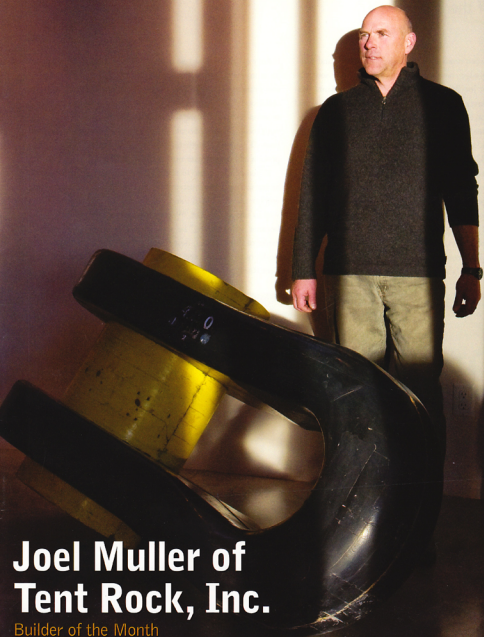


Builder/Architect



**Joel Muller of
Tent Rock, Inc.**

Builder of the Month

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By Beth Wadell

Switching between renovating fragile historic adobes and constructing cutting-edge, new contemporary homes may sound a little difficult, but Joel Muller, owner and President of Santa Fe's Tent Rock, Inc., loves a challenge. "It's what keeps me going. I love that this profession is never stagnant and that every day we get to solve new problems," he says. Solving problems and stretching his horizons as a builder are what Muller does best.

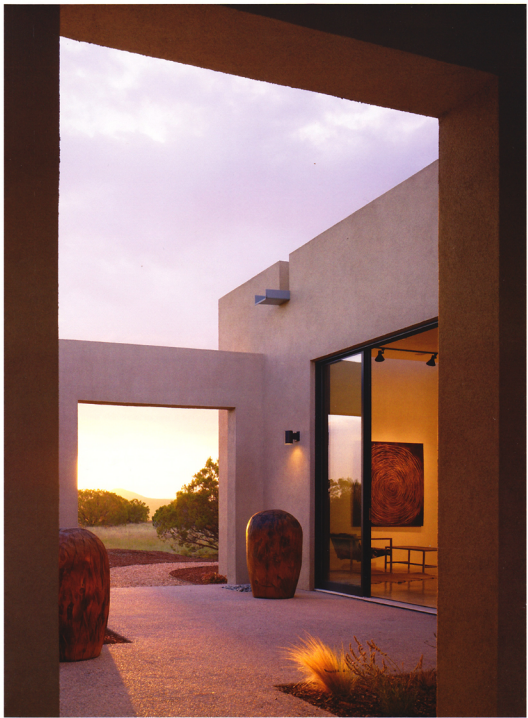
Tent Rock builds and restores many different kinds of homes, but its specialty is difficult projects — everything that requires in-depth knowledge and the readiness to try new techniques. Some of those challenges include renovating Georgia O'Keefe's house at Ghost Ranch, constructing new homes for chemically sensitive buyers and simply putting together a stylish, high-quality small house on a limited budget. Whatever the project, Muller and his team at Tent Rock are ready to take it on.

For Muller, building is both an art and a craft, and he has a long

history of bringing the two together. A New York native, he grew up in an artsy family with a grandfather who was a gifted architect and grandmother who was a sculptor. It was a slightly eclectic childhood; for seven years young Muller and his parents lived on a wooden sailboat. During that time, his father taught him to work with tools and to appreciate the clean lines of a well-constructed boat. "I gained an aesthetic eye, and I also learned to enjoy the process of working with my hands," he says.

When Muller came to Santa Fe as a 20-year-old art student, he started working construction. He was already a skilled woodworker and it seemed like a good thing to do temporarily as a way to support his art. "What I found was that building slowly became my art form," he says. Muller worked his way up the ranks of the industry, first starting the firm Cooke and Muller Builders with a partner, then dissolving that company to open Tent Rock in 1993.







William Penhallow Henderson adobe on the east side of Santa Fe. The Henderson home is now being restored by Joel Muller.

Muller named the company after the Kasha-Katuwe Tent Rocks National Monument south of Santa Fe, where he has gone hiking for years. Clustered in the park are distinctive tent rocks, conical spires of rock formed by erosion. For Muller, these teepee-like forms suggest shelter and stability, the qualities he aims for with his houses. Like the homes that Muller builds, they are also organically connected to the land and history of New Mexico.

One thing that is unique about Tent Rock is that many of the building crafts are done in house. At a time when most builders are moving away from this comprehensive model, Tent Rock continues to have its own woodshop, welders and masons. "When we are handling the specialized, niche projects, it helps us to have a ready-made crew so clients don't need to hire a whole string of disconnected people," Muller explains.

This all came into play in the recent restoration of the historic William Penhallow Henderson adobe on the east side of Santa Fe. Henderson, a 1920s painter and major figure in the Santa Fe artistic circles of the time, was instrumental in the Pueblo Revival. In order to restore Henderson's own Pueblo Revival home, Tent Rock utilized the whole spectrum of its abilities. Woodworkers created new windows to replace the rotten frames, masons restored the crumbling adobe and a superintendent with significant experience in historical adobes oversaw the process. The same craftsmanship and care were applied to another historic project, the restoration

of Georgia O'Keeffe's home in Ghost Ranch, undertaken on behalf of the Georgia O'Keeffe Foundation. "The house was in a sad state of repair, but it was an incredible setting. It was a privilege to bring the house back to what it once was," Muller explains. A board member of the Historic Santa Fe Foundation, Muller approaches renovation work with a deep respect for Santa Fe's unique architectural tradition.

That is not all he does, however. Muller and Tent Rock also specialize in contemporary homes that embrace the latest innovations in materials, construction and design. While the historical and contemporary homes might seem like polar opposites, Muller finds a thread of continuity to connect them. "Southwestern styles have continued to evolve organically, and the best contemporary homes in Santa Fe are rooted in historical styles. In order to really build a good contemporary house, you need to know the tradition you are working in," he explains. Rather than looking dated a few decades in the future, designs that are rooted in tradition will continue to be beautiful and timely.

While Tent Rock builds in a wide range of styles, it is particularly known for contemporary homes with simple lines and quality materials. Aesthetically, Muller tends toward a minimalist style, unencumbered by superfluous details. "What I strive for is the feeling you get when you walk into an Indian Pueblo and see the sparse space that explodes into life when there's a dance and



The recently restored Henderson home guesthouse

music. The human element is what brings it to life, not some extraneous architectural embellishment," he explains. The result is a warm, inviting home. In even the most contemporary of designs, Muller allows the lines to undulate a little and the colors to create a softer touch, taking out what Muller calls the "techno edge" of contemporary architecture.

One recent design captures the relaxing, peaceful, yet playful character that Muller aims for. While it has a view, the house is internally focused. The centerpiece of the home is a series of interior courtyards. The main one has a pond, while the bedroom courtyard has its own outdoor shower, shielded with a horizontal screen. It feels both whimsical and private. "I see it as a place you can enjoy your serenity first thing in the morning or at the end of your day," Muller explains. When it is time to entertain, these same private spaces open up and allow guests to circulate, providing a stunning backdrop for a party. Tent Rock inaugurated the house with a celebration and, Muller recalls with a smile, "it is a darn good party house!"

Muller's design philosophy is to bring the outside in and the inside out. Tent Rock homes are often characterized by trellises, portals and courtyards. "The best houses are places that blur the line between indoors and outdoors, that encourage you to expand outside without even really noticing it," Muller believes. No wonder Tent Rock homes have won three awards in the Parade of Homes: Best

Henderson guesthouse kitchen





Craftsmanship, Best Outdoor Living Space and Overall Character. The American Institute of Architects also granted an award for Zen Garden, a home that Tent Rock built in collaboration with Spears Architecture.

Compared to more traditional Pueblo-style homes, contemporary designs demand a higher level of craftsmanship with no room for error. "Everything comes together just so, and small errors become more glaring," Muller says. For that reason, clients building contemporary homes must search out a company, like Tent Rock, with extensive experience in precision building. Tent Rock's superintendents and subcontractors generally have decades of experience building in Santa Fe. They are also experts in using new materials and techniques, something that Muller relishes.

"The neat thing about building in Santa Fe is that it is like an incubator for new ideas in building. Builders and architects all bring in new ideas and feed off each other. It's a fascinating melding of innovations," says Muller. He relishes this creative interplay and the heightened awareness that comes with it. "I don't think I would want to be building if I weren't constantly learning and developing better ways to do things," he adds. Clients, too, come from all parts of the country with their own ideas to add to the mix, stimulating further innovations.

Green construction is one realm where Tent Rock has worked alongside the clients to find new materials and techniques. "We are tuned into new technologies; that's built into our way of

doing business," Muller insists. For example, Tent Rock was an early adopter of E-Crete, an autoclaved aerated concrete block that is stacked and plastered like adobe. Like adobe, it also helps maintain a constant internal temperature, reducing the need for air conditioning and heating. "It's fun to always be looking for new and healthier ways of building," Muller says.

Indeed, wherever Muller goes, he sees new sources of inspiration. On a recent visit to Bhutan and Nepal, he watched workers build and renovate rammed earth homes using ancient tools and procedures. "It's a joy to see how those very low-tech construction techniques are still used with so much skill," he reports. "It's always nice to be exposed to other cultures' building styles and techniques, and all that knowledge somehow gets incorporated into the next projects that I'm working on."

For 2009, Muller has a new challenge for Tent Rock: building smaller houses with the same features and quality as the high-end homes they typically construct. Tent Rock is one of the builders involved in Oshara Village, a sustainable New Urbanist community. "The economy of scaling a project down is difficult, but our architect did a fantastic job," Muller reports.

Historical or contemporary, large or small, Muller believes that each home is a collaboration between Tent Rock, the architects and the clients. "I really enjoy having that three-way input because it makes a project so much better. This is a team effort and everyone needs to be on board," he says. According to

Muller, good communication with clients is a top priority. "It is important that they can get their ideas across and that they understand what the builder is doing," he believes. "In order to succeed at this, a builder has to be able to [be] flexible and listen to what the clients are looking for, and also be willing to be flexible in order to reach that common goal."

In fact, Muller insists that the No. 1 factor that clients should look for in a builder is not cost, lists of subcontractors or even craftsmanship — it's trust. "Before you even start a project, you need to get to know each other and develop trust," he insists. "If that's not there, the whole project will be stilted." One measure of Muller's success is not only the number of repeat and referral clients, but the number of clients who are now genuine friends.

The focus on trust also extends to Muller's relationship with employees and subcontractors. Muller does not

micromanage his employees. Instead, he tries to allow his employees to think through problems on their own and trusts they will make good decisions. "I'm not heavy handed. I encourage my employees



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PHOTO BY MARK MERRICK, AERIALS IN LIVING PHOTOGRAPHY

