

# Luxury Pools



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Skip Phillips



Gene Brown

# Pooled Visions

Skip Phillips and Gene Brown discuss the benefits of working in partnership to construct exceptional swimming pools that surpass the industry's standards.

For the past seven years, world-renowned watershape designer Skip Phillips, owner of Questar Pools and Spas in Escondido, Calif., and Canadian pool builder Gene Brown, owner of Valley Pool and Spa in Kelowna, British Columbia, have been putting their talented minds together to create stunning pools for upscale clients throughout Canada. We spoke with Phillips and Brown about the success of their professional partnership and gained insight into the relationship between a pool designer and pool builder.



Photo courtesy of Valley Pool and Spa Inc.

**You each design and build pools through your own companies. What motivated the two of you to work together?**

**Skip Phillips:** Gene started coming to our classes at the Genesis 3 school and I got to know him. We started out with him sending me plans for projects generated in Canada and I would just consult on the hydraulic and mechanical issues. There was one project, however, on which an architect and a homeowner had collaborated. Gene sent me the plans to work out the mechanical solutions, but the problems were much more severe than that. It had a vanishing edge surge tank that was too small plus the scale and placement of the pool was completely wrong. I told Gene, "This pool is so ugly it doesn't deserve to be built." The homeowners then flew me up to their property, and after we toured the site, I offered them some sketches, which eventually became their pool.

**Gene Brown:** That project was a real turning point, and we just went from there. Our goal [at Valley Pool and Spa]

has always been to be the best at what we do and to try and make things better if we can. Working with Skip has opened more doors for us to do that, and it has totally brought us up to another level.

**How do you select the projects that the two of you will collaborate on?**

**SP:** Gene will usually have three or four appointments set up and we'll show the clients a collective portfolio of some of the work I've done in other parts of the world as well as our collective designs that we have done in Canada. Then I'll sketch up some ideas of how I would perceive their project looking, and they will decide whether or not to accept my design. But we have a fairly strong batting average; I'd have to say that probably 70 to 80 percent of our appointments turn into design assignments.

**Today, it's common for homeowners to have a pool designer and a pool builder for their project. What should homeowners look for when pairing a designer and builder?**

**GB:** The homeowner needs to establish a nice cooperative situation. They need to look at the whole package; the quality of the design and of the construction. Make sure they have the right designer and builder and that everybody is keeping in mind everything else that's happening around the yard. Everyone should be working together.

**SP:** They should look for an educational background as well as work product. Collaborating with people that have a similar educational background just makes the whole process much easier. Gene and I have similar training. He went through the entire Society of Watershape Designers just like I did, so the benefit is that we're on the same page. We play off each other's strengths. Gene's shells are unlike anything I had come across before. Gene has taken this "cast-in-place" technique to an entirely different level. In the United States, it's common to have shotcrete projects, but I was just amazed at how tight the tolerances are [with cast-in-place concrete] and the quality of the construction that he does. We've



Photo courtesy of Valley Pool and Spa. Photography by Steven Tabler. Photography Designed by Judy Phillips. Quartz Pool and Spa, Inc. Construction by Gene Brown, Valley Pool and Spa

actually decided to do a poured-in-place project in Southern California because the site was a good candidate for that particular technique. My team in San Diego got on a conference call with Gene and we asked him questions about details on poured-in-place. The highly technical information he provided enabled us to do a poured-in-place project.

**Gene, what encouraged you to use this technology to construct your pools?**

**GB:** What we found was that, with shotcrete and other materials you end up with more imperfections; it's harder to truly control quality when forming pools. With cast-in-place you're much more able to manage the quality and get a better vessel. You form all the walls the same as you would a high-rise building, but the best part is that you can curve the form into whatever shape you want. What you form is exactly what you get at the end, and providing you brace it right and form it right, nothing will ever move.

**How much do you collaborate during the design process?**

**GB:** We interact constantly, and because Skip and I work well together, we are able to achieve our desired results. We have to work with the natural environment, specifically the freeze-thaw cycle, and how we're going to deal with certain materials if the customer should want to choose things like stone or glass tile on the bottom of the pool. We're doing a project where the materials cost is over \$100,000. When

we start working on that level, we have to take into account what's going to happen during the freeze-thaw of our environment and how we're going to keep the materials from thawing and breaking. We do a lot of things throughout the design process because as soon as a client chooses to go one path, like with a perimeter overflow, we've got to take a look at how we are going to keep that from freezing,

**Is it important for a designer and builder to communicate during the design stage?**

**SP:** If I'm not at home in California, when I travel to other places the homeowner typically pays for me to come out and work with them on the design. I may not know who the candidates are for the build process until we're done. But when Gene and I are on site and we're reacting to clients and sketching, that's where the synergy comes in. He comes up with solutions I may not have considered. There was one project we did where we had an idea of how the appointment might go, but when we got to the site it looked like a bomb had gone off in the backyard—there was this huge crater. It turned out the soil conditions were such that Gene was going to have to dig down further, but instead of inserting piles and grade beams, he decided to insert a room below the pool to house all the equipment. I realized that I wasn't viewing things as expansive as I should have. There was an opportunity there that I hadn't considered and he came up with it, he executed it, and it was cool.



Photo courtesy of Valley Pool and Spa

#### **Is there anything else you've learned working with Gene?**

SP: I've learned a lot about different methods of heating—like geothermal heat transfer systems—to keep water-in-transit details from freezing in Canada's cold-weather climate. I wouldn't have learned any of that in Southern California. One of the projects we did has actually changed the entire premise of pool design in Canada; now the Canadians are completely rethinking winterization. When we're having a conversation with the client, we'll discuss whether we want to build the pool around having a cover or just keeping it warm enough to keep it from freezing and leaving the cover off. Their first question is, "Well, isn't that expensive?" But winterizing a pool isn't free. You have the expense of winterization plus starting it back up in the spring—and then there's always the potential for damage during the winter.

#### **Do you find there is any difference when working on a project together compared with the separate projects you do through your companies?**

GB: I enjoy working with Skip and appreciate the international flair that he brings to his designs. It's also nice because I can get a different perspective. I might think a little bit differently and have different perspectives on details, so I draw them out and bounce them around. I may have the right one, or he may have the right one at the time. It's nice because it's not competitive, it's just a matter of taking a look and finding out what's going to

work best environmentally and for the customer.

The advantage of working with Skip is that he's traveled all around the world and has seen different details, so I know what's possible and can start at a higher level. The more we see and learn, the more we can use those details to make things better—and that's what we want to do, make it as perfect as possible.

#### **What advice do you have for homeowners when selecting a pool designer or pool builder?**

SP: Like the saying goes, "For anything worth having one must pay the price." Most of the pool images that homeowners see are simply the pool guy that was the low bidder on somebody else's idea, which means he was willing to degrade the project the most. That's hardly a criteria to pick a pool builder or designer. If you look at the educational background and if you look at their work product, then you're going to have a much better feel for what's available. ♦

**Skip Phillips** is president of Questar Pools and Spas in Escondido, Calif., and is well known as a vanishing-edge and hydraulics expert. To learn more about Questar Pools and Spas, read the company's profile on page 68.

**Gene Brown** is the owner of Valley Pool and Spa in Kelowna, B.C., Canada. He is a certified and accredited member of the Society of Watershape Designers and specializes in vanishing edges, perimeter overflows, and other challenging designs for residential and commercial clients.