

NOV/DEC 2018 | VOL 34, NO 6

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Official publication of ALCC serving the green industry in the Rocky Mountain region

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**Marpa and
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Photo courtesy Environmental Designs, Inc.

Extreme landscaping

Environmental Designs and Marpa tackle site fit for bears and mountain goats

By Lyn Dean

"The site was incredibly steep, rocky and overgrown—so much so that it was completely uninhabitable," says Luke Sanzone, Marpa Landscape Architecture and Construction, Boulder. The steep slope of the Black Bear project in the foothills of Boulder meant the house and the landscape had to be built in tandem. "Due to limited workable site space, it would have been impossible to use machinery to construct the pool and landscape if the house was already built," he says. "We formulated a clear plan of action that required

starting construction on the pool and landscape in concert with the foundation of the home."

Landscape architect Sanzone was the lead designer and construction manager. Surround Architecture, of Boulder, created the design for the home and understood the importance of landscape for complementing and setting off the unique house design on this challenging site. Surround brought on Marpa to head up the landscape design and construction management. Marpa has a long list of projects

in its portfolio that involve highly creative site solutions, which include artful and technical rock settings on steeply sloped sites.

Marpa then turned to Environmental Designs, Inc., (EDI) Henderson, as the primary subcontractor on this two-year project. "EDI has done projects with Marpa for more than 10 years," says Rachael Shuler, EDI sales manager.

Environmental Designs and Marpa received the 2018 ELITE Award for Design/Build with a \$200,000+ budget for this project.

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Site challenges became design assets

“The steep slope meant we had to be creative with design,” says Sanzone. “We built horizontal planes into the hillside. We carefully embedded terraces, created outdoor rooms, walkways and paths, a play area and a swimming pool as well as gardens and a lawn area.”

The house is dramatic in both form and materials, and Sanzone wanted to extend the vibe into the landscape. He wanted the landscape design to play off the restrained and contemporary look of the home while maintaining the site’s natural look.

“The plant material is what brought it together,” he says. “We heightened the sense of space with careful plant combinations around the boulders. Swaths of perennial ground covers cascade over rocks and walkways, softening the austere edges of the retaining walls and hardscape elements.”

A sustainable landscape

Marpa’s design had to conform to the City of Boulder Green Points program that requires several sustainable practices. The entire plant palette for the site consists of low water selections suited to Colorado—either native or adapted. “The plant palette was selected

to ensure blooming throughout the growing season. We also planted many trees, which when mature, will create shady environments throughout the site,” says Sanzone.

Irrigation is 95 percent efficient, consisting of point source drip and subsurface irrigation. There is no overhead spray.

“The native soil—clay—was removed, and we brought in a large volume of compost and amended topsoil for the plants.” Thorough soil amendment and careful planting technique have resulted in a minimal number of plants needing replacement during the warranty period.

Project pain points

Sanzone says the project timeline was tight and recalls when construction started, so did the rain. “We were trying to position the boulders in monsoon-like conditions! It was challenging.”

“The mud made it difficult and dangerous to move boulders,” says Shuler. “Keeping everyone safe on the slippery slopes was top priority. We had to get creative and take our time. Of course, taking our time meant we strayed from the budget on the number of hours bid.” She adds that one of the big management issues for Kyle Trembley, EDI inside project



Photo courtesy Logan Manker



Photo courtesy Environmental Designs, Inc.



The house and pool were built on a ledge carved out of the hillside.

manager, was dealing with change orders, especially the slowdowns caused by the weather.

The overriding challenge with a massive landscape construction project running simultaneously with homebuilding was communication. Marpa had to work in concert with the house construction team and their subcontractors as well as the landscape subcontractors. Kevan Gerber was EDI's field project manager dealing with day-to-day operations and communicating with Marpa.

Sanzone admits he learned a lot about construction management on this project. "It took careful orchestration." Both EDI and Marpa underscore the role of communication to ensure everyone is on the same page at all times. The key players had to identify larger team roles and ensure daily communication to make it work.

Creative problem solving

Schuler echoes the pride of the team for their creative problem-solving and artistic eye on this project. "It's one thing to draw rocks on a plan, but it's another to actually install them. It's hard to know exactly where each will go until you see it on the site. Then it's important to orient each boulder in the best possible way and secure it."

Client trust

The client trusted Surround and Marpa to deliver a house with outdoor spaces that would have the feel of a resort-like getaway and offer them great views. To have been entrusted to help deliver their vision means a lot to Sanzone. The homeowners love the beauty and aesthetics of their dramatic and low-maintenance landscape.

While the project was completed in 2015, that's not the end of the story. Sanzone wants to ensure the original vision as the getaway and haven the owners sought will continue over the long term. "This project is more than the beauty and visual appeal of the property created through the design vision," says Sanzone. "We have a long-term responsibility to the profession and to the homeowner."

With this far-reaching vision in mind, Sanzone continues to manage the overall care of the site, with a trusted team of maintenance subcontractors who perform critical care activities throughout the year. He visits the site weekly, combing the grounds with an eye for detail. The results have been favorable as the landscape grows, matures and transitions into a site with timeless beauty. | CG

