

Defying Definition

Sun Valley architect Jim McLaughlin's award-winning designs stand the test of time

WRITTEN BY DEB GELET • PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROGER WADE

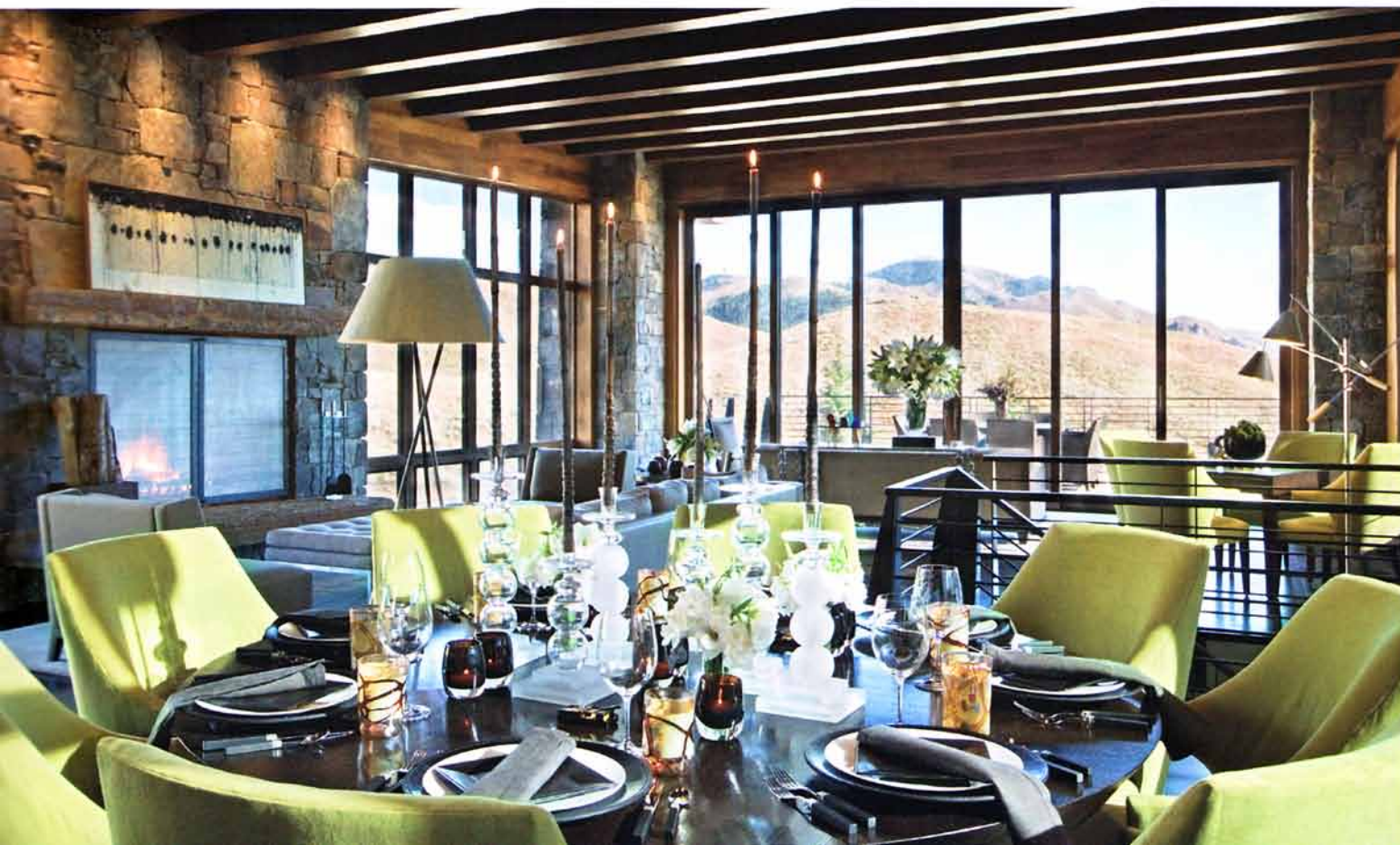
WHEN IT COMES RIGHT DOWN TO IT, the most surprising thing about architect Jim McLaughlin is that he is startlingly unassuming. His easy smile, generous laugh, and warm personal manner speak more of a favorite neighbor than of an internationally lauded, award-winning architect with projects all over the globe. Seriously, shouldn't the guy be harried, at least? Maybe with a faint hint of ego? Although he could be quickly forgiven either of those qualities, McLaughlin seems jarringly unaffected by the way his design career has stacked up. He sees himself simply as a guy interested in discovering architectural solutions to his clients' needs in the most responsible, functional and aesthetically pleasing ways possible.

That approach is serving him extremely well as witnessed by a list of devoted clients, a nicely balanced and happy family

life, continuing design projects around the world and in the mountains he loves, and perhaps most clearly, in his demeanor — calm, relaxed, and open.

"I was always interested in 'resort architecture,' home and commercial design that feels right and functions well for life in the mountains," says McLaughlin in explaining his draw to this small ski town located in the shadow of Sun Valley's Bald Mountain. It becomes quickly obvious, however, that he is well suited to designing for flatlanders and beachcombers as well. His firm, McLaughlin & Associates Architects, has projects all over the American West, in Hawaii, Costa Rica, and New Zealand. His designs range from comfortable and concise private residences to luxurious grand lodges that seduce even the heartiest skiers and fishers.

Below and Right: Instead of a traditional log home ubiquitous of the area, the design was to resemble a Bavarian lodge with large amounts of stonework, big timber, and Old World craftsmanship and charm. Building materials consist of timber, regional stone, log accents and large expanses of glass. A private trout stream runs through the landscaped yard, while indigenous trees provide shade in the summer as well as a screen from traffic.

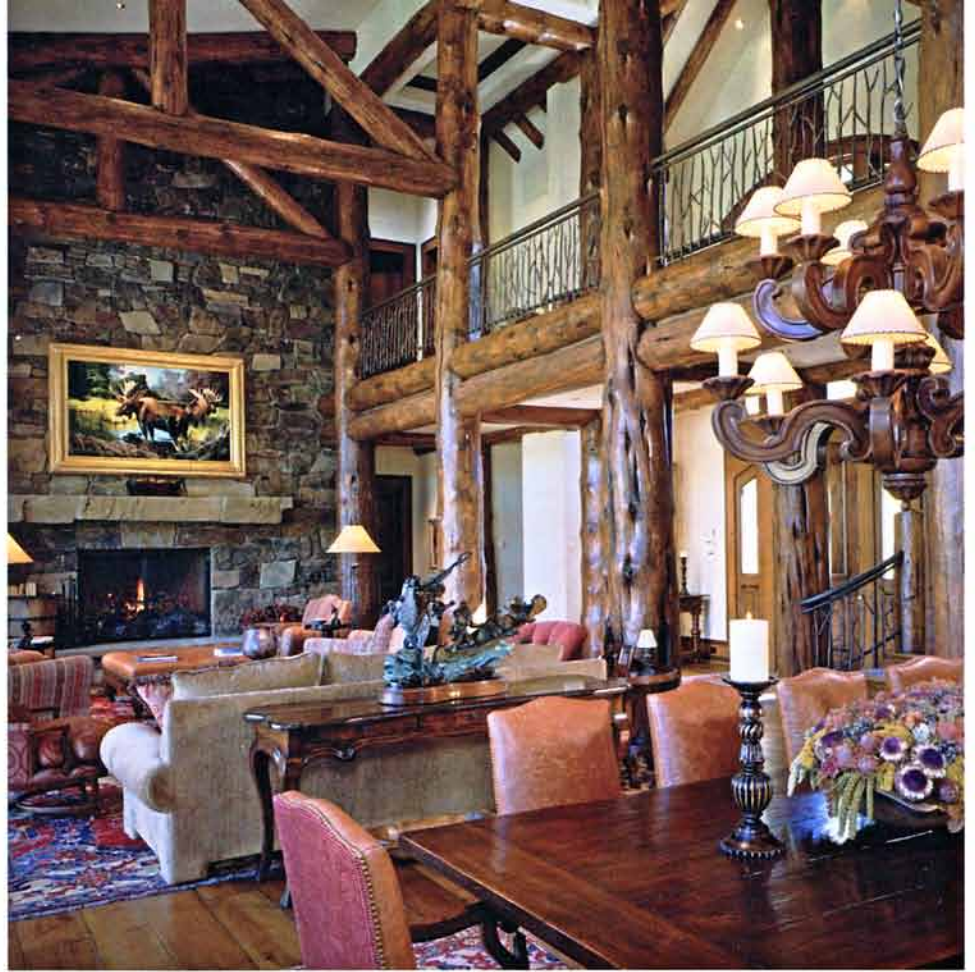




“Well, yes,” he laughs. “It is always nice to win awards, but much of our work is so private, no one will ever see it. That’s really the point for me. I want to find the best solution for the client’s needs and build it in such a way that the project will serve those needs for many, many years beyond the move-in date.”

McLaughlin grew up in what was then a very small city — Mountain Home — about a half-hour drive south of Boise in Idaho’s arid, high desert.

The program was to create a space for a young couple, their children, and guests, which accommodated their activities and took advantage of the beautiful views of the site. Large expanses of floor to ceiling glazed openings not only present the residence with seamless transitions to the outdoors, but it allows for the desired views to the surrounding landscape and gives a sense of openness to the main living spaces of the home. Utilization of native stone and timber tie the home into the local environment and blend the home into its hillside site.



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He mixed some military service with gaining an education through the University of Idaho's architectural school. There, he met and married his wife, Willa, and they moved to Ketchum, Idaho "right out of college." It is a rare thing in the life of today's more nomadic professionals, but Willa and Jim McLaughlin have been in an active part of Ketchum's community life for over 37 straight years.

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"I like to visit clients' homes to gain insight into the things

that might be left unsaid," he explains. "If they're willing to invest their time with me in the preliminary process, the time will be very well spent in the long run. And, I spend a lot of time on their site getting to know everything I can about it — the views, the light, the sounds, the way air flows over it. In this way, I can put together a lot of tangible and intangible information in creating the overall project and the minute details that make it work."

When pressed for his commitment to environmentally friendly or 'green' building, McLaughlin chuckles. "That doesn't feel like a 'new' thing to me. I've always tried to design and build as responsibly as possible. Over 35 years ago, the house I designed for my own family was actually penalized — the appraisal was discounted — for my 'over insulating' it. So, you can see that we as a society have come full circle in our



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ideas. During the fires, we were probably in the most fire-safe building in the county since our home is built of board-formed concrete, and COR-TEN roofing." (The Ketchum/Sun Valley area's highly publicized Castle Rock fire late in the summer of 2007 burned over 48,000 acres and came within mere feet of town. Results of extraordinary emergency management, no injuries were incurred, and no lives or structures were lost.)

"Our firm has always been very conscious of the environment, and we have a lot of local builders and subcontractors that have been great partners on these jobs. It is a process of education for everyone, including clients. Of course, it is harder to do very large homes responsibly and with a more human scale."

Many architects are popularly known for a particular design vernacular, yet McLaughlin & Associates seems to defy definition. As Jim McLaughlin ponders it, "What's the definition of 'favorite'? Our designs are like children, each is unique—a unique combination of client, site, and design goals. My favorite part is gathering the memories of what took place

to reach a particular solution. And, in the end, most of my clients have become very good friends."

McLaughlin has garnered enough experience to consider himself to be of retirement age. His and Willa's children are out of the family nest. Their son, RJ, teaches in an American school in Sao Paulo, Brazil. Their daughter, Jamie, is living in Japan with her husband, a captain in the US Air Force. But, Jim just cannot quite put his drawing tools away.

"I'm having so much fun," he laughs. "Retirement? Why do that if I keep getting these projects I am so fortunate to receive? You know, there's something wrong if you're not having fun in this process of designing and building."

And, for Jim McLaughlin, the proof is in his loyal clients and close-knit family, and...yes, well, there are those impressive national and international design awards he sometimes neglects to mention. **H**

Freelance writer Deb Gelet writes from her home in Hailey, Idaho where she has lived and worked for over 25 years.

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