

MOUNTAIN MODEST

A high-end Teton County residential landscape takes a naturalistic, National Park-inspired approach. Is this the shape of things to come?

By Adam Regn Arvidson, ASLA
Photography by David Swift

CAROL AND PETER COXHEAD were living happily in Teton County, Wyoming, in a cottonwood forest right on the Snake River. They had come to the area two decades before and had made it their permanent home, even after retirement. They had a landscape they loved, designed by Jackson, Wyoming-based Verdone Landscape Architecture, and they had no intention of moving.

Then one day one of their sons, who is a real estate agent, called and said they absolutely had to come see a piece of property that had just come on the market. Carol told him they weren't interested, that they were happy where they were. But her son wouldn't give in. "My son said, 'I'll respect your opinion when you see it,'" she remembers. The site was impossible to turn down: more than 100 acres of pasture, pine forest, and wetlands near the confluence of the Snake and Gros Ventre rivers with unobstructed views of two evocative mountains—the Sleeping Indian and the Grand Teton.

"We were initially concerned with building on such a pristine property," remembers Carol. "That's where Jim came in." Before

they even bought the property, they decided to consult their landscape architect, Jim Verdone, ASLA. Verdone, the Coxheads, and their architect, Bozeman, Montana-based JLF Associates, walked the site, finding it incredibly rich in natural beauty. But development restrictions would severely limit where any improvements could go—most likely confining them to a stretch of

open and unremarkable pasture on the southern edge of the site.

Verdone had dealt with this issue before. He has been designing residential landscapes in Teton County for decades, including one for the Coxheads' former neighbor, custom home builder Jack Livingood (see "Ecology of Privilege," *Landscape Architecture*, December 2006). Like Livingood's, the





The Two Rivers Residence sits on what was once barren pasture in the shadow of the Teton Range. Verdone Landscape Architecture's award-winning design brings the landscape up to the house and guesthouse by creating new wetlands and ponds and planting new trees to extend the existing forest.

Coxheads' new estate, called the Two Rivers Residence, brought Verdone a national ASLA Award for Residential Design. The two projects are similar in their naturalistic style, but Two Rivers is even more understated. While the Livingood Residence is dominated by hard flagstone patios, Two Rivers liberally uses simple crushed gravel. The water features at Two Rivers have high-

ly informal edges, even near the house, in contrast to Livingood, which employs rectilinear wood and steel. And it is those water features (pond, dam and weir, restored wetlands) that accomplish the Coxheads' most important desire. "We loved the property," says Carol, "but I didn't want this to be a house in the middle of a field."

While some projects might try to bring

the house to the landscape, fitting it carefully among the trees and wetlands, finding ways to preserve the vegetation and ecology, and seeking code variances, Two Rivers brings the landscape to the house. In so doing it actually creates more of the landscape the Coxheads moved here to have.

Walking the property on the most perfect of August days (the kind of day when

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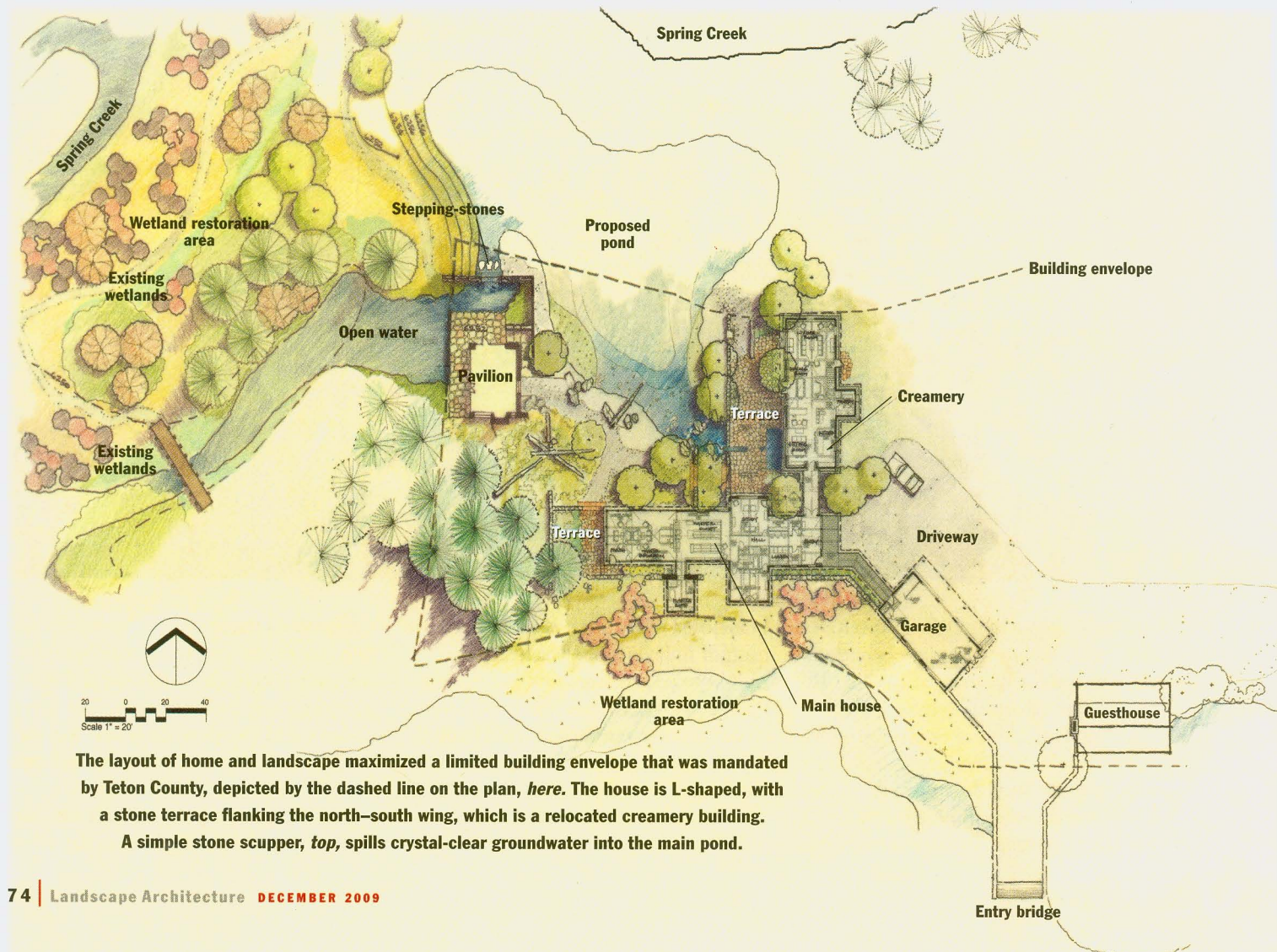
it is absolutely clear why people move to Teton County), Carol gestures out at the new ponds, patios, serene groupings of stones, and native vegetation and says, “Jim made this look like it has always been here.” It’s hard to disagree with her.

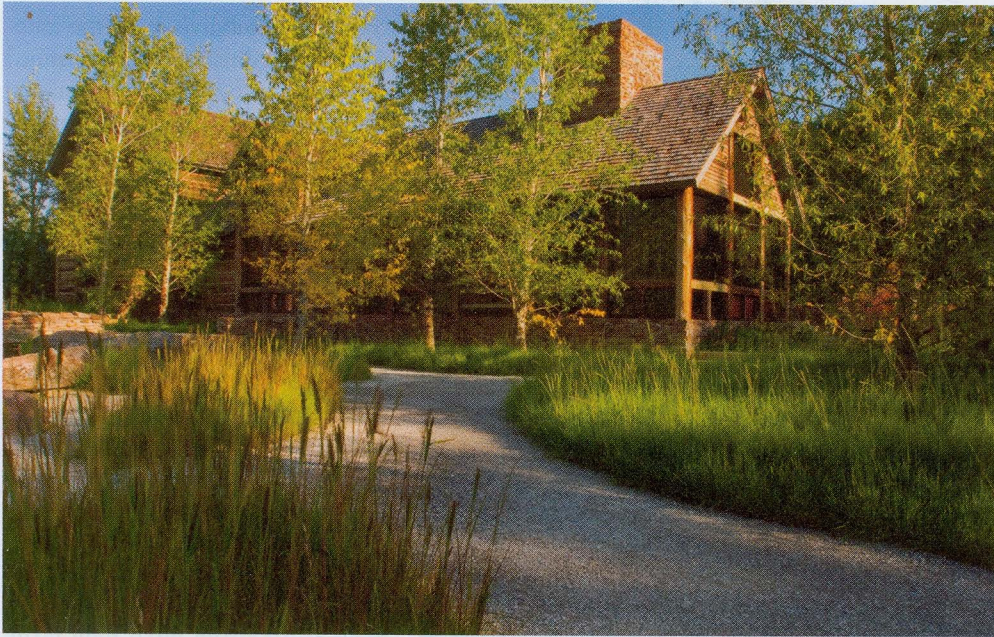
“They brought a strong objective to the project,” says Verdone of the Coxheads. “They wanted it to respond to the Northern Rockies, and they set the bar as high as they could.” During the project, Carol would bring photographs she had taken up the road in Grand Teton National Park, and she and Verdone would look at the relationships between spaces and materials.

National Park design, much of which has been the responsibility of landscape architects for scores of years, has a well-known naturalistic aesthetic. It is particularly notable in Teton, where the U.S. highways



COURTESY VERDONE LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS, PLAN





that run through the park are devoid of standard roadway signs. Everything is park service routed wood: simple, unobtrusive, and deferential to the landscape. Even the new Craig Thomas Discovery and Visitor Center, which opened in 2007 and was designed by Pennsylvania-based

To make the home feel surrounded by an existing landscape, large trees were placed very near the house, *above*, and a pond, *below*, becomes the headwaters of a new Snake River tributary. All the outdoor spaces offer stunning views of the Teton Range, in the background *below*.

architects Bohlin Cywinski Jackson, employs a Zen-garden approach to the building and site, relying more on views of the mountains than some grand design statement.

Though Verdone's residential work generally has a more naturalistic aesthetic than other designs in this and other resort areas, the Coxhead landscape is directly inspired by park service style. "The design became more about what we didn't do than what we did," says Verdone. "It's a very simple palette, so it's all about how it comes together. It's calculated restraint."

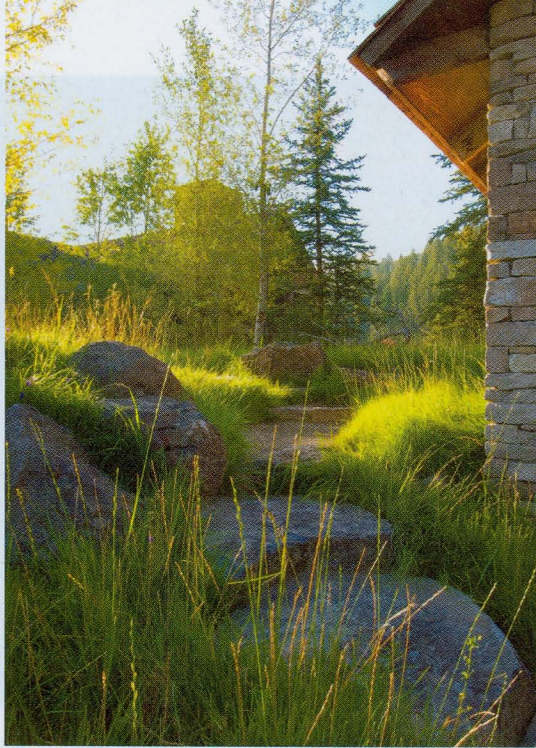
It could also be called restraint within constraints. Teton County has rigorous development requirements. It has one of the most complex review processes and conservation mandates in the nation. Most sites for new development come with predetermined building envelopes. Single-family homes are limited to 10,000 square feet of floor area (8,000 of



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it habitable). If that seems like a lot, remember these are multimillion-dollar homes that would be larger elsewhere. A guest house is allowed, with a 1,000-square-foot maximum floor area, unless a home owner makes some kind of open space or natural resource dedication, which allows for a square footage bonus. Watercourse setbacks are ample. Teton County is an outlier in the region on this. "It's like opposite ends of the spectrum," says Verdone. "Teton has all these requirements, but you go one county over and you don't even need a building permit."

The Coxheads subdivided their 100-plus acres into three roughly 35-acre parcels (the zoning district's minimum lot size), built a road with gravel extracted from the site itself (the pit will be renaturalized after mining), and sold two of the lots. The limited building envelope—mandated as a



All the details at Two Rivers reference the rustic elegance of National Parks design, with pathways of crushed gravel or stone, above, and rustic stone walls. The dam that holds back the main pond, below, is faced with reclaimed cypress.

condition of subdivision by the county's scenic ordinance and determined and approved by the county staff and the county commission—essentially followed the uninteresting pastureland, which amounted to just over two acres. The spring-fed Bar BC Creek and the Gros Ventre River would be out of sight.

Thus the desire to bring the water—and in fact all aspects of the native landscape—up to the very foundation of the home. The grassy clearing to the east that opens the view to the Sleeping Indian Mountain has been extended to the eastern wall with custom-grown native sod (see "Plant List," page 78). The spruce forest at the foot of the Gros Ventre Butte has been augmented with new large spruces (transplanted from adjacent properties and from eastern Idaho) that side up to the master bedroom. The marshy lowlands to the south have been deepened, replanted, and slipped literally underneath the guesthouse. The spring-fed Bar BC Creek has a new tributary: a series



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of groundwater-fed ponds, runnels, and weirs that embrace the outdoor spaces.

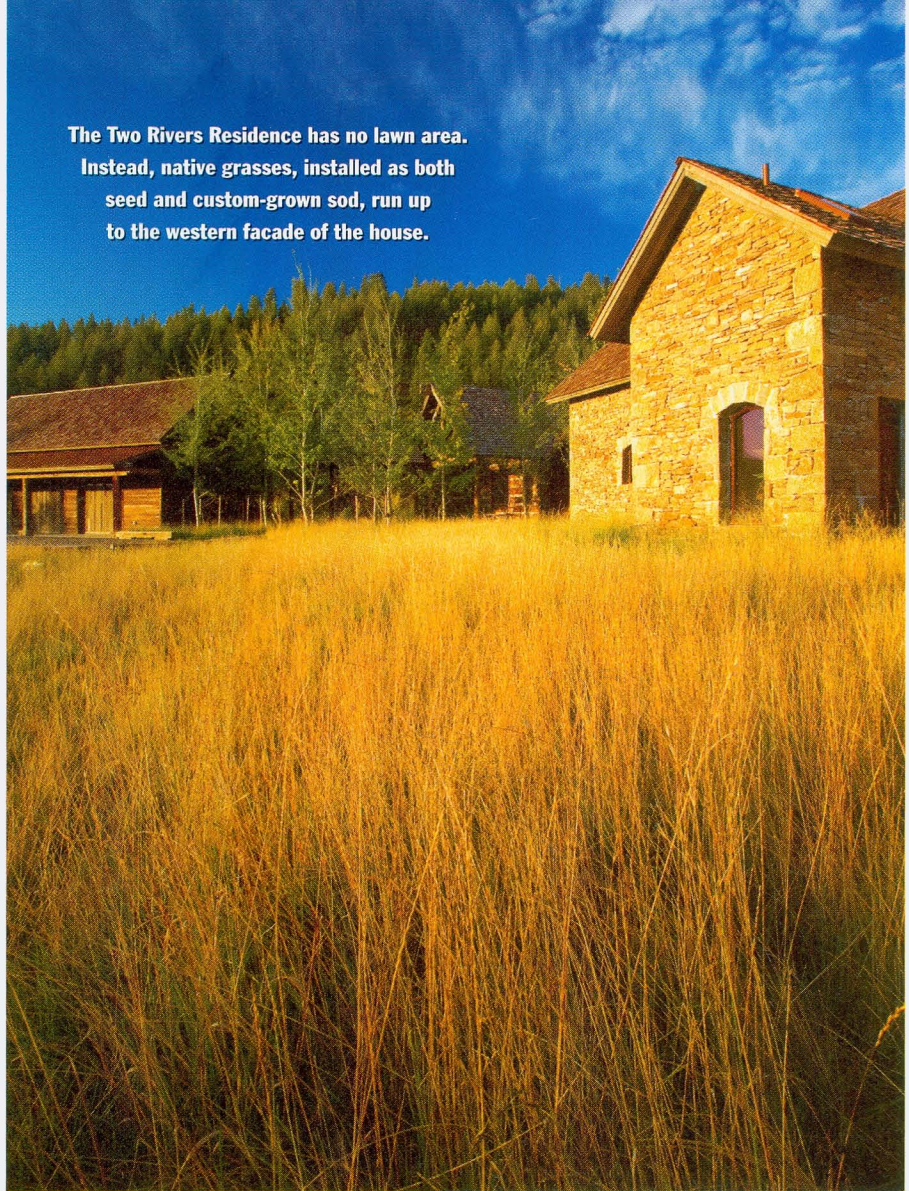
That feeling of the landscape running right up to the home is also accomplished through the total absence of turfgrass. From the gravel approach road, the view is of a cluster of buildings sitting casually amid the native sod and aspen trees. The road passes south of a constructed pond that feeds the restored wetlands that flow away to the west. It then crosses a thick timber bridge and enters a gravel parking court at the main entrance of the house.

The house is L-shaped, with one wing oriented north–south on the Grand Teton. That wing is a relic—an old stone creamery that the architect found in eastern Montana and lovingly restored. It was moved to the site stone by stone and given a new roof supported by reclaimed timbers. There are few windows on this eastern facade of the building, to preserve its historic character. A stone and wood guesthouse sits a short distance away, with a porch that reaches out over the pond. A garage, also similar in character to the old creamery building, sits at an angle to the house and is connected to the front door by a raised wood-plank walkway with a roof—a motif right out of downtown Jackson.

The main entry of the home lacks traditional foundation plantings and formal planting beds; there are only the waving grasses and a few scattered trees. The front door is actually on the end of the non-creamery wing of the house, and an all-glass breezeway connects the new structure to the old. The breezeway offers just a glimpse of the backyard from the parking court, but from inside it puts the great outdoors on full display.

The rear landscape, nestled into the angle of the house, essentially consists of a dry-set flagstone patio stretching the length of the creamery building and a large constructed pond just feet below the elevation of the house. Strategically placed trees shade the patio from the western sun (Verdone Landscape Architecture computer modeled the site to determine tree placement to avoid constructing a shade structure). A source pool, with water so clear it's hard to tell it's

The Two Rivers Residence has no lawn area. Instead, native grasses, installed as both seed and custom-grown sod, run up to the western facade of the house.



Plant List

NATIVE SOD

- Bromus marginatus* • Mountain brome
- Elymus lanceolatus* ssp. *psammophilus* • Sodar streambank wheatgrass
- Festuca ovina* • Sheep fescue
- Lolium perenne* • Perennial ryegrass
- Pascopyrum smithii* • Western wheatgrass
- Poa sandbergii* • Sandberg bluegrass
- Psathyrostachys juncea* • Russian wildrye

full, sits against the house, and water moves through a runnel under the patio to a small stone scupper that spills into the pond.

Simple stone stairways link the patio to a crushed-stone path that leads around the western edge of the pond and down to an outdoor pavilion. The pavilion, made of cypress reclaimed from old buildings, sits below the elevation of the house and pond.

An L-shaped dam, which reflects the geometry of the house, though it is rotated 90 degrees, holds back the upper pond, while a stone weir lets water cascade into a lower pond. The dam is a concrete structure faced with reclaimed cypress to match the pavilion. A stone patio surrounding the pavilion hovers just above the lower pond, which feeds water into Bar BC Creek.

Another path leads along the top of the dam to a few stepping-stones behind the weir. After this crossing, pathways meander out into the untouched landscape, over a log bridge crossing Bar BC Creek, and out to the Gros Ventre River. Away from the house, elk tracks and scat are everywhere, evidence of the herd that, according to Carol Coxhead, visits the property each evening.

The upper pond is studded with rocks and site-sourced logs and tree stumps that seem placed by nature but were actually

An enclosed stone and reclaimed cypress pavilion sits below the elevation of the main pond, nestled into the newly extended forest that descends the slopes to the west.



carefully selected and located. Carol Coxhead and Verdone joke fondly about their trips to the stone yard, where they selected every rock for its particular place in the landscape. “We always wanted the one that was far out of the way,” laughs Coxhead. “The quarry man didn’t like us very much.” The necessity of being so careful again goes back to the site’s inspiration—the National Park—and nowhere else does that aesthetic come together so completely as in the master bedroom.

Located at the far western end of the new wing of the house, the master bedroom has windows on all three sides. It looks to the south over the restored wetlands and the evergreen-clad Gros Ventre Butte. It looks west into the new grove of spruce trees, which seem to march up from the existing forest farther away. It looks north across the upper pond straight at the Grand Teton. The Teton Range is so evocative because of its precipitousness. It is a child’s drawing of mountains: pointed peaks rising out of a flat plain. The geology of the range has created an environment where visitors to the park almost always look at the grand mountains head-on across one of the many cerulean lakes that capture glacial runoff. From the Coxheads’ master bedroom, the view is just that: pinnacles with a pond at their feet.

Back in 2005 and 2006, when the Livin’good Residence won its national award and was profiled in *Landscape Architecture*, business was good for Verdone. In addition to the single-family work, he was designing vast ranches-cum-residential developments, complete with open space conser-

This is a far cry from oft-employed formal neomodernism.

vancies, restored trout streams, and nature centers. He had about a dozen landscape architects on staff. Times are, of course, a bit different now. Verdone says real estate sales are off by 70 percent in Teton County. As a resort community primarily for the wealthy, Teton has been hard hit by the recession in several ways: fewer buyers of ranchettes, fewer visitors to the ski slopes and spas, and fewer patrons of the high-end restaurants in town and at the resorts. Verdone has had to scale back his firm, and he says last winter was particularly hard, due to general uncertainty in his client base.

Though the Coxhead house predates this economic crisis, it may be the face of things to come. Verdone says that people are starting to design and build again, primarily to take advantage of lower material and labor prices. But he says that projects are taking more time and seem to be more modest in scale and materials. The expensive bells and whistles are going away in favor of simple watercourses, naturalistic plantings, and careful placement of elements—like at Two Rivers.

Though it still might be difficult to describe a more than \$250,000 landscape and 10,000 square feet worth of structures as “modest,” it is less formal than many high-end designs being built in Jackson and

elsewhere, including quite a few of this year’s national award winners. There are no perfect panes of turf here, no slick steel walls, no stark edge details where different pavements meet, and no cut stone. The few geometric elements that exist—the low stone walls and the dam—are rusticated, seeming to weather into the landscape. The stone walls, in particular, collapse deliberately into ruins: a far cry from oft-employed formal neomodernism.

Though Verdone could be disgruntled at this turn of events (more modest projects could mean more modest consulting fees), he’s actually a bit relieved. “This is probably a good thing in the long run,” he says of the current change in perspective. “It was getting a little out of hand.” *LAD*

Adam Regn Arvidson, ASLA, is a regular contributor to Landscape Architecture and founder of Treeline, a design/writing consultancy in Minneapolis.

PROJECT CREDITS **Landscape architect:** Verdone Landscape Architects, Jackson, Wyoming (Jim Verdone, ASLA, principal; Marisa Santa Cruz, creative director). **Architect:** Jonathan L. Foote Architects, Bozeman, Montana (Paul Bertelli, Logan Leachman). **Environmental consultant:** Headwaters Ecology, Jackson, Wyoming. **Landscape contractor:** R&R Landscape Inc., Driggs, Idaho (Andy Richardson). **General contractor:** Big D Signature, Jackson, Wyoming. **Pond contractor:** Fish Creek Excavation, Jackson, Wyoming. **Masonry contractor:** Peterson Masonry, Jackson, Wyoming.