

SPECIAL ISSUE: Decorating, Architecture, Furniture & More

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Small by Nature

Huddled in the shadows of the Cascade Mountains of **Washington State**, a compact cabin by renowned Seattle architect Tom Kundig opens up to the sylvan setting.

Custom doors crafted from salvaged fir swing open at the corners and sides of the small building, exposing Jim Dow's riverside cabin to the elements. Marcel Wanders's *Knotted* chair nestles by a concrete fireplace that opens to both the sitting area and the kitchen, where Dow reads at a portable counter. Opposite: Tom Kundig designed the steel-clad cabin to fade into the surrounding forest. "Jim's not here to be in architecture," notes Kundig. "He's here to be in nature."





Vacation homes have always been a rite of passage for novice architects—a way for indulgent family members to give the kid a break until the big time beckons. Luckily, someone forgot to tell Tom Kundig. Despite a meteoric career that has earned him dozens of awards (including top honors from the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum and the American Academy of Arts and Letters), the Seattle architect can't resist the siren call of the cabin. So when contractor Jim Dow asked Kundig to design a diminutive retreat in Skykomish, Washington, the architect accepted without hesitation.

"Smaller projects almost have more appeal for me, because they're intimate to the client and intimate to the landscape," says Kundig, a principal at Olson Sundberg Kundig Allen Architects. "Jim's desire to be in the forest—to be protected, Zen-like, meditative—those are the kinds of projects you dream of doing."

Modest in scale, though not in ambition, Dow's 575-square-foot cabin eschews Big Architectural Statements for a disarming deference to the setting, a nine-acre parcel nestled in a river bend 75 miles northeast of Seattle. Raised atop a concrete base to maximize views, the steel-clad structure huddles under a broad-hipped



roof crowned by a towering chimney. Glass doors fan out on three sides, including the corners, exposing the interior to the elements and the sounds of the river below.

Although it appears to sit on the ground, the cabin is actually perched atop a 16-foot foundation that raises the living quarters so they are level with an outcropping in back; a terrace atop the mound more than doubles the available living space (the homeowner, a contractor, devised his own table and benches). The chimney's height was dictated by thermodynamics rather than aesthetics: The fireplace is so large that the stack had to be tall to guarantee a draw.

PRODUCED BY LINDA O'KEEFE AND LINDA HUMPHREY. PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOHN GRANEN. WRITTEN BY FRED ALBERT.





A concrete fireplace anchors the center of the cabin, the hearth opening to a small sitting area on one side and a kitchen on the other. Dusky rafters trace the contours of the metal roof above, lulling Dow with the somnambulant drumbeat of rain. “This place is so therapeutic. There are times when I’m just staring at the fire and the next thing I know, it’s morning,” says Dow, the managing partner for builder Schuchart/Dow. “You can ski, walk or hike, but coming here is really about doing nothing.”

Underscoring that point is the absence of closets, because they might breed clutter—or projects. Storage is relegated to drawers under the living room sectional and compartments at the head and foot of each bed. Clothing storage was limited to a pair of hooks in each bedroom. “I didn’t want to waste space for a closet,” laughs Dow, who brings along just what he needs for each trip.

Maryika Byskiniewicz, who designed the custom furniture, chose deep red fabrics—like the Pierre Frey mohair on the ban-

quette, in a color called Cardinal. The palette makes the greens of the Pacific Northwest forest seem more vivid by contrast.

When it came time to plan the kitchen, the divorced father of two grown children (he also has a rascally malamute named Beau) was a little more generous with storage, although even here he restricted himself to an undercounter refrigerator and a diminutive 24-inch Viking range. An elevated counter and a bench overlook the expansive terrace and woods beyond, but they are portable enough to move outdoors if the occasion demands—although given that the kitchen’s corners fold out of the way, eating indoors isn’t much different from dining alfresco.

This page: “Everything had to be tightly organized, like a ship,” says interior designer Maryika Byskiniewicz, whose custom sectional sofa features lidded drawers that double as tables; mohair cushions can accommodate overnight guests. Opposite (clockwise from top): The property is bordered on two sides by the Tye River; corner windows dissolve the cabin’s boundaries; Beau stands by, beside Jim Dow (right) and architect Tom Kundig in the sunken fire pit.



What the Pros Know

The cabin, as green as architect Tom Kundig could make it, depends on a geothermal heat pump (also known as a ground-source heat pump) for its primary generator of warmth. Quiet, economical and energy-efficient, geothermal heat pumps rely on the constant temperature of the earth to warm fluid passing through underground tubes, then transferring the heat to the air inside. In summer, heat is extracted from the air and released into the fluid, cooling the interior. Some units even provide domestic hot

water. While they are more expensive to install than conventional heating systems, geothermal heat pumps reduce energy consumption by 40 to 70 percent and are eligible for a 30 percent federal tax credit, so they can pay for themselves in fewer than ten years, depending upon installation and use. Although Jim Dow's cabin is occupied for only about half the year, the homeowner is satisfied that the investment was worth it. "The electric bills here average twenty-five bucks a month," he says.





Kundig says clients often claim they want a small space, but Dow really meant it, never wavering for a second from the original 25-by-25-foot dimensions he envisioned. The architect was grateful for the limitation. “As soon as a building gets big, you get separated from the landscape,” he observes. To maximize interior space, Kundig relegated stairs to the exterior and fashioned sleeping quarters barely bigger than the beds occupying them. Mammoth windows at the foot of each bed swing open, so that when you’re lying down, the sights, sounds and smells of the forest envelop you. “It’s just like camping next to a river,” Kundig quips, “except for the comfortable bed and 400-thread-count sheets.” Adds Dow, “I leave the windows open all night. Bugs fly around and things crawl in, but Beau chases them out. He’s always tearing after something. Needless to say, you don’t ever sleep through the night.”

Dow made a sybaritic soaking tub the centerpiece of his Seattle residence (*MH*, May ’08); here, a more compact model sidles up to a bathroom window overlooking the forest. The floor and walls are covered in black mosaic tile—a color Kundig praises for its calming influence and the way it sets everything else in relief. “It’s like the bass line in music,” the architect says. “You don’t necessarily hear it, but it holds everything together.” Much like the cabin itself: inconspicuous, but inexorably linked to its surroundings. ▣

See Resources, last pages.

|| This page (from top): A river bay skirts the land below Dow’s cabin; inky mosaic tiles from Daltile cover the walls and the soaking tub surround in the cabin’s sole bathroom. Opposite: The exterior is wrapped in 16-gauge steel plate, left natural to acquire a patina of rust. Each bed culminates in a floor-to-ceiling window, which Dow leaves open so it feels as though he’s sleeping in the woods. || Woven shades provide protection from insects; the blanket is from Pendleton.

