

# HOME

VAIL VALLEY

REAL ESTATE & MOUNTAIN LIFESTYLES | SEPTEMBER 2015

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mountain  
contemporary

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WHAT WAS NOVEL AND EDGY IN '90S IS NOW PART  
OF THE VALLEY'S ARCHITECTURAL VERNACULAR





The interior of this home in Avon's Mountain Star neighborhood was a trend-setter in bringing mountain contemporary design to the Vail Valley. See our cover story, "What's in your 'vernacular'? — Part 1," on page 62. PHOTO BY RIC STOVALL/STOVALL STUDIO



## ON THE COVER

Local architects say increasingly open-minded guidelines for home design are making the Vail Valley an exciting haven for sophisticated homeowners to express themselves through architecture. See our cover story, "What's in your 'vernacular'? — Part 1," on page 62.

Photo by  
Ric Stovall/Stovall Studio

As mornings grow chilly and the aspens begin their annual transition from summer green to the colorful yellows, oranges and even reds of autumn, it's time to relish what many of us consider the most beautiful time of year here in the Vail Valley.

It's not a bad time, either, to relish what's going on in the local real estate market. One look at the numbers through July is all you need to conclude the rally continues, with new listings and sales in Eagle County up by double digits over this time last year. The only downward trend seems to be in the average number of days properties remain on the market — and that's a good thing.

It's a great time, therefore, to enlist the guidance and experience of a REALTOR. Our organization, its members and partners exist to provide the most informed, ethical and comprehensive options for clients and their real estate needs for both primary and secondary residences, as well as rental properties. And nobody knows the local market like we do.

Enjoy the season,



Vail Board of REALTORS®



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Architect Hans Berglund says this Vail home — with its curved roof, bold, modern lines and materials found here in the mountains — was an important step in the Vail Valley's transition toward mountain contemporary architecture.

PHOTO BY DENNIS JONES / DREAMCATCHER IMAGING

# what's in your VERNACULAR? part 1

## The beginning of a contemporaneous discussion on the evolution of architectural design in the Vail Valley

BY STEPHEN LLOYD WOOD

If it's true a community's identity is conveyed through its architecture — particularly that of its private homes — the Vail Valley has taken great strides the past few years in terms of its vernacular.

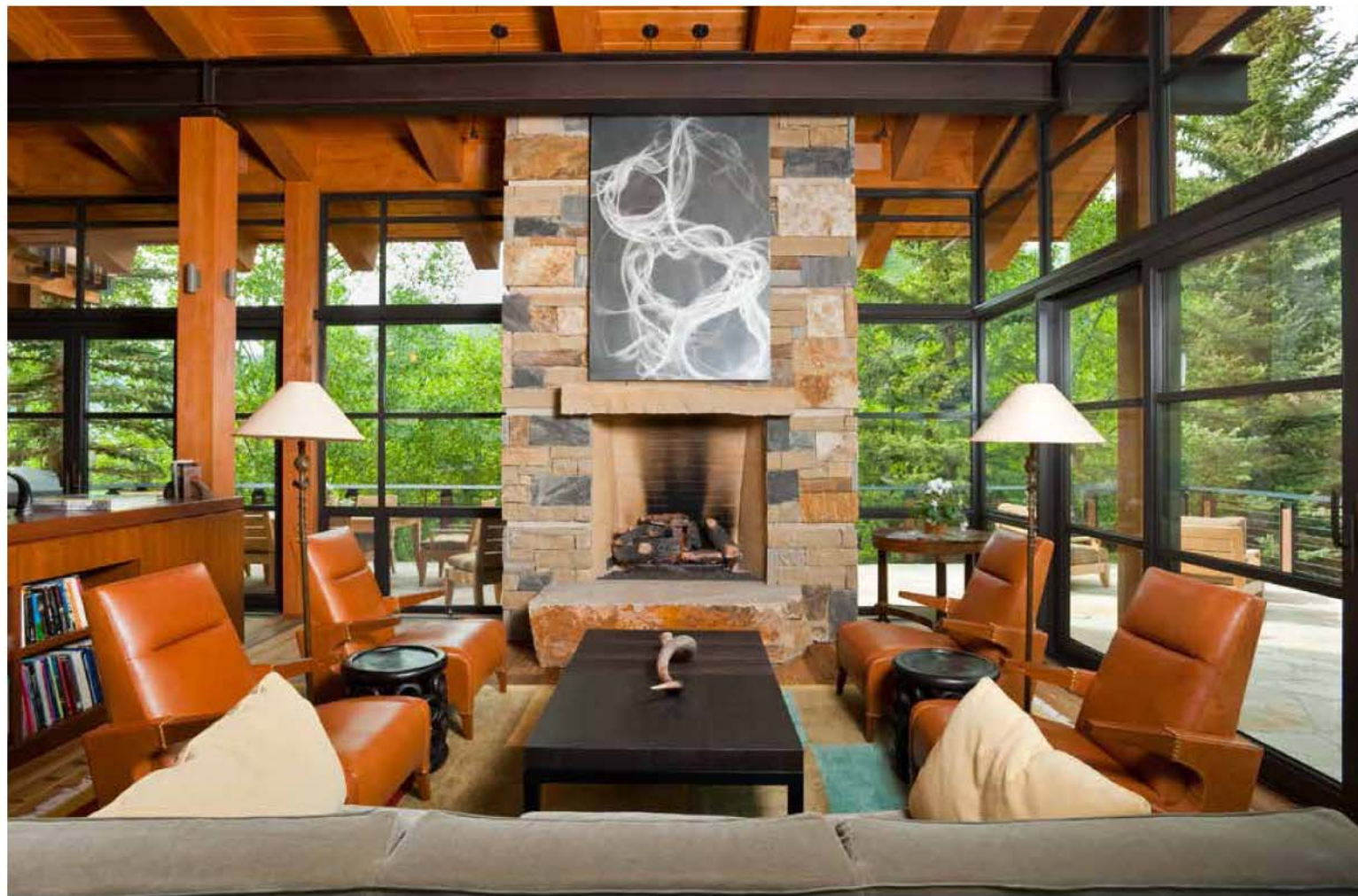
Discriminating buyers of new high-end, luxury homes in other mountain resort towns, like Aspen and Telluride, had been driving a trend toward more modern design inspired by the surrounding mountain landscape. Home design in the Vail Valley, meanwhile, seemed stuck in a rut until the end of the 20th century, with most new custom homes — even veritable palaces worth many millions of dollars — tending to resemble the same ol' log cabin, mountain lodge or Swiss chalet, albeit on a grand scale.

That's all changed.

A relatively new look experts now call “mountain contemporary,” or “mountain modern” — an increasingly popular blend of bold, modern lines, shapes finished in traditional colors, textures and materials found here in the mountains — has taken a firm hold. While even just a few years ago just a handful of completed homes in the Vail Valley were described as this blend of urban modern with mountain traditional, a veritable slew of new homes incorporating this latest interpretation of contemporary style now stand proudly throughout the Vail Valley, from Vail to Mountain Star, from the Lake Creek Valley to the Cordillera Valley Club, even Singletree.

Vail Valley HOME recently sat down with three of the valley's leading architects — Hans Berglund, Kyle Webb and William Pierce — to discuss this evolution of our community's vernacular.





PHOTOS BY DENNIS KONIS/STRENGTHARCHITECTURE

“In the beginning, this contemporary stuff was a tough sell. ... Seeing drawings was one thing, but what was it really going to look like up here in the mountains?”  
— HANS BERGLUND

as a wall in the great room and an enormous deck with views of the entire Gore Creek Valley — was a popular place for Sunday brunch among Vail’s early movers and shakers. Other periods of contemporary architectural advancement followed. Pierce, a longtime resident of Vail himself, has seen it all. He’s been closely involved with Vail’s infamous “DRB,” or design review board, as well as the town’s planning and zoning commission, for four decades and has worked with a long line of contemporary-minded partners since 1978. He credits

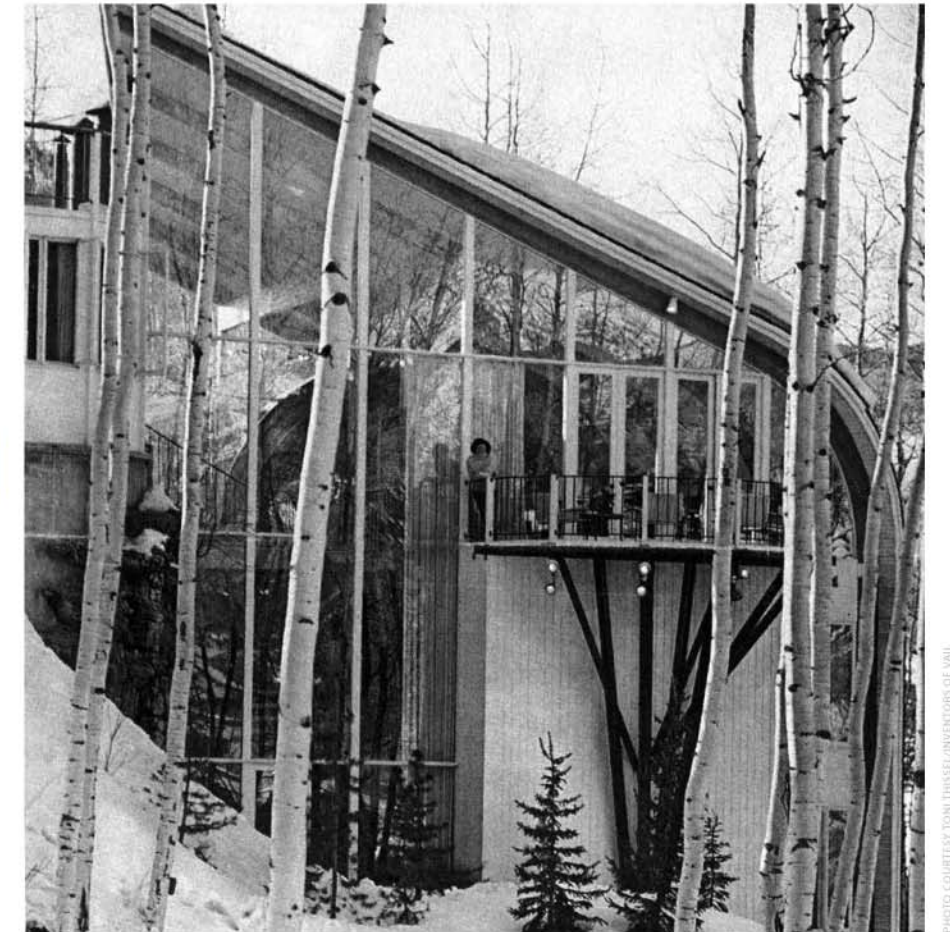


PHOTO COURTESY TOMI THRESE/PHOTOGRAPHY OF VAIL

## ‘A TOUGH SELL’

“When I first came here, in 1997, I was doing work similar to what I had been doing in Aspen, where this style was well accepted. They were a bit ahead of us here in that regard. By the time I started my own firm here, there had been a fundamental change,” says Berglund, who spent 10 years with the revered firm Basalt-based Cottle Graybeal Yaw Architects, seven of those years directing its Vail office, before founding his own, Edwards-based Berglund Architects, LLC, in 2004. “In the beginning, this contemporary stuff was a tough sell. It was hard to find clients, and people were somewhat resistant to it. The whole community here was skeptical. They wanted to know what these houses really were going to look like. Seeing drawings was one thing, but what was it really going to look like up here in the mountains?” “We’ve now seen an evolution of people becoming more accepting of it. Some are more willing to take the plunge than others, but for a lot of them it’s how they’re seeing things now,” adds Webb, who began his career working eight years with another

ABOVE: Berglund says the owner of this home in Vail wanted “mountain modern” design features, such as floor-to-ceiling windows in the great room, for “super strong indoor-outdoor connections.”  
RIGHT: Architect William Pierce says the Simba Run Condominium, built in the 1980s, is one of several major projects in Vail with enduring contemporary architectural style.

revered Vail firm, Morter Architects, before pursuing his own vision in 1999 with KH Webb Architects, headquartered in Lionshead. “It’s just a matter of their wanting it and accepting it now — more than ever before.”

## MOVERS AND SHAKERS

Truth is, Vail has been a stage of sorts for adventurous, contemporary architecture since its early days. A perfect example is, or was, a very modern home built on Rockledge Road, high above Vail Village, by oil and real estate tycoon John Murchison and his wife, Lupe, in the ‘60s. Their unconditional love for Vail in its early days helped ensure its success as a ski resort, a town and a community. Their home, which integrated enormous walls of glass and a curved roof with natural features of the steep terrain — including existing rock cliffs



one of those partners, Tom Briner, for laying the groundwork for modern design in Vail with a number of highly visible — and controversial — projects that set the tone for Lionshead in the ‘70s and ‘80s.

“There are a lot of contemporary buildings in Vail that were built in the ‘80s that by even today’s standards would be considered extremely modern or contemporary — but Briner didn’t do all of those crappy buildings in Lionshead people grew to hate,” Pierce says, referring to a collection of buildings, modeled after contemporary French ski resorts that since have been torn down and replaced. “He did the Vail post office, Red Sandstone Elementary School and the Vail Gymnastics Center, but he also did the Vail Spa and Simba Run condominiums; those two buildings, which have endured, would be considered very ‘contemporary’ even if they were built today.”

## ‘INCREDIBLE FREEDOM’

Jump ahead to the mid-‘90s. Berglund found himself involved with a home in the Mountain Star neighborhood, on the south-facing slopes

Contemporary architecture with curved roofs and vast windows is nothing new to Vail. This home on Rockledge Road high above Vail Village was built in the 1960s by John and Lupe Murchison.

high above Avon across from Beaver Creek Resort. Enormous investment potential matched a mindset as open-minded and creative as what he’d experienced in Aspen.

“We started working on this in ‘96, construction started in ‘97, and we finished in ‘99,” Berglund says of the trend-setting project, designed to provide a dynamic showcase for the owners’ extensive art collection. “It was a bit more traditional vernacular, a different look with copper siding and paneling, some exposed steel beams and trellis — some modern elements but overall still a bit traditional.”

The Mountain Star project was a sign mountain contemporary design in custom, single-family homes was gaining a foothold in the Vail Valley, Berglund says. The style took a few more years to rise to the surface with just a handful of actual plans submitted to DRB’s valley-wide; but in 2006 a home much like the Murchisons’ began to take shape on the Vail golf course.



This home in the Mountain Star neighborhood — the interior for which was designed to provide a dynamic showcase for the owners' extensive art collection — was a trend-setter in bringing mountain contemporary design downvalley, says Hans Berglund.



Copper siding and paneling, exposed steel beams and trellis and other modern elements were relatively new to the Vail Valley in 1999, when this home in Mountain Star was completed, says Hans Berglund.

There are a lot of contemporary buildings in Vail that were built in the '80s that by even today's standards would be considered extremely modern or contemporary.

— WILLIAM PIERCE

"It's our favorite house, with a really fantastic client. He gave us incredible freedom and he wanted 'mountain modern' with floor-to-ceiling windows, Gore Range views, super strong indoor-outdoor connections. He was really into that kind of clarity and purity," says Berglund, who sees this home, completed in 2008, as the next step in the valley's transition toward mountain contemporary architecture. "Everything you see is real structure. It's all real beams, real structure. You can clearly see what's holding what up."

#### PENT-UP DEMAND

Just as "mountain modern," as Berglund calls it, began to take hold, for real, the ongoing building boom — propelled by a roaring economy — came to a crashing halt with the Great Recession. Many architectural firms tied to traditional styles

found themselves out of work. Those with more contemporary bloodlines, like those of Berglund and Webb, actually thrived.

"For the next several years, there were tons and tons of houses for sale — but no 'modern' houses on the market. If you wanted just to buy a house, that was way cheaper than building one, so architects who focused on more traditional stuff had a really, really hard time," says Berglund of the resulting, pent-up demand for mountain contemporary homes. "It really wasn't until the Recession when some people decided they really wanted more modern work, which for us was fantastic because there really was nothing on the market for sale. We had clients coming to us saying, 'Look, we've been looking for a modern home for years, but there's just nothing on the market that's modern; we love your work, so we'll just buy a lot and build one, instead.'"



"That got us through the Recession. We were doing mountain modern work, and there was nothing out there to buy. We had a long history of it, going back to, like, 1999, which was super beneficial at that point," Berglund adds. "And since the Recession, we've continued to do modern stuff."

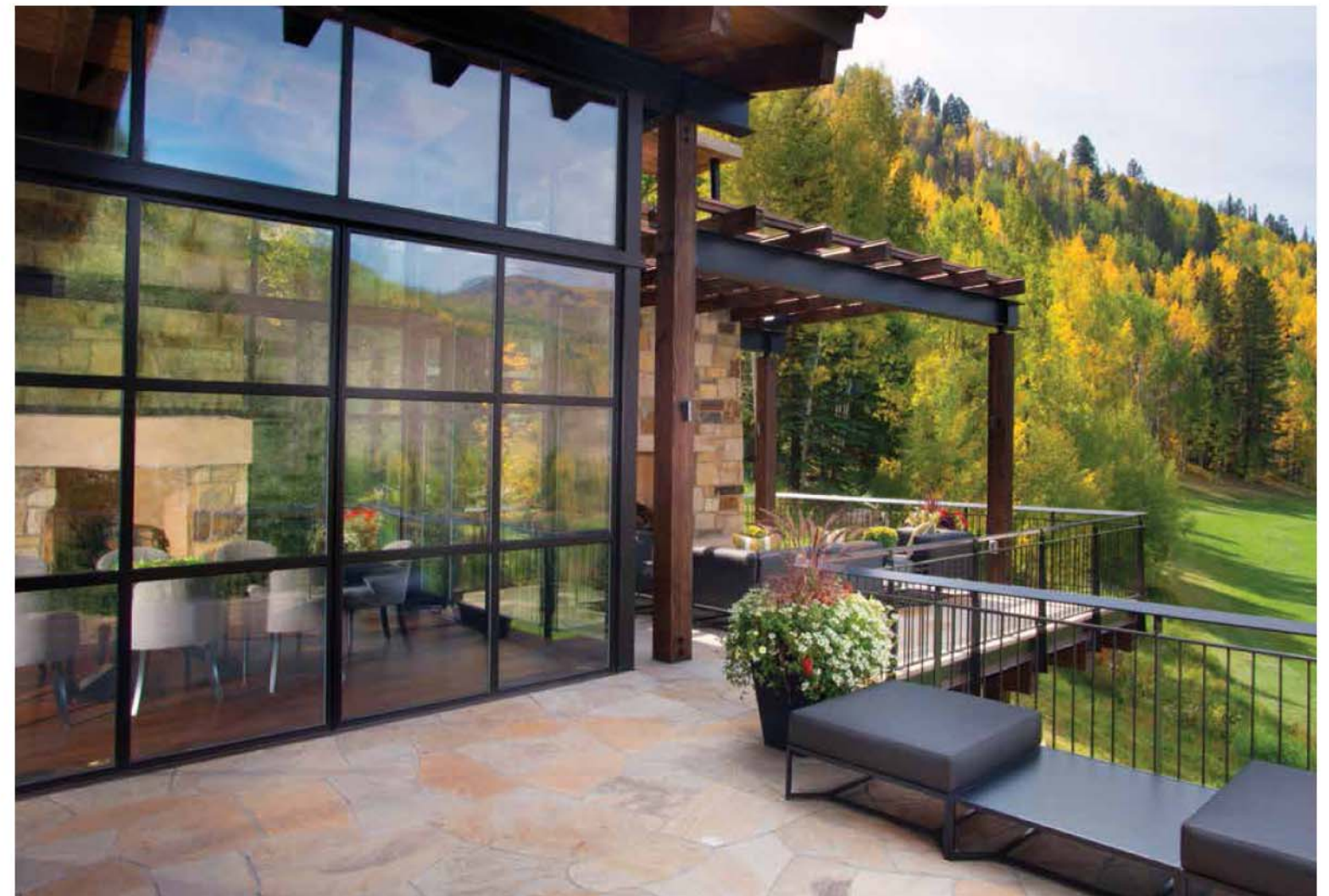
"It was a matter of clients wanting it and accepting it now more than they ever did," adds Webb. "The Recession kind of did that; it made people look at things differently."

## 'CREATIVE INTERPRETATIONS'

So, despite the downward spiral and stagnation felt throughout the real estate and building industries, locally and nationwide, the design and construction of custom homes in the fledgling new mountain contemporary spirit continued full-steam, particularly in Vail. Pierce estimates as many as 50 such homes are built or are under construction today, with more in the pipeline.

"You still can't build them in Arrowhead or Beaver Creek or Bachelor Gulch because their design guidelines are so restrictive," Pierce explains. "In Vail, by contrast, from the very beginning of the concept of design review, it's always been more about whether a project fits in an alpine setting. That's very vague, and intentionally so. It's meant to allow for creative interpretations of what alpine design really is, on a case-by-case basis. That allows for individuality."

In addition to the open-mindedness at the core of Vail's process, historical commitment to quality craftsmanship and timeless designs that work for the community at large continue to make the town an exciting haven for sophisticated, contemporary-minded, well-heeled homeowners to express themselves through architecture.



*THIS PAGE: The market for new mountain contemporary homes was especially strong during the recent recession for architectural firms specializing in the style, say architects Hans Berglund and Kyle Webb.*

*OPPOSITE PAGE: Veteran architect William Pierce, with Vail's Design Review Board for many years, says the town's open-minded guidelines and "historical commitment to quality craftsmanship and timeless designs" continue to make the town an exciting haven for sophisticated homeowners to express themselves through architecture.*

"Here, the DRB's expectation is that, above all, a proposed home is an extremely good example of its vernacular," says Pierce. "You can't build a lousy Tyrollean house, whether it's next to another Tyrollean or a 'modern' house. If you build a 'modern' house, it's with the highest expectations of what it's going to look like on the outside. If you're going to use certain materials, they have to look good together."

**Editor's note:** The second part of this two-part series, "What's in Your Vernacular?," will appear in next month's issue of Vail Valley HOME magazine.

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— KYLE WEBB

