

TOM KUNDIG

‘BAD’: Human Scale

Introduction and transcription:

Jill Maltby

Panel:

Matthew Darmour-Paul

Jill Maltby

Department of Architecture Chair, Deborah Hauptmann

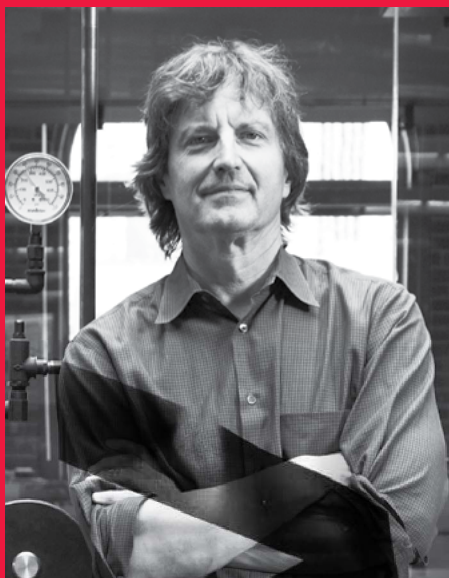
Calvin Lewis, FAIA

Opening Statement:

“I never understand why the profession is seduced by mega-projects, which I find usually don’t have a sense of humanity, a sense of scale, what it means to be a human being. For the most part, the projects done at that sort of scale are done by architects that have never done residential architecture. Food, water, shelter...residence is the most basic building block of what we do everyday.

Glenn Murcutt said, “residential architecture is an architecture the profession has forgotten.” I thought, “wow, here’s a guy who won the Pritzker Prize, an enormous influence using residential architecture in a certain area and yet he has an unbelievable influence on the work we all do everyday in offices, whether it’s large scale or small scale. And the reason why he says it’s so important is that those people that understand residential architecture can begin to understand the scaling of larger architecture to make places people actually want to live in and use, rather than just experience as a graphic.”

contextual cultural economic



Tom Kundig, founding partner of OKA in 1996, covers the importance of residential architecture not only for its conversation with the landscape, but for its contributions to shaping the abilities of designers. As Tom so thoroughly notes, architects able to design for human navigation can translate such human design sensibilities across several scales. Essentially, firms who have never had a hand in residential design often design the larger projects we observe today. Therefore, the largest projects are not only the most removed from what we interact with daily in terms of physical scale, but also from those who understand daily activity most; Residential Architects.

As Tom mentioned earlier in his opening statement, architecture is a 'terrific' profession because it allows for the opportunity to make any subject one that can benefit from design. Engaging craftspeople, looking to experts, and unpacking the risk clients take daily, Tom engages in conversation about human scale and the importance of designers who are in-touch with what it takes to make a space livable. As you'll find below, Tom Kundig, an architect renowned for his consideration for the natural landscape, doesn't restrict his definition of landscape only to the natural landscape. He references the importance of contextual, cultural and economic landscapes as significant drivers in the design process of Olson Kundig Architects.

M: Matthew Darmour-Paul

J: Jill Maltby

D: Deborah Hauptmann

C: Calvin Lewis, FAIA

M: So when researching you, Tom, something we found endlessly amusing, and maybe deeply significant, is the fact that in over 90% of the images found (Google search: Tom Kundig) you're found leaning on, touching up against, almost always relying on your architectures. This relationship between 'the body' and 'the built,' which I think we all value, helped to inform our questions. So, our over-arching question is, Tom, what is happening in the red circles?

T: Well that is actually a terrific question. I never realized this, and it's actually, it's so transparent! Architecture is about touch, really. Have you all read Juhani Pallasmaa's book, "The"...

M: "The Eyes of the Skin?"

T: "The Eyes of the Skin," thank you. He talks about a handshake with the building. Probably one of the most important moments we all experience in any of our projects, and it's one reason why we do an accessory line of things that are more human in scale. It's another reason that a lot of the work we do is residential. Single-family, cabins, multi-family... you know it's the stuff of life. This is really terrific because I'm thinking, "that's great, that I'm leaning, or touching, or moving some piece of architecture." To realize that a building is actually not this magic thing, it's actually a tangible thing. Touching architecture and realizing it's not this dead thing, it's actually alive.

J: With your background in geo-physics, as you mentioned earlier, the active pursuit of other interests is essential. Can you go into a little bit greater depth on how you found architecture through physics?

T: Well that's actually a really good question because my Dad was an architect, so the last thing I wanted to be in the world was an architect. So, I actually avoided architecture. I would hear things around my dad like, "well you know your Dad built our house." And I thought, "no he didn't." There was sort of like a, a pretention about an architect, or a position about an architect that I just didn't buy into as a kid.

I knew I wouldn't be an artist. I knew that I wasn't so self-absorbed that I could be an artist. But I was around an artist that absolutely engaged that part of himself, and still does. But also he was interested in materials, and the fabrication and physics of those materials. So when I was working on those large sculptures with Harold [Balazs]...he would do sculptures that were probably 1,000 – 2,000 pounds, and he would move them just using his smarts...his intelligence...you know, pulleys, ropes, and screws. I was always fascinated with that brilliance...of solving problems and finding them.

But, I also loved the art part of it. As I went into the physics part of it, I realized, a.) I wasn't as clever as I probably thought I was, and b.) it felt kind of like a dead end place for me socially and culturally. I slowly worked my way back to architecture. Architecture is a terrific profession because you're trained to be smart about solving problems and working in groups. You can go into this profession, go virtually anywhere, and be productive. How did I wind up in architecture? I'm not sure, but I went into architecture because I knew what it was about was actually very interesting.

J: Your work seems to celebrate human interaction with architecture. In your opinion, what is the significance of physically altering a space as opposed to pushing a button?



Architecture
is about change

T: Super important, I think. I don't even care if you push a button necessarily, some of these projects, are actually motors and hydraulics. The physical mechanics of moving something using your body as part of that machine is actually a little tricky. A motor or hydraulic actually overpowers any sort of resistance that might happen. We're actually very fragile creatures. We're kind of pathetic, really. The accuracy and the geometries are really important when you're doing it by yourself. I'm fine with pushing buttons, but I think it's more impactful if you do it by your hand or body. Architecture is about change. To me, the architecture that's most interesting is the architecture that moves. You can move it, people will come in and can change the shapes, and it actually ages. It actually gets better with time.

clients are risk takers

D: The relationship for you between body, motion, even light actually, is part of that. So, the temporal sequence. Your background in that type of art can be described as your relationship between body, movement, light, time....is this something that you've thought about? The way you move has got to be informed by that.

T: Learning how to use the equipment around your body to solve a problem, how to do it quickly so that you ...you know it's potentially saving your life... you've got to get better and better at it. The more time you spend on a mountain, the more dangerous it is. That was something I escaped architecture to do. Now when you get a littler older, you realize that what you learned as a kid is so important to how you operate as an adult, and especially in architecture. I'm not smart enough to be an academic, or understand how to describe it and why it happened. I can just look back and go, "oh, you know..." Some of those movements are risky and I'm willing to engage them. That's just my personality. I don't want to risk everything, but I'm not afraid of some risk, and some of my clients aren't. They're unbelievable if you think about what they're risking.

The risk situation is actually really interesting. Sometimes in our office, in every office, in everybody's career they think, "God, if it wasn't for the client we'd really be doing a better job than we are." Sometimes that can be a problem, but sometimes that can be an unbelievable inspiration too. Clients are risk takers. How many in this room would do what a client would do? Ask yourself, would you hire a bunch of a yahoos that you sort of know...not totally, maybe there's some published stuff out there for some award,

and you're risking thousands of dollars of fee, sometimes hundreds of thousands of dollars of fee, sometimes millions, building something that you actually have to work in or live in? That's what a client does. That's an impressive person.

M: With that, on the notion of the client, have you found that clients have come to expect these ridiculous 'gizmos'?

T: The gizmo thing is a really personal thing that just comes from my background and my experiences. I'm influenced by Scarpa, I'm influenced by Kahn...they kind of gave me permission, in a way, to do these things. The gizmo thing becomes a gimmick thing if it is just expected by a client. Sometimes they'll say, "oh, looking forward to our gizmo." That's what you don't want to hear. The mechanics there, they are a way of taking architecture and making it more extraordinary.

J: Can you talk a little bit about Phil Turner's role in your design process?

T: He's like a big kid. You can throw virtually any sort of situation towards him, and he just gets out his little 8 ½ grid of paper, starts drawing these gizmos and gears, and the relationships. He just starts to solve the problem. Like me, he only knows how to communicate on a computer. He doesn't know how to draw [on a computer], obviously. His drawings are fantastic, these funky little diagram drawings. So, it is an iterative process. Phil knows how to make things work mechanically. Sometimes that isn't necessarily maybe the best way to why he likes working with those of us that can't

necessarily solve the problem as precisely and as geometrically as he can. We can come in with our own sense of structure and machining that brings new ideas to him.

M: How do you find that you and the partners of Olson Kundig Architects continue to challenge each other?

T: Terrific question. I don't know if it's clear or not, but my partner's architecture is much different than my architecture. When I joined the firm I recognized, here's a guy during the postmodern years that was absolutely a modernist. He was convinced about his belief in what modernism meant. I almost quit the profession because of postmodernism. But here was little Jimmy Olson out there at all costs. I thought, "that's a partner. Somebody that's willing to lay his neck out on the line and just believe in what he did and persevere." I joined the firm, and it all kind of worked out. We help each other with our work. He's completely generous with my work and I'm generous with his. In fact, sometimes he'll get calls and say, "hmmm...I think you're better with Tom than you will be with me." I do the same thing. So the firm is a 'weirdo-firm'. We are a group of misfits. Basically, we are people that don't fit into corporate firms. Fundamentally there's energy, and a willingness to throw yourself on hand grenades for other people. That's the way the firm works so far. Knock on wood, who knows how much longer...but it's been great.

J: What's next for the firm?

T: We're trying to urge people to find their voice. How do you let people in the office find their voice if they're working for you on projects and you're still out there with your own voice? You're trying to transition people building their career and let them not have to start their own firm. Is there a way to hand over the keys to a firm that actually, at this point, has enough reputation that you can still go out and search

for those cool small projects and cool big projects, and get them, and let people begin to have their own voice and change the voice of the firm. One of the issues for us is whether the firm name continues with the next group. In a way, we don't want it to. There's an identity to the firm maybe at this point, because maybe Jim and I were heads of the pin, at some point we're not there....you don't want to work for somebody dead, if that makes sense to you. You want to work for kind of a live thing, something that actually is evolving. Do we have the answer? No. We just know what we don't want.

J: When looking at the leadership of Olson Kundig Architects, it seems you in particular have a very spiritual connection with the landscape. How do you communicate that connection with your staff of 120 and your partners?

T: You know, I think it's just because the people we hire have that connection with the landscape. And it's not the natural landscape, it's the context landscape. I hope people realize I'm doing buildings in Manhattan. That's a landscape. That's a cultural landscape. That's a natural landscape. I think the people we tend to hire, it's like an intuitive response. You can almost immediately see this intuition in the way a person draws, the way a person thinks through a pencil even through they're unbelievably skilled with a computer.

M: With projects like Art Stable, how do those landscape sensitivities emerge again when you're surrounded by buildings?

T: That's the beauty of architecture; it doesn't necessarily give you the ultimate architectural convergent answer. It's your skill of taking and exploring all of these issues, and then making architecture. Some people will argue there's one best piece of architecture. I don't think that's true. I think everyone comes at it from their own DNA, the client's DNA, the issues that are quantifiable, and the moment in time.