The Quest
For Transparency

Affluent buyers say the best ski homes offer wide-open views of the slopes from the cozy indoors.

BY CECILIE KOHWEDEER

THE TEMPERATURE OUTSIDE was 23-degrees below zero the day Michael and Shadia Alessandro bought their modern mountain home for $3.4 million in Wyoming's Jackson Hole.

The frigid weather briefly gave them pause, since the five-bedroom, 6,800-square-foot home had walls of glass—a design that can be less energy-efficient than insulated walls. Still, the Wilson, Wyo., house, designed by Jackson-based Dynia Architects, offered sweeping views of the Teton Range. After the sale closed, the Alessandros installed even more glass in the living room to further enlarge the view.

Mr. Alessandro says the home is still warm and cozy, with monthly heating bills averaging $238 in the 12 months through September. "You couldn't have done this 100 years ago," says Mr. Alessandro, 74, a retired managing director of Hambrecht & Quist, a San Francisco-based investment bank now part of J.P. Morgan Chase & Co. "Glass technology has evolved so that people can have a house like this. It's amazing that people still want to build those old-style log cabins."

Many affluent buyers say that the best ski homes are ones where you can see the snow and slopes while staying snug inside. Recent advances
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in glassmaking and engineering mean homes can have larger panels of architectural glass with higher levels of insulation. Two or three panes, with sophisticated coatings and argon gas between layers to displace cold air, allow homeowners to manage extreme climates with- out inflated utility bills. Extra-clear glass, low in iron, eliminates the green tint that thick glass had in the past. For safety, glass is lami- nated like car windshields. To man- age sunlight, it comes in versions that darken like sunglasses, either automatically or at the flick of a switch. In contemporary mountain homes, windows have narrow steel, aluminum or fiberglass frames.

"The goal is for the window frame to go away," says Alan Pick- ett, resident architect at Pella Corp., a window and door manufac- turer in Pella, Iowa. "Clients want more glass, less frame, less wall."

Such transparency can be costly. At Agora, a company in Colling- wood, Ontario, that makes large ar- chitectural glass, prices rise with the size of the panel and level of in- sulation. Double-pane, high-perfor- mance glass with low emissivity and argon gas costs three times as much as single-pane glass. Triple- pane, triple-coated glass with argon costs more than five times as much.

"In mountain areas, almost all houses have double-pane glass, some have triple-pane," says Rich- ard Wilson, Agora’s founder and president. Some homeowners re- duce building costs by using pre- mined glass on the main panoramic windows and less-expensive vari- eties in less-prominent spaces. Others opt for smaller, more af- fordable window panes with a grid of muntins, even though it inter- feres with the view.

Architect Tom Kundig designed a newly translucent retreat in Wash- ington’s remote Methow Valley. The communal area of the 3,200- square-foot, four-bedroom com- pound near Winthrop, Wash., has glass on three sides. Walls open up, further blurring the boundaries be- tween inside and outside.

SEE-THROUGH Steve Biedn and Mark Brown’s $3 million, 4,200- square-foot house in Aspen, Colo. The living room has sliding glass doors that open onto a deck.

"We have 360-degree views," says homeowner Tasha Archison, a 44-year-old mother of two and re- tired transportation engineer. "Why ruin that with walls?"

Mr. Archison and her husband, Shane, a 44-year-old chief market- ing officer of Utah-based software firm Domo, completed the house in 2012 and now spend weekends and vacations there with their children, Keegan, 13, and Faison, 11.

Sitting on 20 acres, the property is composed of four separate build- ings that are placed to frame views of the valley, Pearrygin Lake and the Stuhlhman Ridge. The separate structures, built like pioneer wagons circling a campfire, give those inside
a closer connection to the landscape than one larger house would, says
Mr. Kundig, owner and design prin-
cipal at Seattle-based architectural
firm Olson Kundig. Public spaces,
such as the living, dining and
kitchen areas, are in one building;
private spaces, including the master
bedroom, children's room and den
are a short walk away in another.

One challenge homeowners face
with contemporary mountain
houses: making them look cozy. To
offset the stark look of glass, steel
and straight lines, they ask for
warmth, textured materials for non-
glass walls, as well as soft fabrics
and warm colors for furnishings. At
the Atchions' house, Olson Kundig
designed a small kitchen area with
a low ceiling made of reclaimed
barnwood. Living-room armchairs
are upholstered in homey tartan.

Bedding chairs provide a pop of
color to the industrial black, brown
and gray. Floors are made of
brushed concrete that "really
grounds you," says Mr. Atchison.

At John Thompson's contempo-
rary home in Big Sky, Mont., the
living room walls are full-height
sliding doors that completely open
up to the outside deck. Glass walls
on the sides make the view even
larger. Floor-to-ceiling windows in
the master bedroom create a sense
of immersion in the outdoors.

"When you're in the house, it
feels like you are in nature," says
Mr. Thompson, who sells real es-
tate at Big Sky's Yellowstone Club
and completed his house at Span-
ish Peaks, a nearby ski and golf
community, in 2015. "You just get
lost in the view."

The home uses highly insulated,
triple-pane performance glass that
keeps out both cold and heat from
the sun and lends off-uvradiation
rays. And it is clear enough to make
Mr. Thompson and his fiancée, Cody
Goeftle, feel one with the landscape.

Ms. Goeftle, a kinesiologist and
recent graduate of Montana State
University, and Mr. Thompson, who
has traveled extensively in Australia,
say the house was inspired by that
country's contemporary coastal ar-
chitecture, with clean lines, natural
materials and emphasis on views.

"Glass technology is changing
quickly," says Reid Smith, a Bose-
man, Mont., architect who de-
signed the $3.5 million house.

"There is a world of innovation
out there that is making it easier
to use those large sheets of glass."

At Steve Brunt and Mark
Brown's 4,100-square-foot house
on the Roaring Fork River in As-
pen, Colo., visitors are greeted by
a shimmering, two-story glass wall
exposing a floating staircase. Next
to it is a glass front door that
opens a view through a corridor,
to pine trees behind.

The living room has sliding
glass doors that open to a 900-
square-foot deck with a glass rail-
ing. The master suite also has
floor-to-ceiling windows. For Mr.
Brunt, 71, the main goal in building
the modern-mountain house was a
seamless transition to the out-
doors. At the same time, Mr. Brunt
and his husband, 66-year-old Mr.
Brown, wanted the four-bedroom
home to feel warm and welcoming.

To create that sense of se-
comfort, Aspen-based architect
Charles Cunniffe matched the glass
with textured sandstone walls. The
roof has wide eaves that shade
outdoor living space. And he de-
signed a lighting system that cre-
ates a warm atmosphere and pre-
vents the glass panes from
becoming large mirrors at night.

The glass itself is highly insulated,
preserving the heat in Colorado's
cold winters.

"We can enjoy the view of the
snow without feeling the cold of
the snow," says Mr. Brunt, a retired
ophthalmologist.

With Mr. Brown, a retired ac-
countant, Mr. Brunt is in Aspen six
weeks in the winter and four
months in the summer, which the
pair spends hiking, biking and
horseback riding. They spent around
$600 per square foot building the
house—around $3 million, including
outdoor space and garage—and
moved in 2015. Mr. Cunniffe, the
architect, says the more glass there is
on a house, the more expensive it
is—and modern mountain architec-
ture needs a lot of it.

"The clients that contact us are
usually looking for a maximum
amount of nature and minimal
separation between them and na-
ture," he says. "As much glass as
possible—that's our No. 1 request."