take a long look at itself in the mirror.

"Teaching has always been in our blood," Cottle says, "but to teach something, you have to understand it better yourself. You have to dig deeper. We love to do design critiques in our office. This monograph was like a long-term, extended design critique of our work and our process."

The book took more than four years to put together—after all, everyone at CCY has a day job. But the length of the project actually turned out to be a bonus. "One of the great surprises was that the process of writing the book became synergistic with our daily work in real time," Cottle says, "so the monograph was informing the projects we were working on in the office. And that was really rewarding."



The new monograph from CCY has a cover image that speaks to the firm's site-specific approach to projects. "We liked that image because it's not obvious—it has nuance and unexpectedness to it," says John Cottle, CCY principal. "Nature is the primary focus and how the architecture adapts or fits to that."

The 312-page book—with a foreword by Rick Sommerfeld, assistant professor of architecture at CU Denver and director of its design-build Colorado Building Workshop—was created by a small in-house team of five people, with a book design (by Julie Kolar of Esse Design) that is every bit as artful and intelligent as the firm's architectural creations themselves.

When CCY first looked around, it didn't find many examples of exactly what it was aiming for with *Connection*. "When you take on a problem, like putting together our first monograph, you quickly gravitate to looking at what is out there," says Gage Reese, an associate at CCY. "What do we like? What do we not like? What is too big and what's too small? How much writing are we actually going to do? And the more we looked at precedents, the more dissatisfied we were with any of the formats we saw. So we looked at ourselves as a firm and said, 'Well, who are we? What do we believe in? What are we doing, and how do we deliver that message graphically as well as visually and through writing? Our own style, our own layout, and our own

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—John Cottle, CCY principal



concepts naturally started to flesh themselves out. This really became ours—that was part of the fun of the process.”

The result is a book highlighting 10 residences that exemplify CCY’s site-specific design approach, which is both rooted in place and inspired by the Western environment around it. “It’s a cross-section of what we think is most representative of our ideas,” says Reese, starting with a 2010 project called Red Mountain. “That project was sort of a turning point for the firm, taking a more modern approach and using modern materials like concrete.”

“Our work has a pretty wide variety of how it’s expressed, from gabled roofs to very flat roofs to lots of glass to not as much glass, so the houses don’t look the same,” Cottle says. “But in the last handful of years, a growing number of projects really defer to the land. They listen to the land more carefully, respond to it and, in many cases, step back from it or reflect it in ways that are a little less obvious. So the idea of really deferring to nature is pretty important. You’re taught in architectural school to make big statements, and the result is often big, showy pieces of sculpture. But there is a different approach that responds to the specifics of a place. And there’s an important message in there that architecture can listen to nature more.”



Gammel Damm is a modern family retreat inspired by the client’s rugged, multigenerational cabin in Norway. To ensure privacy, the house is situated on the interior of the lot among pine trees, aspen groves, and scrub oak.

Photo: Draper White



A five-person team at CCY was the main force behind the monograph, poring over past projects and slowly forming the message and images of the book, which was designed by Julie Kolar of Esse Design.



The 312-page book will make its debut on June 15, sold both through independent booksellers and through the publisher, Monacelli.



**“WELL, WHO ARE WE? WHAT DO WE BELIEVE IN? WHAT ARE WE DOING, AND HOW DO WE DELIVER THAT MESSAGE GRAPHICALLY AS WELL AS VISUALLY AND THROUGH WRITING? OUR OWN STYLE, OUR OWN LAYOUT, AND OUR OWN CONCEPTS NATURALLY STARTED TO FLESH THEMSELVES OUT. THIS REALLY BECAME OURS—THAT WAS PART OF THE FUN OF THE PROCESS.”** —Gage Reese, CCY Associate

The hope is that architecture fans—including CCY’s own clients—will enjoy both the images and the ideas in *Connection*. “Most of our residential clients are really pretty serious architectural buffs,” says Cottle. “They love the design process, so we think people like that who are passionate about architecture as a hobby or pursuit will enjoy the book. We also imagine it finding interest among academics and younger people interested in how buildings can fit into their environments better.”

The book, which ends with a firm timeline and a nod to all the people who have worked at CCY over the years, was a labor of love. “It’s demanded as much time as some of the projects we’re delivering for clients,” says Reese. But the CCY team is thrilled with the result. “It’s got all our blood, sweat, and tears in it,” says Cottle, “and the more of those you put into something, the better it is.”

After all that work, would they do it again? Yes, indeed. In fact, their Monacelli contract stipulates an ongoing relationship—the publisher wants to have right of first refusal on future CCY manuscripts.

*Connection* is making its debut on June 15, and can be bought through local bookshops (including Tattered Cover in Denver, Bookbinders in Basalt, Explore Booksellers in Aspen, and Between the Covers in Telluride); the publisher, Monacelli; and its mother ship, Penguin Random House. (When purchasing through the publisher, use the discount code CCY20 for free shipping.) And for anyone who wants more, a panel discussion is planned for this October between CCY Architects and Sommerfeld as part of the CU Denver School of Architecture’s Fall Lecture Series. ■