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## Interview

by  
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# WILL BRUDER

AN ARCHITECT REDESIGNING ARIZONA PIECE BY PIECE.

Architect William Bruder's studio is easy to miss. The collection of small buildings seem to be more part of the desert than members of civilization. At first glance the New River studio resembles a shack, a water tank and a cement bunker that sit on the side of a hill.

But that's exactly the effect Bruder was shooting for when he built the remote studio more than 25 years ago in the desert community north of Phoenix. The buildings that make up his studio are constructed of cement, rusty iron pipes, steel and glass. The simplicity of the design blends with the desert, while providing a comfortable and functional interior.

For Bruder, 52, architecture is about more than designing aesthetically pleasing buildings. Architecture is about designing buildings that fit in with their environment, are functional and reflect their occupants. That's been Bruder's philosophy for the past 33 years, in which he has designed some 430 buildings, from the Phoenix Burton Barr Central Library to the Deer Valley Rock Art Center to numerous private residences.

"I find the public buildings I have done to be more rewarding, but each design is new and exciting," Bruder said. "I look at every place individually and ask questions about the surroundings and try to incorporate that into the design. I like for my designs to be functional and poetic."

Formally trained as a sculptor, Bruder came to Arizona in the 1970s and worked briefly with Paolo Soleri of Cosanti fame. He soon branched off to form his own studio, and has gained international fame since for his use of natural materials and his attention to making buildings part of their surroundings. He is now considered one of the top architects in Arizona and among the best in the country.

Private residences launched the career of Bruder. Today, in the shadow of such achievements as the Central Library and the Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art, Bruder still enjoys designing buildings for private use.

"All people are unique. I delve into their lives to discover their needs and reveal their souls. My design should celebrate who the owner is," he said. "When I'm done, people will say I know more about them than their psychologists. People will see a reflection of themselves in their design."

Bruder's philosophy differs from architectural great Frank Lloyd Wright, who designed buildings his way, from the carpet and lighting fixtures to the dining room table and sofa. Wright often reprimanded occupants of his homes for moving a chair or replacing a coffee table. Bruder said he takes a different approach.

"I have to accommodate my clients. They are making a big commitment when they ask me to design their home," he said. "It's their home and I have to design it in a way that allows them to take ownership."

The sense of ownership and feeling of community are important to Bruder, and he takes both factors into consideration when drafting new buildings. One problem that plagues Phoenix, Bruder said, is the open space within the city that prevents a strong feeling of community to mature. By requiring in-fill development, Bruder said Phoenix could tie neighborhoods together and transform this sprawling oasis into a true community.

"There is a strong tradition of modernism in Arizona," Bruder said, adding that the Valley is home to several Frank Lloyd Wright buildings. "That tradition is being lost in the neighborhoods with garages lined up like soldiers along the setback. The only thing that differs are the paint and stucco."



In-fill development is part of a larger problem Phoenix must overcome, according to Bruder. For more than 20 years, the city has been approving new construction with no real plan for how to control growth. The last major change in planning strategy occurred in the 1970s when the villages were formed. Since then, development has been almost haphazard, uncontrolled and nearly reckless.

"The city is slowly coming alive. It will take a bureaucracy with courage to limit the torrid expansion," he said, adding that Portland and Salt Lake City have both been aggressive in controlling and limiting urban sprawl. "We can't form a rich community until we fill in the empty lots."

Bruder said his own contributions to the community is found in his public buildings: the Central Library, Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art, Temple Kol Ami in Scottsdale and the soon-to-be-built Liberal Arts building on the campus of Arizona State University in Tempe.

"I'm most proud of the Central Library — which I built for \$98 a square foot — not just because of the scale, but because it is a centerpiece for the community," Bruder said, adding the building uses materials from around the world, including copper from Germany. "It's distinct and celebrates the place. Like it or not, it makes you think."

With the Bruder name comes a certain style, but don't call him a regionalist — he has buildings across the nation to his credit, including a library in Jackson, Wyo. and public facilities in Boston and Montana. Bruder buildings, experts say, are different and unique while remaining practical. Donations and the reputation of the new Scottsdale Museum could be bolstered by the selection of Bruder as the designer of the facility. As one California museum director recently said: "He's respected throughout the profession and among museum people. And that first step sends a signal to the community and collectors that this new museum values creativity."

The art of what is architecture is what drives Bruder to try new ideas and look for alternative approaches. From his use of copper, metal shutters and fabric sails on the outside of the Central Library, his buildings are far from traditional.

"Almost 100 percent of the people who come in here think this is so impressive. Most visitors say they wish they had a library like this in their home town," said library volunteer Evelyn Feffer, who works at the Directions Desk at the Central Library.

"But I think it's ugly," she added, lowering her voice. "I'm a traditionalist. I think a library should have dark, wood-paneled walls and look like the Library of Congress in Washington."

Visitors to the Central Library trek through low-ceiling tunnels before emerging into the lobby with exposed elevator shafts and a reflection pool. Natural light is brought in from skylights in the roof of the five-story building.

"This city has the potential to become one of the great cities of the new century," Bruder said, giving much of the credit to former Phoenix mayor Terry Goddard. "There is no place in America where more impressive things are happening."

While few dispute that Bruder is good at what he does and that his designs have contributed to a revitalized emphasis on modern buildings, some local architects claim the ego of Bruder is larger than some of his designs. And Bruder admitted he knows how to use the media to his advantage, a lesson he learned after public outcry over the redesign of the Cholla Library at Metro Center.

Bruder said he didn't inform the public well enough about the design, both in and out, and as a result, the building was met with a good deal of negative reaction. Today, however, the Cholla Library, which critics say looks like a metal barn, is considered one of the better examples of modern architecture in Phoenix. Bruder says he learned from the Cholla Library incident that using the media and selling his buildings to the public have become part of designing non-traditional buildings.

"People come from all over the world to see the Cholla Library today," Bruder said. "You have to educate the public if you want them to accept changes, especially with public buildings."

Local designer Michael Johnson, who hired a fresh-from-high-school Bruder as an office assistant in the 1960s, said that while Bruder's designs are good, his attention to the media can detract from the true art of his architecture. Johnson compared Bruder to Wright in the way he uses the press to generate fame for his designs and bolster his ego.

"On a global scale, his work is excellent. The Central Library is one of the most significant buildings to happen in Arizona in a number of years. It is a major accomplishment," Johnson said. "If you design a piece of architecture and it doesn't get an emotional reaction it's just a building. Bill (Bruder) learned the lessons of PR in order to sell his buildings to the public. He is far better at PR than he is a designer," Johnson added.

Bruder, however, sees himself as a leader in the modernistic architecture movement in the country.

"I do consider myself to be a leader and a visionary," he said. "My agenda is that it's important to do the art that expands people's possibilities, makes them think and helps them to enjoy their lives. That's what architecture is all about. We are all afraid of change, but those changes make us think."

