

Dream Builders: Tom Kundig (Pursuits)
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To hear Clay Jackson tell it, when he and his wife Jane showed up to meet architect Tom Kundig at his Seattle office, Kundig could hardly contain himself. "Check this out," he said, bounding over to a pair of strange-looking steel dials suspended by steel rods from above. It all looked like something out of an ancient submarine, and Kundig like a kid showing off a new toy. The architect beckoned them over and started spinning the dials with his fingertips. A massive skylight overhead began to lift, almost noiselessly, until the offices of Olson Sundberg Kundig Allen Architects were open to the sky and the cries of seagulls were drifting through the light-filled space.

The Jackson's were impressed—not just by the mechanics, but by Kundig's enthusiasm. They had come to Seattle to interview the architect about designing a weekend home on land they'd purchased in Highlands, North Carolina, a couple of hours outside Atlanta, where they live. Clay, an investment manager, and Jane, a photography curator, had been combing through design magazines looking for an architect, when a single image stopped them in their tracks: a bridge-like, glass-enclosed living room, reaching over a small gully in eastern Washington state. It was Kundig's Ridge House. "Nothing else spoke to us like his work did," Clay remembers.

It was enough to draw them to Seattle—to eat, to browse the bookstores and, most important, to spend time with Kundig. They toured a few of his completed houses to make sure he was the right fit before committing to what would be years of collaboration and no small investment of money. There was no hard sell—indeed, because of the amount of interest in Kundig's work across the country, he was feeling them out as much as the other way around. The trio talked about food and art, and their vision of a house nestled into the landscape. "I'm not sure there was any lightning bolt," Clay says of the Jackson's time with Kundig in Seattle. But it slowly became clear that this prize-winning architect was genuinely listening, and sympathetic to, the Jacksons' ideas—about the use of windows, for example, and about the way they hoped to minimize their home's impact on the landscape. "Tom has a real passion not only for what he sees in the

project, but also for listening to what we were saying—as opposed to forcing something down your throat,” says Clay. “And his enthusiasm makes you want to get going.”

Kundig is a rarity in architecture, yet also part of an emerging breed: a hybrid who combines highbrow architectural credibility and a distinctly contemporary architectural vocabulary with a focus on residential work and a startling empathy for his clients' needs and experiences. He doesn't wear German-engineered eyeglasses or root the design for your house in his own Jungian analysis. Nor is he your tweedy neighborhood architect who drives an old Saab with blueprints piled on the back shelf—though he is that guy writ large, in a sense. Kundig's modest bearing belies an outsized talent and the logistical and technical chops of the major firm behind him.

OSKA has designed 900-square-foot cabins and 100,000-square-foot law schools, but it is perhaps best known for a certain kind of house that enterprising realtors might call "mansion-in-the-woods." For a who's who of Seattle's elite, the firm has designed exceedingly grand modern homes, gracefully set upon the powerful landscapes of the Pacific Northwest. Many are enormous by any measure, even as their craftsmanship and often-assertive modernism make them a retort to so-called McMansions.

Kundig is the firm's indisputable hotshot, creating the most daring designs and attracting the attention to match. He burst on the architectural scene in the mid-1990s, just as Seattle itself was establishing pride of place in the American consciousness with the rise of Starbucks, Microsoft and Amazon.com. In the past five years, as Kundig's architecture has reached maturity, his houses have left an indelible mark on American residential design, becoming some of the most widely-published works of the last decade. When photos appear in a magazine, hundreds of calls pour into Olson Sundberg Kundig Allen's offices from people interested in a Kundig house of their own.

But Kundig's houses aren't the architectural equivalent of summer blockbusters, loved by millions, dismissed by critics. Kundig was a finalist for the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Awards, and selected as one of the Architectural League of New York's Emerging Voices, a key anointment in the architecture world. Two of his houses, Chicken Point Cabin and The Brain, won American Institute of Architects National Honor Awards, the highest honor bestowed annually on individual buildings. Most strikingly, they were chosen alongside massive commercial and institutional projects.

Kundig delights in the contrast. When his designs won, he called up the clients and said, "You guys have to understand, your little peanut in the forest beat out football stadiums!"

It's early one misty morning last spring, and Kundig is sitting at a drafting table in a corner of Olson Sundberg Kundig Allen's offices, pencil in hand. He's wearing jeans and a black cotton turtleneck, and when he heads towards the firm's conference room he seems to glide on his toes. When Kundig was in his twenties, he was a serious mountain climber, and he maintains the manner: energized by everything yet alarmed by nothing. With his long hair, loud voice, and avuncular manner, he chats like a stool-mate at a country diner—a sort of cultured woodsman.

Kundig grew up in Spokane, Washington, the son of Swiss émigrés. His father, Moritz Kundig, is an award-winning architect trained in the rarified world of European modernism but who often collaborated with local artists in Spokane, including a sculptor named Harold Balazs. The younger Kundig spent summers working in Balazs' studio, absorbing both his boundless enthusiasm and his painstaking attention to detail. He studied architecture at the University of Washington and then spent much of twenties—his "lost years"—in Alaska and Switzerland. By the time he was 30, he'd returned to Seattle, married and joined Olson Sundberg Architects, a firm with a growing reputation for producing exceptional work. In 1994 he became a partner.

The firm is now located in a restored warehouse in Seattle's Pioneer Square neighborhood. With exposed brick walls, wooden bookcases, and steel accents—among them that massive skylight

near the entryway—the office reveals the exquisite toughness that's characteristic of the firm's work. Little balsa models of houses seem to litter every surface in the office.

They often belie their true size. As the closest thing to court architects for Seattle's business royalty, the firm doesn't find it unusual to design residential projects as large as 30,000 square feet. A few, like a house that Jim Olson designed for Barney Ebsworth, the founder of the Royal and Clipper Cruise Lines, have become well-known fixtures on the Seattle charity circuit. "It's almost a Renaissance idea, that these houses are social gathering places," Olson says.

Confidentiality agreements prohibit Kundig from discussing his largest residential projects in detail, but he's happy to articulate the distinctive challenges they present—and how he tries to turn those challenges into opportunities. One struggle is to create a sense of intimacy as the square footage creeps north of 6,000.

At that scale, houses usually pick up what he terms "fascinating extras," like art galleries, libraries or indoor swimming pools. Those more public space inevitably become the core of the house, but Kundig balances them with intimately scaled bedrooms and studies. And more often than not, an owner's favorite place will be a little reading nook, not a grand gallery. Large houses are also technically challenging because they begin to require steel frames and sophisticated engineering. That brings with it a sense of permanence that a typical suburban house never achieves, and, like all architects, Kundig revels in that sense of permanence. "They building something extraordinary that's going to outlive us all," Kundig says of his clients, "and that's something you take seriously as both an architect and an owner."

And then there are the "personalities" that inevitably come hand-in-hand with ambitious, and expensive, projects. This too Kundig embraces in a way that few major architects are willing or able to do. Rick Joy, a Tucson-based architect well known for his desert houses, has been a close observer of Kundig's work. "Some architects feel that their projects are an opportunity to be very self-expressive, like a sculptor," he explains. "Tom's mature enough that he doesn't necessarily feel that desire. Instead, he digs in with his clients and searches for the space and atmosphere they would like to inhabit."

Indeed, Kundig clearly thrives on his interactions with clients. "These people are engaged, they're curious, they're intelligent, they just go for it, and often their success is because they have that kind of drive," he says. "The people I get to work with are extraordinary because they're already willing to risk a lot. They're laying out a bunch of money on this yahoo"—he means himself—"for the planning and design process. And it's a very personal gesture, frankly. So I just know right out of the block that I'm dealing with a pretty remarkable personality."

Kundig often becomes friends with his clients, a result of working together on such intimate projects. When developing a design, he asks them to share everything with him: not just pictures of houses they like, but also favorite books and art, vacation stories and heirlooms. "I'm bringing my values and tools and ideas and dreams—but I'm fascinated by what clients are bringing to the table as well," Kundig says.

Then he lowers his voice to a whisper, as if he were in church. "It's a personal connection. You're building their house."

That reverence for his clients isn't just cant either. It turns out to be integral to his deepest architectural principles. Kundig believes homes are expressions of our insides, even as they protect us from the outside. They connect external forces—whether culture, landscape or the literal forces of wind and water—with internal forces like our personalities and family histories. "Houses should be sincere to all this out there, and sincere to what's happening in here," he says, gesturing towards his heart.

Kundig's theories about inside and outside find their way into his designs in a literal way: One hallmark of his work is that the walls and ceilings move. As with the skylight at Olson Sundberg

Kundig Allen's office, many of Kundig's houses actually open themselves up to the outside. One entire wall of Chicken Point Cabin, for instance, is a 20-foot by 30-foot, six-ton window that rises like a garage door to open the house up to the view. Intellectually, the house becomes a subtle and beautiful membrane between inside and outside, reminding its occupants of the physical world of landscape and weather, as well as the emotional world of shelter and dreams. That huge window is also an awesome toy, providing a chance to interact with the house. You don't just live in it; you operate it too.

Not long after the Jacksons visited Kundig in Seattle, he flew to Atlanta and drove up into the hills with them to walk their property in Highlands. The three of them spent hours imagining their tree house in the woods. They watched the light move during the day, and the puffs of mist slide down the hillside. On the way back to the airport, Kundig sat in the back of the car, sketching. He imagined a pair of bridges: a narrow one leading to a guest bedroom and library, and a wide one containing the bedrooms and leading to a master suite. Instead of following the contours of the slope, the house would be on a single level, reaching straight out and up into the air toward the trees, with the master bedroom at the highest point.

A month after his visit, Kundig called the Jacksons and told them to expect a large package, with a model of the house. "It may change, but I think from a design standpoint it's what we talked about, and if you don't like it we'll start over, but I really feel like I got it, I really think this is it," Kundig told them.

The package arrived at Jane Jackson's office on a day Clay was traveling. She couldn't wait. Opening it up, she said, "Wow, there it is. It's perfect."

Poring over another model of the Jacksons' house back in Olson Sundberg Kundig Allen's conference room, it's hard to imagine how something so delicate stands for something so permanent. But inevitably, it's the nature of working with Kundig—or any architect, really—that the buildings are built not for 25 or 40 years, but for 150 or 200 years. "For the most part these houses do not get resold, and people live in them for the rest of their lives," Kundig says. "In general, that's why they come to architects: because this is their final shelter, their final home, and they're willing to risk it. This is their dream. They want to do it right."

The Jacksons agree. "It would be great to build something that we really felt would stay in the family a long time, and the kids would enjoy, and who knows, the next generation maybe as well."

All architects dream of immortality, yet for Kundig and his clients, those dreams are somehow more personal, more about the private life of family and shelter than the public life of museums or monuments. "I just want them to love these houses to death, and call me two or three years later and say the place is just getting better and better," Kundig says. "It's what I do this stuff for: to be involved with a landscape, and with these personalities. Somebody pinch me."

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