



Builder/Architect June 1997

**Bruce Olson, “He’s the Man” on Lake Tahoe’s North Shore
by Harvey McLeod**

When I began background research for this month’s cover story on Bruce Olson Construction, I knew of Olson Construction only by reputation. Basically I knew he was a successful builder who has built a bunch of “big, bold and beautiful” lakefront homes on the Lake Tahoe’s North Shore. When I started asking people about Bruce Olson, the repetitious response I got was like an echo through the Sierra Nevada. The resounding comment by most everyone I talked to was “He’s the Man on Lake Tahoe’s North Shore,” followed by a bristling stream of hugely flattering accolades. “He’s the Man” could mean a lot of things. In Bruce Olson’s case, it’s the epitome of greatness.

Like no one else I’ve ever met, Bruce Olson is a man of impeccable character who is actually “living his dream” ...a dream he’s had since childhood. As a youngster, Olson and his family vacationed at Lake Tahoe often. At age 10, upon returning home to the Bay area after one of those family vacations, Olson recalls emphatically telling his parents, “I’m going to live there someday” It was a dream that never wavered, and is his reality today.

Bruce Olson recognizes and appreciates elegance and fine architecture. This, coupled with his innate sense of proportion and balance, his keen eye for detail and perfection, and his decades of hands-on involvement with his building projects, enables him to deliver custom homes unmatched in their beauty, quality and functionality. He utilizes only the highest quality native wood and stone in presenting a wonderfully warm ambiance.

Of Scandinavian heritage, Olson descended from an eight-generation span of carpenters and builders. Growing up, he worked with his father and uncle, which is where he learned the practical side of the building trade. In college, he studied architecture and business, both of which he aptly applies to his trade today. Self-employed since 1974, Olson understands home building better than most. He has an uncanny ability to sort out problems in a way that is often brilliant in its simplicity. His most difficult task is keeping things simple. Olson does that quietly, and quite well. He loves the building trade and is most comfortable with a tool belt strapped on his waist, working along-side his crews. To Olson, the joy is in the construction process, and the end product is always more important than the bottom line.

Anyone who knows Olson will tell you his crews are his most cherished assets. Some of his crew members have been with him since the beginning, and this playful collection of eclectic individuals are spirited in their work, and in their play. Olson surrounds himself with champions of the trade who know how to work hard, and play hard.

They are all cross-trained and able to shuffle around to different sides of projects as the need dictates. This allows Olson to be flexible and more efficient in the flow of work, and also keep his crews working year-round in the seasonal climate. Olson is proud they are able to deliver precise custom woodwork to his projects – custom doors, windows, cabinets, etc. – because they mill almost all their chosen wood in their shop and on job sites.





A devoted father and husband, Olson can often be found enjoying the fruits of this mountain wonderland with his wife Molly (whom he met during a church retreat to Tahoe when they were young) and their four daughters: Molly, 17; Marissa, 13; and twins Blythe and Kirstin, 10. With its four distinct seasons, Olson endeavors to take full advantage of the recreational opportunities and adventures Tahoe affords: snow- and water-skiing, wakeboarding, mountain biking, golf, windsurfing, etc. He is the consummate Tahoeite.

Bruce Olson possesses an enviable lifestyle: he's successful, respected by his peers and community, blessed with a wonderful family, has close relationships with his team of employees, and is living exactly where he wants and at exactly the time he wants. Many people I talked to offered comments about Bruce Olson. Here are just a few. Sausalito architect Kirk Hillman has designed many of the custom homes Olson has constructed over the years. He feels Olson is the best general contractor he has ever worked with. "He's very astute, conscientious and competent, has good aesthetic sense, and knows good quality. He's easygoing-mild and mellow-and I've never seen him angry nor lose control. He's always a joy to work with."

Dale Cox, of Cox and Kromydas Architects in Truckee, also has worked with Olson on many custom home projects over the years and feels they work well together. "It's a comfortable collaboration because he's a true professional as well as a remarkably gifted craftsman. His attention to detail and his finish work are on the highest level. He's very personable and easy to work with because he 'listens' so well."

Gary Waters, of Tahoe City Lumber, has worked with Bruce Olson for 20 years. "The amazing thing about our relationship is that we do business on a handshake. He comes in and tells me what materials he needs, and it's my job to find them. It's not often easy, because he uses only the top quality building materials, and he never cuts corners."

As a private person himself, Olson protects the privacy of his clients. I got the feeling if I asked Olson too much about his clients, he would put on his best Tom Cruise Top Gun impersonation and say, "I can tell you, but then I'd have to kill you." It doesn't go that far, but in a resort area where homeowners relish in their privacy, their anonymity is secure with Olson and his company. I did talk to a couple of homeowners who were very willing to go on record and expound on their relationships with Olson.

Olson built Bruce Purdy's 13,000-square-foot, three-story custom home with an eight-foot basement, just like they wanted. Purdy proudly explains that many have said, "Ours is the most beautiful home on Lake Tahoe...in color, design, interior, everything. And the fireplace is a work of art. Olson did an absolutely wonderful job on our home."

Olson homeowner John Wichland, of Wichland Properties, emphasizes that "Olson has an incredible ability to listen carefully to the customer and understand exactly what the customer wants. He also is able to look at a two-dimensional drawing and visualize it in three dimensions. This is an extremely valuable asset because Olson can see potential problems and options from his 3-D perspective that may not be completely obvious to others when reading a two-dimensional set of drawings. He's a modest man and not flashy. You can always depend on the highest quality from his work.

This partial view of Olson's open kitchen design is an extension of the living room. To maximize the views, few upper cabinets were included. Exquisite Sierra-native granite was polished and gracefully positioned over native sugar pine bases. The complementary Sierra granite used on the floor was flamed to raise the texture. All case work, cabinets, doors and boxed beams were custom-milled from rough stock, native clear sugar pine, while the paneling was crafted from knotty sugar pine.

I don't think anyone at Lake Tahoe assembles glass, stone and wood in a more glamorous fashion than Bruce Olson. Beyond the gorgeous appearance, Olson's assemblage of the highest quality materials in a fastidiously fashion is unmatched by any other builder in the area.

In closing, one thing that really struck an emotional nerve with me was when Susan Kolak, Olson's bookkeeper [and a whole lot more], elucidated on her view of Olson, and what he does.



When I think back on my own childhood,” Kolak recalls, “some of my fondest memories stem from an old family beach house where my cousins and I spent our summers and school holidays. It was always relaxed and familiar, and most of all—fun, fun, fun! Our ages and heights were monitored on the same wall that held our fishing poles. Activities ranged from nature hikes and canoeing to sing-alongs, late-night poker, and wedding receptions. First dates happened there. Puppies were born there. BBQs lasted three days. In all of our lives, that house signified comfort – comfort on all levels. It was a wonderful house and magnet for a family of seven children with their respective spouses and their children, and their children.

“When I think about what Bruce does today, it churns up those fond memories. You see, Bruce Olson builds homes, like the one I remember, ‘for the generations,’ not just for the client. He envisions families enjoying his creations for years and years and years, passed from parents to children to grandchildren, the way it used to be, the way it ought to be. This philosophy is reflected in the warmth that Bruce contributes to each home he builds. He’s a deeply passionate man and pours his heart and soul into the structures he builds. Although he’ll probably never admit it, he’s even been seen caressing his sugar pine shelving when he thinks no one is looking. Bruce Olson truly loves what he is doing, and it shows in his work.”

Is there any doubt that Bruce Olson deserves his well-earned moniker, “The Man” on Lake Tahoe? I think not.

That’s Bruce up front and center. Bruce Olson construction is a balanced collection of eclectic craftsmen, totally loyal to their craft and their employer. Multitalented everyone is cross trained to enable year-round construction with an ambitious and efficient schedule. “Working in an ‘Olson’ home ain’t too shabby either,” admits one of the crew. “Just look at the homes we build – skylights and glass galore, custom doors and windows, hydronic heating, interior sugar pine detail, native granite indoors and out, and a great sound system.”