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From: [CUSTOM HOME January-February 2011](#)

Posted on: January 25, 2011

Custom Builder of the Year

Grand Crew

Jim Murphy and Jay True master the wine country estate.

By [Bruce D. Snider](#)

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Custom Builder of the Year

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Fifteen years ago, JMA built a weekend house for Roberson and his wife on a mountainside near the town of Sonoma. "It was sort of an experiment," says Roberson, who produced only a minimal plan set and worked out details with his builder during construction. "What I learned from working with Jim and Jay was that they were

You can't talk with Jim Murphy and Jay True for long before the conversation turns toward grapes. In California's Sonoma Valley, where their company, Jim Murphy & Associates (JMA), is based, vineyards are everywhere. Doctors, tech industry entrepreneurs, and entertainment executives move here to establish their own labels. Well-off retirees grow grapes instead of grass. In upscale homes, climate-controlled cellars and tasting rooms are as common as ice makers. The influence shows also in the architecture of JMA houses: a robust Mediterranean blend with California farmhouse overtones and notes of San Francisco modernism. Building at the top of this market entails complex projects, sensitive sites, formidable regulations, exacting architects, and demanding clients. And in this environment, no one builds a better house or runs a better company than Jim Murphy and Jay True.

But don't take our word for it. Ask JMA client Darryl Roberson. Roberson is founding principal at STUDIOS Architecture, an international firm whose recent projects include a 28,550-square-foot expansion of MTV Networks headquarters in New York and a 5 million-square-foot renovation of the Pentagon.

right on it. They came up with a lot of great ideas.” When the time came to build a year-round residence on the property (see photos), he says, “It was automatic that I would work with them again.”

JMA president Murphy took a hands-on role in the project, Roberson says. “He knew I would be detailing it out as we went along, so I just stayed ahead of him. He knew I was the architect, but he also knew when he would step in with advice.” At least once, in the case of a stainless steel exterior stair, the builder actually overruled the architect. “Jim said, ‘What you have detailed isn’t good enough; I don’t think it will last over time,’” Roberson remembers. “And it was built already. Jim said, ‘We’re going to pull it out and do it over,’—at his own cost.” Roberson insisted on splitting the expense, but he remains impressed with Murphy’s insistence on getting things right. Moreover, he says, “He understood the design intent. My specifications were thin, but I trusted Jim.”

Murphy, who clearly enjoyed the collaboration, puts it more succinctly: “I love to solve problems.” Tall, lean, and not yet gray at 68, Murphy is famously frugal with words, especially when talking about himself. But an affinity for solving problems explains as well as anything else how a self-educated builder finds himself on equal footing with an architect of Roberson’s stature. Murphy got into construction in 1963, at the age of 21, as a drywall tapper making \$4 an hour, a career choice motivated primarily by the fact that his previous job paid only \$3. But he seems to have shown aptitude for the work from his first day. “The next day,” he remembers, “they gave me a \$1 raise.” By 1966, he was running his own drywall company, and was soon building houses on the side. He sold the drywall company in 1972 to concentrate on spec construction, but the early 1980s recession put an end to that. “It almost put me under,” remembers Murphy, who vowed never again to build with his own money. And so a custom builder was born.

True, now 59, entered the picture in 1983. An engineer by training, he had attended Stanford University—with some help from ROTC—and spent two years in a Navy construction battalion, building recreation centers and ball fields. “It was fun,” he remembers. “It was like contracting, but without the risk and with no budgetary problems.” When he and Murphy met, he was a contract administrator for a large commercial construction company. Murphy says, “I would bug Jay for subs or ideas.” True joined the company in 1987, but not as an employee. “Jim insisted that we be 50/50 partners,” True says, “and that was pretty cool, to me. I had no ambition that that would be the way I’d start.”

True expanded the company’s capabilities in important ways. “We realized that by bringing the systems approach that I had to residential and bringing Jim’s talent for quality to commercial, we could stand out in both venues,” he explains. “It was kind of a yin-and-yang thing: Jim was the craftsman; I knew how to make the numbers add up.” Not that Murphy was out of touch with the books, however. “It was uncanny to me,” True recalls. “He knew the balance in our checkbook to within a couple of dollars. And I signed all the checks. He had been able to run the business completely in his head.”

At 6 feet 6 inches, True is 2 inches taller his partner, but he spends a lot more time hunched over a desk. Murphy says, “Jay calls himself the vice president in charge of paperwork.” Be that as it may, one of his first initiatives was to lead JMA out of the paper age, computerizing its accounting, scheduling, and project management. “Today,” True explains, “the custom builders in the market we’re in are pretty sophisticated.” But with the “shoebox” accounting typical 20 years ago, “the choice was either time-and-materials forever or a fixed price contract.” True’s commercial-grade systems afforded much closer cost control. “That allowed us to offer a guaranteed maximum price contract to our residential clients,” he says. JMA runs the majority of its projects on this model, which offers clients the best features of cost-plus and fixed-price contracts—and the potential to get money back at the end of the job.

The new partnership expanded the company’s reach in commercial work and streamlined its residential operation. It also opened a new market in projects that require expertise in both disciplines, such as resorts and schools. Wineries, which often include industrial, retail, hospitality, and residential functions, have become a company specialty. But JMA’s stock in trade soon became houses that apply design and finish of the highest order, sometimes at a scale—and with systems—more common in commercial buildings. Here in the wine country, it is a segment of the business where standards of scope and technical difficulty are still on the rise. A JMA project under way in upper Napa Valley represents the current high-water mark.

Murphy lowers the window of his Acura SUV and taps an electronic key pad. The gate swings open, and he eases down a long dirt drive. To the left, earthwork contractors have scraped a 13,400-square-foot pad for the

barn that will house the owner's collection of exotic cars. Ahead, the drive climbs steeply to a leveled shelf on the hillside, where a pair of guest houses will open onto a swimming pool. Higher still, perhaps 120 feet above the car barn, foundation work is under way for the main house, a 12,000-square-foot farmhouse-style structure that will surmount the property like a medieval castle. "We're on 62 acres, and yet we're building everything in these little shoebox areas," observes Murphy, perfectly unperturbed. "We can't get to the back of anything; we're constantly building from the front and backing out." The foundation crew has already poured a 15-foot-by-18-foot concrete planter box for a huge native oak that will rise through the main deck, one of several in the plan. "They'll come with a 12-by-12 root ball, 40,000 pounds, each tree," he says. "They'll bring them on a Cozad trailer, and it will take a 200-ton crane to set them. We'll be using 150 tons of counterweight, which will give us a swing radius of 40 feet. It's pretty fun."

There's plenty of fun to go around. With more than 30,000 square feet of buildings—including a caretaker's house and a fire-pump house—the job will occupy two project managers, a project engineer, two full-time superintendents, and a foreman whose primary job will be to verify dimensions on framing and finishes. Project manager Michael Quesenbury says local code officials have informed him that this is the largest construction project under way in Napa County—commercial or residential. The delivery of a 45,000-gallon water tank required a California Highway Patrol escort. (The 12-foot-by-61-foot tank, now buried, is primarily for firefighting; two 10,000-gallon tanks will store domestic and irrigation water.) The site work will require permits from both the California Department of Fish and Game and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. In terms of utilities and permitting, "It's like a subdivision," Quesenbury says. When the last JMA truck pulls out, though, the atmosphere will be more like that of a bucolic ranch—albeit one with a high-resolution, fiber optic-linked surveillance system capable of license plate detection at 100 mph.

Lead superintendent Larry Braughton meets Murphy at the sun-baked clearing of the guest house site. Sun-baked himself—the dry season has been unusually hot this year—Braughton started with JMA 22 years ago, as a finish carpenter. "This is the first time we've had three of us on the site full time to keep track of everything," he says. "We're going to have five buildings going all at once." Asked if the project ever keeps him up at night, Braughton laughs, "It keeps me up all nights. Two o'clock in the morning, that switch goes on." One thing he doesn't worry about, however, is ever getting in trouble for going the extra mile for the client. "I don't have to ask if I can do it. [Murphy and True] want it to be there. They want things done the right way. That makes them happy, and it makes my owners happy."

Back at JMA headquarters, a well-kept but nondescript building near the freeway in Santa Rosa, True describes what it takes to maintain control of both product quality and client experience at this altitude. "Your challenges grow geometrically as your payroll grows," he explains. JMA has grown at an average annual rate of 15 percent, "So we've had to get more systematized, more sophisticated." Three times from the early 1990s to 2005, the company retained management consulting firm FMI to help update its structure, systems, and procedures. "The first came at around \$5 million to \$8 million in volume," True says. "At that point, Jim and I still had our hands in everything; one of us knew every job. We had to make a deliberate attempt to let go. Not just to respect the people we had working for us, but actually to give them some rope." At that stage, the partners wrote formal job descriptions and established regular project manager meetings and a separate, monthly meeting for project managers and superintendents.

"The next hurdle was when we broke \$12 million to \$15 million," True continues, a point at which the company needed to document its operating system. "We had to create process maps," he says. "I had a schematic process model, but it wasn't really integrated into one big whole." True codified company procedures in a manual titled "An Employee's Guide to the Way Things are Supposed to Work," which remains holy writ on matters ranging from hiring, salaries, and benefits, to estimating, billing, and the company's safety program (see "No

No Accident

Construction has always been a dangerous business, but the issue became personal for Jim Murphy and Jay True when one of their carpenters took a bad fall. "I spent about six hours with his wife at the hospital," remembers Murphy grimly. "It was about a year before he came back to work." The accident "terrified us," says True, but the partners channeled their shock into an effective focus on safety that their company, Jim Murphy & Associates (JMA), has sustained to this day.

JMA conducts regular safety inspections, holds safety demonstrations at its regular staff meetings, invests generously in safety equipment and training, and will have a subcontractor employee pulled from a job for failing to comply with safety procedures. Thrice-yearly company picnics include job site "vignettes," where employee teams win prizes by flagging the most safety violations. Employees earn a \$50 gift card for each quarter completed without an accident; if the entire company is accident free, the award is doubled.

More important than any one program, however, is the pervasive message that safety is a priority. Over the years, JMA has employed varying tactics to teach and promote safety. "There's always been an attenuation effect," True says. "What we've found most important is just constantly reinforcing that Jim and I really care." The formula is working. In 2009, JMA won an NAHB Safety Award for Excellence. Better than that, True says, "We've just had our fourth [insurance] policy year without an

Accident” sidebar) .

accident.”

By 2005, he says, “we were breaking \$30 million to \$40 million, and we had to start acting like a big-time contractor. We decided to become more strategic about our future. We needed a farm system.” To recruit talent, the company now seeks interns from colleges with construction management programs. A relatively new position, assistant project manager, supports the company’s ever-larger projects and serves as a stepping stone for the next generation of project managers. Murphy and True invite employees to audit client and subcontractor meetings that are, technically, above their pay grade, then conduct post-mortems to determine what they’ve learned about the company ethos.

Through three decades of growth and change, that ethos seems to have remained remarkably constant. For that, True credits his partner. “If there’s management and leadership,” he says, “I’m management, and Jim’s leadership.” Project manager Quesenbury concurs. “Jim’s kind of a bigger-than-life person,” he says. Once a competitive amateur tennis player, Murphy now spends his weekends building and racing 4,000-horsepower top fuel dragsters—and winning. Despite such extracurricular heroics, though, Murphy’s influence derives much more from his approach to his work, and from a moral code that places equal value on excellence and fair dealing. “You see how hard he’s working to make it right,” True says, “and you don’t want to let him down. It’s leadership by example. You see it in everything he does, so you think, ‘This must be the standard.’”

Murphy is not a big talker, but he makes every word count, and his employees collect and repeat his sayings like Zen koans. On job sites, they wear T-shirts emblazoned with the words “Murphy’s Law,” followed by a quotation: “On a JMA job, perfect is barely good enough,” “If it isn’t fair, it isn’t right,” “The more you plan at the start, the less you fix in the end,” “Monsters in the closet never get smaller. Deal with them now,” or “We work with people we can trust, and they have come to trust us.” It is worth noting that these are not slogans aimed at marketing the company; they are a means of building character and spreading wisdom within the company. Character and wisdom take time to develop, and JMA has had more than three decades to build up its store of both. But in business leadership, as in wine, age does not always yield excellence. Oenophiles speak, instead, of “maturity,” the point at which a wine reaches its full potential. In the field of custom building, Jim Murphy, Jay True, and their company do more than exemplify maturity; they define it.

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