



1745

# DREAM HOMES

NORTHERN CALIFORNIA

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## Dennis E. Zirbel

DENNIS E. ZIRBEL, ARCHITECT

Based in historic downtown Truckee, near California's illustrious Lake Tahoe, Dennis E. Zirbel, Architect helps clients tell their story by transforming their visions into thoughtful works of indigenous mountain architecture. The principal has long been a proponent of architecture that not only blends with and responds to its site's intrinsic beauty but celebrates the spirit and history of the surrounding community.

To achieve buildings that "make reference to the mountain's ecological system, climate and sensory qualities," Dennis visits the site on which his creation will be built. He listens to the land and observes what nature has provided on the site—colors, forms, shadows and light—to find design inspiration. Buildings, both residential and commercial, become an extension of the natural environment. An entry, for example, may reveal itself gradually upon approach "the way a forest reveals itself as one walks through a grouping of trees." Nature can also be reflected in his designs, as structural elements are exposed to mimic the crisscrossing of pine boughs. Site-harvested stone and heavy timbers often anchor his buildings to the site and provide historical reference to age-old cabins.

Before putting pencil to paper, goals and a general creative direction are documented in what Dennis and his associates have coined "Poetic Concepts." The architect explores all that the site has to offer and discusses, with his clients, the upsides and downsides to enhancing the land in various harmonious manners. According to the future residents' lifestyles or the



ABOVE:  
Nestled amongst young trees in Big Springs, California, the 3,200-square-foot retreat boasts four bedrooms, a great room with masonry fireplace, loft and separate recreation room.  
Photograph by XXXXXXX XXXXXX

FACING PAGE:  
Spectacular mountain and lake views are drawn in through carefully sized and placed Tahoe cabin-style windows. The vaulted ceiling creates a feeling of spaciousness, while natural materials add warmth.  
Photograph by XXXXXXX XXXXXX







commercial use of a building, the structure could be situated on the edge of a clearing to take in panoramic views or in an area with thicker vegetation for a secluded, more intimate feel. As a building's orientation and room placement crystallize, a thoughtful floor plan emerges and attention can be turned to fine tuning the details.

Essentially, the esteemed practice of Dennis E. Zirbel, Architect is centered on creating architecture intended for a specific spot on Earth. "Too often," Dennis says, "new buildings make no reference to the site on which they are placed. Irrational forms, meaningless placement and inappropriate styles contradict the spirit of the natural environment. Those same qualities often compromise the historic character of the area as well."

The principal goes to great lengths to familiarize himself with the physical attributes of a site, the local vernacular, even historical methods and means when appropriate. A good percentage of the firm's clients desire new homes or resort/recreation projects that feel like old Tahoe cabins, which were traditionally a modest 800 square feet and quite dark. Tasked with carrying over that same intimate feel into homes in the 5,000-square-

**LEFT:**  
The clever two-story design affords scenic views from virtually every room in the home.  
*Photograph by XXXXXXXX XXXXXXXX*

**FACING PAGE:**  
The epitome of indigenous mountain architecture, this residence seems to interact with its surrounding natural landscape.  
*Photograph by XXXXXXXX XXXXXXXX*







foot range or commercial resort projects in excess of 15,000 square feet, the architect must have a solid understanding of how buildings native to the region were designed and constructed. He then borrows what he can and devises a respectful, modern interpretation.

These interpretations have won Dennis E. Zirbel, Architect distinguished local and national architectural awards including an American Institute of Architects Residential Merit Award where the jury commented: "It's a lovely example of the traditional Tahoe vernacular, masterfully executed ... the presentation is succinct, consistently hitting the mark." He has also received a Classic Lakefront award from Tahoe Quarterly magazine as well as their first ever, Tahoe Style Award. His award-winning Tahoe Style home included many Green elements and is an example of Dennis' passion for sustainable design, his desire to incorporate Green technologies and even LEED certify structures when the client agrees.

Green design is integrally woven into Dennis' practice. Not only does his firm incorporate passive solar and even ground source geothermal systems into designs, but they recycle materials at every chance. "Reclaimed materials have an unmatched patina," Dennis says, "and the soul of the home can be greatly enhanced by the presence of something much older." Likewise, family heirloom materials, like tiles from a client's grandparents' home have been specified to enhance the residents' personal connection to their new space.



Each of the firm's projects has a personality all of its own, but the common denominator in every undertaking is Dennis, as he involves himself from start to finish, whether the structure is a primary residence, family vacation home or a five-star resort. In addition to new construction and planning services, historic preservation and renovation work is a specialty.

When Dennis decided to restore a bungalow in historic downtown Truckee, built in the late 1880s, to serve as his design studio, he sparked interest in the community and other businesses solicited his expertise so they could follow suit. As a longtime member and multiple-term chairman of Truckee's Historical Preservation Advisory Committee, he has played an integral role in developing guidelines and goals that will preserve the Town of Truckee's rich historic character and prepare for future growth. Dennis knows that development is inevitable and has stepped up to ensure that it is done with proper planning, pleasing aesthetics and Green building technologies.

**RIGHT:**  
The light-infused dining area and adjoining kitchen celebrate California mountain living.  
*Photograph by XXXXXXX XXXXXX*

**FACING PAGE TOP:**  
Welcoming residents and guests alike, the stone-paved walkway winds through a canopy of trees and steps down to the front porch.  
*Photograph by XXXXXXX XXXXXX*

**FACING PAGE BOTTOM:**  
Substantial beams evoke the feeling of quiet intimacy, while a wall of windows connects the interior to the great outdoors.  
*Photograph by XXXXXXX XXXXXX*







Dennis and his team spend the majority of their time designing structures in the greater Tahoe/Truckee area. Dennis enjoys knowing that when he designs a retreat home, it will be cherished for countless generations to come. Though smiles speak volumes, it is the friendships created through the process of designing these “legacy homes” that Dennis cherishes the most. Such rewarding experiences are the fruits of Dennis and his team staying true to their mission: design structures that elicit the same response from the heart as great music or poetry does from the soul.

**ABOVE:**  
Ceiling beams direct the eye upward, allowing subtle changes in elevation to be wholly enjoyed. Traditional elements are incorporated in the light-contemporary open layout.  
*Photograph by XXXXXXXX XXXXXXXX*

**FACING PAGE:**  
The architect designed his personal residence for a site with natural pockets of space, each of which communicates a different emotion. In response, a layout with small interconnected areas was created.  
*Photograph by XXXXXXXX XXXXXXXX*

## Q&A more about dennis...

### DO YOU HAVE A SIGNATURE STYLE?

No, every creation is as unique as its inhabitants. Although many of the projects we design are indigenous to the mountains, that interpretation varies widely depending on its location and the desires of the client. I feel a structure should enhance the lives of those who live in and or use the spaces.

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