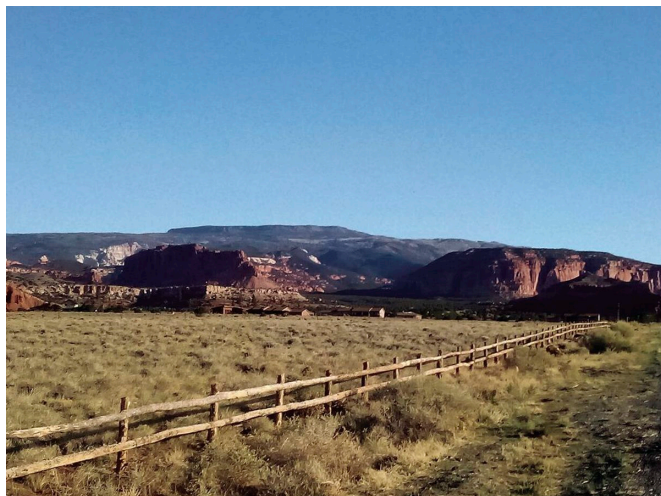


Writers on the Range: The West is an exploiter's paradise

February 13, 2023



High on a mesa where everyone can see it, a trophy house is going up in the northern Colorado valley where I live. Some of my neighbors hear that the house will be as big as 15,000 square feet. Others say it will take three years to complete. Whether that is valley gossip or truth, the house is now the center of everybody's attention.

Until this happened, my valley seemed to offer much of the best of what Colorado has to offer, including views of a snow-capped mountain range, and spread out below, irrigated hayfields with black cows on tan rangeland. But now, right in the center of the valley, will be one person acting out a lack of consideration for others.

Gigantic trophy houses seem to signal, "I built here to see, but also to be seen." It's a jarring reminder that we in the New West are remaking the Old West in our own image, a job that apparently requires a drastic redoing of topography. These big homes seem to follow a pattern of complicated rooflines, lots of windows that reflect the light and "ego gates" at the beginning of driveways.

Most of us in this valley delight in what we've been able to see from our front door: Uninterrupted ridgelines, cliffs, and the rounded slopes that converge to make foothills, which then rise into mountains. Nature made these views, and we've been fortunate to have them in our lives every day.

But more and more, houses that resemble castles are sprouting on ridgelines and hilltops, here and all over the mountains. And sometimes it's ordinary houses or trailers that get built on ridgelines, interrupting the natural flow of the land.

Where only a few years ago our eyes might find comfort in tracing a ridge's backbone — wondering how it got to be named White Pine Mountain when no white pines grow there — now we look at manmade structures that irritate the eyes.

People who have lived in my valley for decades share a different style. Appreciating what a winter wind can do to steal warmth from inside a house, they looked for sheltered areas to build. They saw it made sense to build low, tucking a home against the south side of a hill or cliff.

Most yard lights were few and hard to see, as were their homes. But the new Western lifestyle broadcasts yard lights at night for all to see, just as the homes are conspicuously visible during the day.

In this newfangled West that has “ranch the view,” people apparently need to stand out to enjoy an amenity lifestyle. Will these new folk ever take time to appreciate the human and natural histories of the place they live in now, to show respect for the land and its natural beauty? Will they learn to be considerate of neighbors and not take away from the views that define where we live?

It's shameful to think that just as we first moved into the West to exploit its valuable resources, we now exploit the last resource our region has to offer — its heart-stopping beauty.

There is some good news, because in many parts of the West we are learning how to sustainably log, graze, divert water and develop energy. I hope it's not too late for us to also realize the value of fitting into the land as residents, to keep intact our ridgelines, mesas, mountains and valley floors. Once a house caps a hilltop, however, that view is irretrievable, gone forever.

I hope we can learn how to value homes that blend with the land in shape, color and location. Maybe a new generation of home builders, architects, and developers will lead the way in paying due respect to our region's natural beauty.

But I'm afraid that it's too late for our valley. The great writer Wallace Stegner told us that the task of Westerners was to build a society to match the scenery. From what I see, we're not doing the job.

Richard Knight is a contributor to Writers on the Range, writersontherange.org, an independent nonprofit that hopes to inspire lively conversation about the West. He works at the intersection of land use and land health in the American West.