



The bold, emphatically forward-looking architecture that transformed museums has spread to schools, churches and bedrooms. It's often dazzling, but can you live in it?

# Tomorrowland

A special issue on architecture.



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On the cover: Ludwig Kuttner and Beatrix Ost in their New York *pied-à-terre*. Photograph by Lars Tunbjork for The New York Times.

This page: To get to the medieval center of Toledo, Spain, you need to ride a lightning bolt, in the form of an escalator carved into a hill. It was designed by the Catalan architects José Antonio Martínez Lapena and Elías Torres Tur. Photograph by David Cardelus.

### >> This Week on the Web

Magazine articles are online all week at The New York Times on the Web, nytimes.com/magazine, or on America Online. Keyword: NYT Magazine.

**Exclusively online:** Audio slide show of modern architecture; Arthur Lubow narrates. • Web pulse: Would you rather live in a futuristic house or a Victorian? • Forum: What have you seen looking into other people's windows?



Suburban Houses

Phoenix	Built 1996-present	Five houses
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In a city of subdivisions and bone-dry strip malls, the emergence of ambitious architecture is a minor miracle.

Oasis

By Jonathan Dee      Photograph by Timothy Hursley



Phoenix has been part of the United States for less than a hundred years, and like many young American cities, much of it resembles a debris field from

the war for the corporate dollar. The skyscrapers that sit downtown might as well have been brought in by helicopter from other states, while the explosive sprawl of residential neighborhoods surrounding it is largely divided between gated, walled golf course communities and functional ranch-style homes with all the design charm of walk-in refrigerators, which in an important sense — this is the desert, after all — is exactly what they are.

But Phoenix also has a couple of things going for it that most other American cities don't. One is a grand, popular tradition of high-concept architecture traceable to the city's original urban visionary cum tourist attraction, Frank Lloyd Wright. And the other is a former mayor named Terry Goddard (now the state's attorney general), who in the 1980's dared to argue that unchecked growth might not always be in a modern city's long-term interest. He said that a truly great city needed a public face, and to that end persuaded the citizens of Phoenix to pass a billion-dollar bond issue, a quarter of which was set aside in the unprofitable name of great civic architecture.

"A lot of the public debate at that time was about quality-of-life

Phoenix, a city that dares to dream architecturally, seen from the Tocker home.



My children's friends come over to play, and when they leave, they ask me, 'Can I please come back here again?'" Gretchen Freeman, owner of a house by Tod Williams and Billie Tsien



issues,” says Ron McCoy, interim dean of the College of Architecture and Environmental Design at Arizona State University. “Godard was committed to urbanism and a kind of lifestyle that was clearly not on the radar screen before he got into office.” By the late 90’s, downtown Phoenix had an art museum newly expanded by two New York architects, Tod Williams and Billie Tsien; the Arizona Science Center, built by Antoine Predock; and, most spectacularly, a new main branch of the Phoenix Public Library, designed by Will Bruder, a structure that quickly took its place, in McCoy’s words, as “one of the best public buildings in any city in the country.” Similarly ambitious projects — most notably Richard Meier’s massive, light-drenched, ecologically innovative Sandra Day O’Connor United States Courthouse — followed in their wake.

It would be stretching the point to say that downtown Phoenix has been transformed. Bruder himself describes the new buildings as “trophies, like isolated objects in a desert landscape. You see one, then you get in your car and drive three miles and see another one.”

Still, the idea embodied so triumphantly by these high-profile public buildings — that great design is itself a quality-of-life issue — seems, two decades after the original debate, to have gotten into the cultural groundwater of this growth-oriented city. Here and there in the residential neighborhoods that still race one another toward the mountains, a number of private homes have sprung up that are both formally audacious and faithful to the geologically paced verities of the desert itself. In a city where no one ever seems to get out of the car, they’re enough to make you pull over and take a look.

GRETCHEN FREEMAN, a former director of Phoenix’s public art program, met Williams and Tsien during their work on the museum project. A few years later, when she and her husband, Alan Silverman, decided to build a house of their

*Jonathan Dee is the author of the novel “Palladio.” He last wrote for the magazine about artificial grass.*



**The Freeman-Silverman House, 1996** Tod Williams and Billie Tsien designed a house that gathers around itself the way the desert vegetation gathers around the arroyo — and blurs the line between indoors and outdoors.



**The House of Earth and Light, 2000** Although this house, designed by Marwan Al-Sayed, is in every way a work of art, it was relatively inexpensive to build: proportioned like a railroad car, it is made of poured earth, a sort of contemporary adobe.

own, they called them on a whim.

“At first, the desert can seem featureless,” Tsien says. “But if you give it time, it reveals itself.” The north Phoenix site seemed somewhat short on character until they walked farther in and noticed an arroyo, or wash, a slight depression in the terrain. During the monsoonlike desert rainstorms, runoff from the nearby Squaw Peak Mountain range can fill the normally bone-dry wash to a height of two feet. Denser, more various vegetation — mesquite, brittlebush, green-barked paloverde trees — tends to gather around a wash, as do jack rabbits, roadrunners and coyotes. The finished house gathers around the wash in a similar way: two cool, open, rectangular, inward-facing wings are connected by an indoor bridge with a cutout window in its floor.

Freeman says that their requirements were simple: straightforward materials, lots of glass, “no big distinction between indoor and outdoor space.” For the kind of high-art home that is photographed all the time, its design is remarkably easygoing and livable. And some of its most personal details grow out of another point of connection with the architects: they’re parents too. “My husband always said he wanted to live in a house with a secret room,” she says, and thus there is a room off the kitchen with a hidden door and small cutout windows peeking into other rooms, predictably staked out by the couple’s two children. Their son’s bedroom also has a window running along the wall at floor level, known as “the bunny window.” “Kids love this house,” Freeman says. “My children’s friends come over to play, and when they leave, they ask me, ‘Can I please come back here again?’”

Ambitious architecture also has its uses as a matchmaking device. When a longtime friend of Freeman’s named Lisa Sette, who owns an art gallery in next-door Scottsdale, showed signs of getting serious with a man she was dating named Peter Shikany, Freeman moved things along by suggesting they have a look at another extraordinary recent home — unexpectedly for sale — one street over from hers. Its architect, Marwan Al-Sayed (who worked for Williams



**The Tocker House, 2002** Wendell Burnette built a house, near right, that comes alive at night. **Quadrant House, to be built** Diller + Scofidio solved the problem of a site with too many views, bottom right, by taking them all in. **The Byrne House, 1998** Will Bruder worked with the contours of the desert, instead of against them, and came up with a design, opposite, in which there isn't a wall that's perpendicular to the roof and hardly one that's parallel to another.

and Tsien on the museum expansion), has dubbed it "the House of Earth and Light"; it is, as the name suggests, quite self-consciously a work of art, and yet the most inspiring thing about it, in the context of high-end architecture, is that it was relatively, even attainably, inexpensive to build. (The original owners were firefighters; the husband, a skilled metalworker, helped defray costs further by doing much of the construction himself.) The house, whose exterior dimensions are roughly that of a giant railroad car, is made of poured earth, a technology that allows soil from the building site itself to be mixed with water and cement and set into forms; in other words, a sort of contemporary adobe.

For its most impressive feature, though, Al-Sayed updated a signature technique of Wright's: the house's roof, startlingly, is made entirely of fabric. Sloped like a tent, its design comprises three layers: one for shade, one for waterproofing and one for insulation. Shadows — primarily from the roof's own framework — twist and lengthen and play out overhead all day long. It's a genuinely inspiring effect; in a city where so much construction seems predicated on the idea of making you forget you're in the desert at all, here the play of light and shade is always with you. You're sheltered from the climate without ever losing contact with it.

Of course, there are times — August comes to mind — when the thrill of contact with the desert climate may seem somewhat blunted. And from the beginning, the three-year-old house has been dogged by what's known in the architecture biz as "performance issues"; the insulation layer of the roof is just now being installed, for instance (Al-Sayed says it was part of his original design, left unbuilt by the former owners), and Sette and Shikany are making a few other modifications with Al-Sayed's assistance. But if the high-tech shade doesn't cool the house as much as advertised, they're uncon-

cerned; air-conditioning, they say, is a fact of Arizona life no matter what kind of roof you're under. Having moved in just two months ago, they're in the honeymoon phase with a home whose idiosyncrasies are still revealing themselves. "The other night, we had our first really big storm," Shikany says. "The sound of the rain on the roof — well, you know, it's not unlike living in a tent. It's really exciting." As for Sette, she and Freeman have commemorated their delight at being neighbors by clearing the brush to create a footpath between their two properties, which they have named, in apparent tribute to Al-Sayed, the Path of Dirt and Rocks.

WENDELL BURNETTE is a native of Nashville who came to Phoenix straight out of high school in 1980 to study at Wright's Taliesin West studio. Though a local fixture now, he still brings — like many non-natives — a fresh eye to those aspects of the desert landscape that are most challengingly alien. "A piece of geology activated by light" is how he refers to the desert, and out of this view has grown an aesthetic of epic minimalism, on prominent display in his house for Brad Tocker, which brings a bit of Donald Judd to a modest residential neighborhood called Sunnyslope.

Backed up against the Phoenix Mountain preserve, the home consists of two basic forms: at the rear of the site, the house itself, a deep rectangle edged in black, with one recessed glass wall facing out over the valley, staring straight out at the downtown skyline with the frankness of a surveillance camera; and, at the bottom of the slope, a brightly lighted pool surrounded by high walls. The house and the pool are connected by a walkway that's as long as the site allows. "I wanted that idea of resort living," Burnette says. "If you want to take a swim, you leave the house, throw a towel over your shoulder and stroll down to the pool."

The client has a demanding career,



and for that reason Burnette conceived it as a "life-after-work house," a place activated by darkness. Contextually noteworthy during the day, at night it achieves the purity of a monument; as we watch this transition from the street below, Burnette talks about his own debt to conceptual art. Of course, there has always been a certain control-freak aspect to those titanic, elemental Earth Art projects. And as Burnette — who has the ponytail and the self-esteem surplus characteristic of installation artists everywhere — wishes aloud that the people living in his house hadn't put those big ficus trees near the window (they mess up, he says regretfully, "the apparent thinness of light supporting space"), you see how high-concept residential architecture can become a kind of shotgun marriage.

IF THE CURRENT MOMENT in Phoenix architecture has a dean, it

would have to be Will Bruder. He came to Phoenix in 1969 to work for the utopian, ecologically-minded Paolo Soleri, who worked for Wright; over the years, Burnette, the Tucson-based Rick Joy and many others have come through Bruder's studio. While he has been working in his own eclectic, landscape-sensitive vein for decades, the public library — bellying out toward Central Avenue in an organic, mesalike line, lighted from within by an elaborate series of lensed skylights that track the sun's movement across the sky — is the structure most likely to vault him into the pantheon.

His reputation as a genius presumably reassured Bill and Carol Byrne on the day he came to look over the site of their proposed home in north Scottsdale. "The first thing he did was to bend down and pick up two big handfuls of dirt," says Bill Byrne, a general con-



tractor. "He was here for all of about 15 minutes before he said he had it, he knew what the house would look like."

The site is steep and asymmetrical, set in the cooler, cactus-studded, abruptly shifting terrain of the high desert and framed by the sharp summits of the mesa behind it. "The other architects who'd been out here, they all wanted to talk about how first you'd need to flatten out a portion of the hillside and then build on the flat part," Byrne says. Bruder's house angles right along with it. There isn't a wall in the house that's perpendicular to the roof, and few are even parallel to the wall opposite.

From the foot of the stairs, the view of the house is almost vertiginous; walls lean toward one another, passages open and close; and Carol Byrne's own color schemes create a kind of dialogue of opposites as well. The roof, which fol-

lows the grade of the hill, is attached to the house's long central concrete-block wall by seven brackets, so that light (just as in the public library) seems to spill over the tops of the walls. The master bedroom, walled on two sides by glass ("No neighbors," Bill Byrne says, "so no window treatments"), takes in a working ranch at the bottom of the hill and several more miles of landscape beyond that. The exterior walls are covered with copper sprayed with ammonium sulfate to give them the less shiny, more aged color of the mountains themselves.

EVIDENCE THAT THE wave hasn't yet crested in Phoenix may be found in the scheduled groundbreaking this August for a house designed by those most *au courant* of New York architects, Diller + Scofidio. Their Quadrant House, on an almost ridiculously picturesque site facing the city from high

on Camelback Mountain, seems in part a solution to the problem of having too much to look at all at once. A glass wall bisects the house, through which the living area looks out over the city; the master bedroom faces through the same wall in the opposite direction, back into the mountainside, composed of pink granite. A swimming pool is suspended over a downstairs patio.

Of course they wouldn't be Diller + Scofidio if some signature perversity didn't sneak into the final design; thus, outside the master bedroom will sit an utterly incongruous 25-foot-by-30-foot lawn, with a pop-up movie screen in it, so that the homeowners, Scofidio says, smiling, "can watch westerns, there against the actual Western landscape."

To be moved to such cleverness by the Southwest's exoticism raises questions of a cultural carpetbagging of the rich and artsy as an element of the Phoenix design boom

— questions that trouble Bruder, a longtime native, not at all. "The key to Arizona has always been people coming out here and divesting themselves" of certain comforts, certain expectations, he says; people "ready for a change, ready to find an oasis and a retreat in an alien place."

"Well, second homes, winter homes," McCoy says more pragmatically, "that is a big piece of it. You get an influx of sophisticated people, they get hooked up with an innovative young architect and they're both willing to experiment." But this particular moment in Phoenix, he says, is also about a local culture coming of age, about the maturation of a certain level of society. "As with most cities, there's a kind of inner circle, and eventually that circle begins to grow. But here it's still a small one. That's one of the most interesting things about Phoenix. It's still so young." ■