

BY LESLIE VREELAND PHOTOS BY DALLAS & HARRIS PHOTOGRAPHY

A Place of Health



On a communal deck at the Virginia Placer affordable-housing project, built by Allison Construction of Ridgway: priceless views of surrounding peaks.

At Virginia Placer,
the housing is more
than 'affordable.'
It promotes well-being >>>

Community health, collective credit:
"Lance McDonald and the Telluride
Housing Subcommittee desired a
project with diverse types of units,
which we worked on together,"
project architect Jim Kehoe said.
"Planner Amy Levek was involved from
the earliest stages."





Big windows offer continuous views of nature, and bring in needed light. Opposite page: Project Architect/ Design Lead Jim Kehoe of Charles Cunniffe Architects incorporated tall ceilings and big views in private apartments (above) and shared spaces such as communal dining rooms.

Jim Kehoe is an unusual architect.

When he contemplates a project, he imagines not only how it will look from the outside, but how it will *feel* like to be inside it.

He wants it to feel good — which means it is probably good for you.

“Architects sometimes miss the point,” Kehoe said. “A building isn’t designed for the cover of a magazine, or to win an award. It’s for the people who live in it.”

When Kehoe first laid eyes on a potential building site a few blocks from downtown Telluride several years ago, his initial response was, “It’s dark.”

This was not good, but it was a challenge.

Located west of the Shandoka Apartment complex along the San Miguel River,

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the strip of land called Virginia Placer was to be the setting for the Town of Telluride's newest affordable-housing project.

There was much potential there: it was nestled against a steep mountainside, with old-growth forest on one side and the sprawling Valley Floor on the other.

Still, it faced north, which meant it would lose sun earlier each day (and even earlier in winter) than the rest of town. For Kehoe, the fact that the site was dark resonated in a way that it might not have for other architects: He knew about the growing body of scientific research that suggests that the effects of an environment on our bodies and brains is profound —

and that designers can use this information to make our spaces healthier.

"Environments with variety and features distracting the eye activate curiosity," as Kehoe says.

Conversely — as the neuroscientist Colin Ellard and others have discovered — "dull, unimaginative environments increase heart rates and raise cortisol levels, the main component of stress."

AVERTING A 'CRISIS'

When the firm Kehoe works for, Charles Cunniff Architects of Aspen, was awarded the Virginia Placer project, the

goal was not only to construct a gorgeous place, but a healthy one: to maximize available light, and space, and to foster a feeling of community.

In short, the aim was to make life better for the people who lived there.

"Today there's an understanding that the design of our environment — based on what we've learned through neuroscience and biology — can have more of a positive effect on our cognitive states," Kehoe said. "We can make spaces healthier."

Affordable housing in Telluride has been described as having reached 'crisis' level, and what CCA designed is envisioned as the first phase of what will become a larger



HEALTH + WELLNESS

NATURE

- Substantial evidence supports views and connections to nature contribute significantly to cognitive stress restoration and residents' sense of well-being.
- Living space orientation, decks, and windows integrate with nature views and access to maximize cognitive benefits.
- Limiting construction disturbance outside the building envelope retained the existing old growth vegetations for maximizing benefits of nature and preserving much of the greenfield site.

DAYLIGHT

- Town historic code limits glazing and window sizes building orientations and site topography limited daylight access.
- Team used evidence-based data of daylighting and health to gain approval for maximizing windows into all the living areas.

CONNECTIONS

- A key component of well-being is connection to neighborhood, community, having access to social spaces, and to nature.
- Site and building design focused on an ease of these connections for residents.
- Critical to the new expanded neighborhood was direct pedestrian access to trails, transit and Town.
- Tiny Homes located adjacent from the Boarding House allows occupants access to social spaces and to share laundry facility.

Courtesy of Jim Kehoe



neighborhood. It is a 'neighborhood' that seems to spring naturally from the geologic landscape, creating both drama and a sense of belonging in the way that, say, the Flat Irons embrace the Rocky Mountains in the foothills outside Boulder. The project consists of three parts: a 9,376-foot, 43-unit Boarding House, designed for seasonal workers; a 12,427-foot, 18-unit apartment building intended for families, and a trio of 280-square-foot tiny homes, with a downstairs kitchen and a loft.

The buildings employ metal siding and timber trim, which is both affordable and echoes, but does not mimic, the hues of the surrounding landscape. There

is in-floor heat, to help mitigate noises between floors and for added comfort (as a young Boarding House resident remarked of his abode, "It's great. It's so much warmer than a tent"). There is also a spacious communal kitchen/living room, and an adjoining deck with gaping views of surrounding peaks (yet another resident slept in a hammock on the deck every evening last summer, to take in the stars and cool air).

Clinical Aesthetician Meredith Muller, who both lives in and works from her place in the apartment building, appreciates the high ceilings and adroit use of space (such as the stacked washer/dryer,

which takes up no room because it's built onto the wall).

Kehoe addressed the issue of natural light — or lack of it — by making the windows as large as he could while still complying with the Town of Telluride's concern about light spill.

"The neuroscientific data was one of our bullet points to enlighten the town that there's a health matter here regarding how much daylight is coming into the living spaces," Kehoe said. "That was a turning point, when I could pull this information out and highlight it. It's readily available data, not just speculation."

He also made the most of the darkness,

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Even in snow, the project harmonizes with natural surroundings, blending with the forest instead of fighting it.
(Photo by Eric Ming)



One of three tiny houses at the Virginia Placer project, designed to coordinate with the project's adjoining buildings and featuring similarly-large windows.

“We also tried to conserve the planet.”

by situating sleeping areas “in the back, where the trees are. Having a sky view and a view of nature has a calming effect on the senses,” he said. “Views are important, and we were able to bring more light in and to develop the design from the very beginning with these parameters in mind. The town was key in responding, and accepting these parameters.”

One distinguishing factor of Virginia Placer, Kehoe adds, which makes it different from most other affordable housing developments, “is the mix: the boarding-house, apartments and tiny homes create a neighborhood. Such diverse occupancy creates liveliness, which the Town of Telluride wanted, and we worked together to achieve.”

The design also attempts to emphasize the natural environment. The Valley

Floor is just a short walk away, offering a chance to watch local wildlife and get some exercise. “Leaving your moment of frustration and going for a walk is a restorative process and relaxes your prefrontal cortex,” Kehoe pointed out. “We also tried to conserve the planet.” (One example of that: instead of building a new bridge, the design team turned an old railroad car into one.) Situating the buildings as close as possible to the old-growth forest “meant we didn’t have to go through a lengthy planting and growing process,” Kehoe pointed out. “We had ‘no-cost’ landscaping. It not only keeps overall costs down but offered an immediate benefit — the buildings fit seamlessly into the landscape, and look like they’ve been there for a long time.”

Charles Cunniffe Architects won a 2019

Award of Distinction from the American Institute of Architects/Colorado for the Virginia Placer project. “We loved it because it met a community need in a beautiful way, by providing affordable housing while still exhibiting high design and beautiful architecture,” AIA programs management director Megan Kincannon said. “We thought this was important to recognize.”

“Ninety percent of people’s experience is in the built environment,” Kehoe observed. “I think intuitively, good architects know the things that drive a better, healthier environment, but we don’t necessarily put them on the table and make them part of the design.” At the Virginia Placer project, they have, and those who reside there are reaping the benefits.

As Kehoe has put it, “The well-designed space is a gift.” 🏡



Both Boarding House (left) and apartment building appear to emerge from the forest naturally. Views face outward, toward surrounding peaks and sunshine. Sleeping areas are in back.