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REBUILDING AFTER THE FIRE

by Juana Gómez

The meadow and tree stand survived the Fourmile Fire, the neighbors' house, too. Your house did not. Flames made fickle patterns, picking unpredictably on structures old or new. After surveying all the losses, you are thankful for your land with its starry nights and quiet mornings. "I live in the most beautiful place in the world," says Kim Neill, an evacuee. "My lot is down in a valley with little creeks running through it."

In between waves of emotion, the frenzied early weeks after the disaster are filled with finding urgent housing and replacing the essentials. Routines return, and one day, after discussing with friends and loved ones, you decide it is time to rebuild. Where to begin? Find out what federal and state programs exist to help you recover. Then talk again with the insurance agent and adjustors. Discuss your coverage. Replacement cost will frequently include rebuilding to current codes and regulations.

"Impressive fire breaks by federal firefighters saved my house. If I had to rebuild, I couldn't nor would want to, replace the same redwood house and deck from 1969," adds Kim Neill, herself a builder. Much has changed since your house was built, too. You may not be able to reconstruct exactly what you had. Improved methods and materials have become standard practice. Homeowners and architects pay more attention to weatherization and renewable energy. The County has tightened its fire resistance standards, adopted current codes, and upgraded the energy requirements.

A competent team of architect and contractor can help you design, build, and navigate the permit process. For example, since 2008, the County requires compliance with Build Smart, one of the country's strictest green building codes for new residential construction and additions. Avoid companies that are new to these local regulations. Be careful to choose licensed people with experience in Boulder. Many area professionals have spent years learning the intricacies of this system. Interview them and ask:

- what can they do to expedite your project?
- do they have licensing and experience with Boulder County regulations?
- will they work within your budget?
- how can your next building save energy?

The unique opportunity to create a better house can be an exciting and rewarding time. Start with some research. An initial visit to the Land Use Department web site (www.bouldercounty.org/lu/) provides an introduction to the requirements for building in the County. Though some of the material might overwhelm the casual reader, an experienced architect can sort through the documents to determine which issues are relevant to your project. For example, did you know that....?

- You will need a new foundation designed by a structural engineer.
- A surveyor may have to verify the building location.
- Construction waste must be recycled and documented.
- The new house could be required to have a residential fire sprinkler system with cistern.
- Outdoor lighting fixtures must comply with Dark Skies guidelines.

Create a list to give to your designer outlining all you like about your land and previous house. Landscape architect Carol Adams, owner of Studio Terra, advises that, "now is the best time to evaluate your overall property in terms of site planning. It's possible the house was not located in the optimal spot to begin with. You'll want to do fire-wise landscaping, which involves creating a series of increasingly defensible zones around the building."

When vetting professionals for your project, call their references. Look for a design team who will listen to your hopes and dreams, and be able to translate those into a stronger, beautiful house within your budget.