

# Conversation

Tom Kundig and Jim Dow

*Jim Dow is a cofounder of the contracting firm Schuchart/Dow. Both a carpenter and a designer, he believes that masterful architecture requires masterful builders and loves finding innovative solutions to creative challenges. Over his thirty-year career, he has worked for renowned architects such as Christopher Alexander (creator of A Pattern Language) and several of the Pacific Northwest's top architectural firms, including Olson Kundig. He and Tom Kundig have built a deep rapport over their many years of working together.*

Tom Kundig: So, Jim, I'd heard about you over the years, but we'd never connected to do a project until Greg Smith hired us to build out some of the interiors of the Millennium Tower in downtown Seattle. Greg thought you would be an ideal contractor for the project lead. And you said the right things, did the right things, and your crew did a terrific job. I've gotten to know you better and better, and I can say that you're the kind of contractor we love working with, in that you treat the undertaking as more than just construction and running numbers. It's about what you're building, where, and with whom. That's important for us as architects, because we're also in it for more than just a bottom line. It has a much deeper meaning.

Jim Dow: We worked on three condos in that building, so it wasn't a small deal at all, but quite meaty and fun. And a big challenge, namely to create a beautiful product for a reasonable budget. It's always scary for a contractor to work with a new architect; it can go really badly or really well. And that goes both ways, meaning that it can take a while for an architect to be comfortable with a particular contractor. I quickly got very comfortable with how Olson Kundig works, how completely reasonable you all are as an architecture firm, and how respectful the working relationship is. Some architects see contractors as a necessary evil, but we were treated as a real partner. Our ideas and concerns were very much heard.

Tom: Contracting is a lot like architecture in that there is value that cannot be quantified—that isn't directly linked to hourly rates or fees or budgets. There is the potential for a project to be built well, beautifully nuanced, and for the builders to go above and beyond the drawings to make the thing better than anybody expected. It's intangible—virtually impossible to define—but that's what we discovered between our offices.

In talking to Phil Turner for another interview for this book, we spoke some about risk. How do you think about risk, and tackle it, or channel it, or own it?

Jim: I figured out pretty quickly that I could trust you, that your word was good. Also, you are always on time. That may sound like a minor thing, but it's a huge deal. I have experienced over the years that when you say something, you mean it. These are important traits in a businessman. This business of building is so difficult already, I don't want to worry about trust.

So, risk, in the sense of our relationship, doesn't exist because I know that Olson Kundig and Tom are honorable. And they know that we are as well. So we all get to concentrate on the risk of making these crazy, amazing buildings. That's the fun part, the challenge. We want to hang a building off a cliff, right? Those are the kinds of risks we thrive on.

Tom: Indeed, it's not like everything is just a pretty garden path and roses and blue skies. You can have tough situations in your shop, just like I can in my shop, and we don't always see eye to eye. But there is a trust that the situation is not about deception or monkey business.

Jim: What's an example that readily comes to mind?

Tom: A tough project that could have gone way south, but that was wonderfully successful on all levels, is the Pierre. People sometimes don't understand that our business is a three-legged stool: you've got the contractor, the architect, and the client. The Pierre was, on so many levels, a risk.

Jim: We had no idea if we could do it. Usually when you're drilling and blasting rock, it's for tunnels, and it doesn't matter if it's rough. We thought it would be amazing to do it for a house and make it really precise—as if that concrete house was cut into the rock with a butter knife. The expectations were high, and the costs were somewhat unknown. But we had a great client who was willing to take the risk with us, and we poured ourselves into solving it. And it worked. It was amazing to take a step back at the end and say, "Oh my God, look what we made together."



Excavating the rock at the Pierre, Lopez Island, Washington, 2010.

Tom: I mean, who carves into rocks to build houses? Conceptually it sounds like an easy thing, but actually, realistically, as architects we knew it wasn't, as contractors you knew it wasn't, and the owner was supportive of that situation.

Jim: Every project has *something* go wrong. On the Pierre, when we were blasting for the basement (using the same technique we'd used all along), suddenly a huge piece of stone on the opposite end of the house fell over. It was almost like a comedy skit—so tragic you had to either cry or laugh. Turns out the piece already had a natural split (which we couldn't have known), and with all the shaking, it just gave way. Some architects I've worked with would have thrown a fit at that point. But what you did was to say, well, we'll just flip the basement to the other side of the house, and if you see it today, it appears that everything was perfectly executed. My point is that your way of working is to continually look for opportunities to respond to what is happening.

Tom: In any situation, the architect should be thinking about the issues that the contractor has, and the contractor should be thinking about issues that the architect has. Returning to your point about me wanting to take big risks or wanting to explore ideas that haven't been done: I often tend to back off on the fit and finish, so to speak, of a big idea because I know what we're trying to do, within a budget, is a reach. In other words, I can't ask my contractor to go the extra mile *vis-à-vis* feasibility and then simultaneously need the thing to be built like a surgical blade.

Jim: True, it's not about fussing over super-precise details. It's about making big moves that are not often done. Also, I know you often make a point of retaining the marks of the hand of the craftsman in your buildings.

Tom: I'm not even *interested* in surgical precision. Sometimes your people want to go further with the

finish than I even want them to, because they are so deep into their craft. But that can be when trouble starts from a budget standpoint. It needs to be beautifully done, but not over-extravagantly done. Many contractors wouldn't be so creative in how the marks of the craftsman can manifest themselves in the work, in all the myriad ways we've accomplished it.

All of which is to say, there's an interesting story here about perfectionism versus exploration and risk taking. We should also talk about your cabin, which I designed and you built.

Jim: Well, actually, *I* designed it, but you didn't listen to anything I had to say. Ha, I came to you with a floor plan, everything all worked out, and I plopped it down on the table and you said, "Yeah, yeah, OK, I get it, this looks great, that looks great," and then two weeks later you came back with something totally different, which is what got built.

Tom: Here's the thing: you did a sketch and I could immediately understand from the sketch how you were thinking. Any drawing tells me a lot about the person who made it, and I saw what the internal relationships were and how it might work. You were asking me to make architecture out of your scribble. You respected me enough to be an architect, and I respected you enough to be a client, that I tried to understand what your scribble was about, and make a building out of it. So, how did you get into building?

Jim: My grandpa was a farmer, and basically a builder, in Kansas. And my dad was always a tinkerer. I got into construction when my dad passed away because I needed to make money, and it paid better than McDonald's. I started the summer when I was thirteen. Over the years, I learned that I had a good feel for it, and loved it.

My first important job was with Christopher Alexander, the guy who wrote *A Pattern Language*. I went down to Modesto, it was around 1980, and



Jim Dow's Tye River Cabin, Skykomish, Washington, 2005.

worked side by side with his group, getting mentored, before they would let me help build the house. I spent six months working with them and learned the art, and from that point there was no turning back. The craft of building is not just looking at a drawing and building a wall or a roof, but understanding the building holistically, seeing the art and design behind it.

Tom: What's been one of your favorite projects we've worked on together?

Jim: The Whistler Ski House was one of the most amazing. Those big beams that span the living room are like Flintstone beams, they're mammoth. And the bridge! Just to give you an idea of the scale of the trusses: to get them to the site, we had to arrange to close the highway from Vancouver to Whistler. It was no small feat, let me tell you.

Tom: I had no idea.

Jim: We started at two o'clock in the morning and arrived at four. You've seen that bridge, it's a monster. And when we put the pieces together it was perfect, within a quarter of an inch. That is exhilarating for a contractor to pull off. It's this exciting challenge, and then it works and it fits and you put it up and bolt it down and step back and look at it and you just get chills.

It's also so satisfying to watch how excited the clients are when they first see the things we do for them. What we do is really out of the ordinary.

Tom: I suppose I think of you as a secret weapon of some kind. I feel that way as well about Ted Hall of Spearhead Timberworks. You work for other architects, and certainly Ted Hall works for other architects and contractors, and Phil Turner used to work for other architects until he started working here full time. But when we get together . . .

Jim: Ted is so into the challenge aspect, and so fearless. He says, "All right, guys, let's figure this out. We've never done it before, but we can do it."

Tom: Over the years, one begins to develop one's core team. One great thing about Schuchart/Dow is that you are willing to travel. That's a big deal. And Spearhead, due to the nature of their business, they travel, and their equipment travels. Phil Turner now travels also. So what could have been an exceptional locally based team is now an international team, which is extremely exciting.

Jim: With Bigwood and Hawaii Residence, the local contractors didn't have, or understand, what it would take to put those buildings together. I mean, building is a difficult job, and a lot of contractors simply want to receive a drawing and start building. They're not worried about, or invested in, the architectural vision. Or what opportunities might present themselves along the way. That is where the real art of what we do lies.

Tom: In keeping with that: it's very important to me personally that when the project is done, we all remain friends with the client. It's not common in the industry. Everybody says, "You're still *friends* with your client? You actually get invited back to the house?"

Jim: When you're diligent about trying to understand what your client really wants, you watch, you listen, and through that process you are *caring* for them. That sounds touchy-feely, but it's a word that comes up a lot at Schuchart/Dow. So, we also find ourselves in a lot of really nice relationships with the people we work for.

Tom: Another way the secret weapon comes into play is that we're able to operate at both the lower and the higher end. Not all clients have the same budget, yet they all have the same desire to get the most value out of their dollar. So even though a budget is perhaps a high dollar amount, there's a correspondingly



Underside of the bridge, which uses eighty-foot-long flange beams, at Whistler Ski Cabin, Whistler, British Columbia, 2015.

extra-high expectation; meaning, the higher end isn't necessarily easier because it's more expensive. It's actually as difficult to attain success there as it is to give lower-end budgets the maximum bang for their buck.

Jim: Some clients simply don't have a lot of money, and others have a lot, and we strive to be successful at whatever their budget is. It takes a different approach: some contractors could never pull off a high-end project, and some could never pull off a low-end project, whereas we've put energy into getting good at doing both. Whether the project is \$400 per square foot or \$2,000 per square foot, we want to do a great job.

Tom: Not all architects are sensitive in this respect, and that's precisely why some projects are difficult to navigate: the architect is trying too hard to create an award winner, and they're not addressing the client's needs and budget and the fact that the house has to be comfortable to live in. The people who live in these buildings should love them, see them as wonderful places. Again, it's intangible.

Jim: We certainly have some amazing clients. They are a huge part of the success of our projects.

Tom: I always say, a good building, a good client. You cannot do a good building for a difficult client. You can suffer through it, but a great building doesn't happen unless you have a great client.

Jim: Can you unpack that a little? Good client, bad client?

Tom: Well, a good client is a client who trusts that you are trying to solve their brief in their best interest, as an architect. You're bringing your DNA to it, the contractors are bringing their DNA to it, and the owners have their DNA invested. It's like going to an attorney or a surgeon; you're causing trouble if you try to tell them what to do. I don't necessarily mean that the

client has to agree with everything I say, but that trust has to be there.

Jim: Also I imagine it's about the client *not* asking you to repeat what you did last time, for them or someone else.

Tom: All the buildings we create have different personalities, and that is intentional, as each site is different, each client is different. There is certainly room for commodity in design, but less so when you want to make something that is special to the situation. I'm not interested in making the same house over and over and over again. I am, however, deeply interested in the engagement process, and the relationship with the contractor is one of the most important engagements in the making of a building.