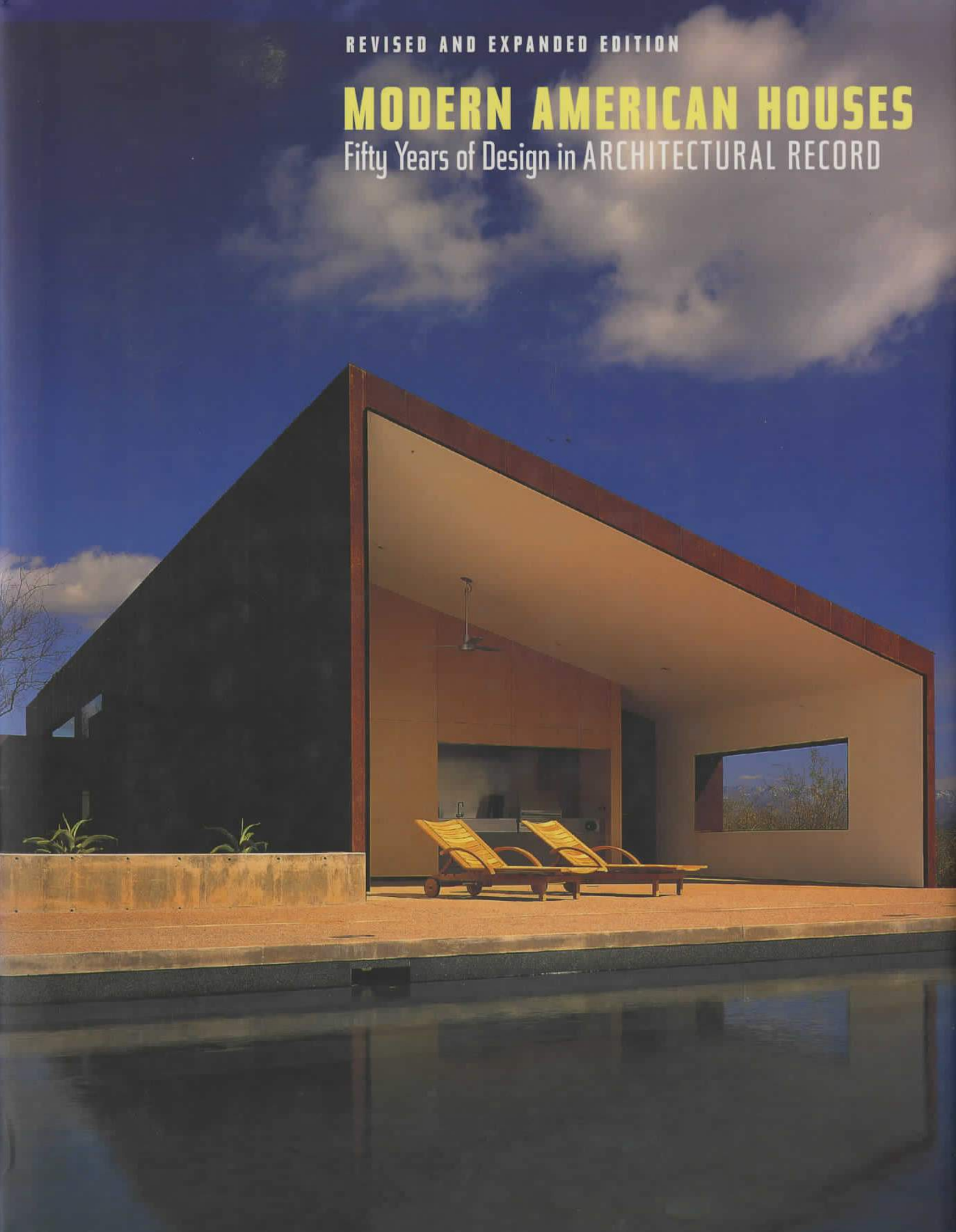
REVISED AND EXPANDED EDITION

MODERN AMERICAN HOUSES

Fifty Years of Design in ARCHITECTURAL RECORD



Modern American HOUSES

Fifty Years of Design in ARCHITECTURAL RECORD

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BYRNE RESIDENCE
NORTH SCOTTSDALE, ARIZONA
WILLIAM P. BRUDER, ARCHITECT
1999

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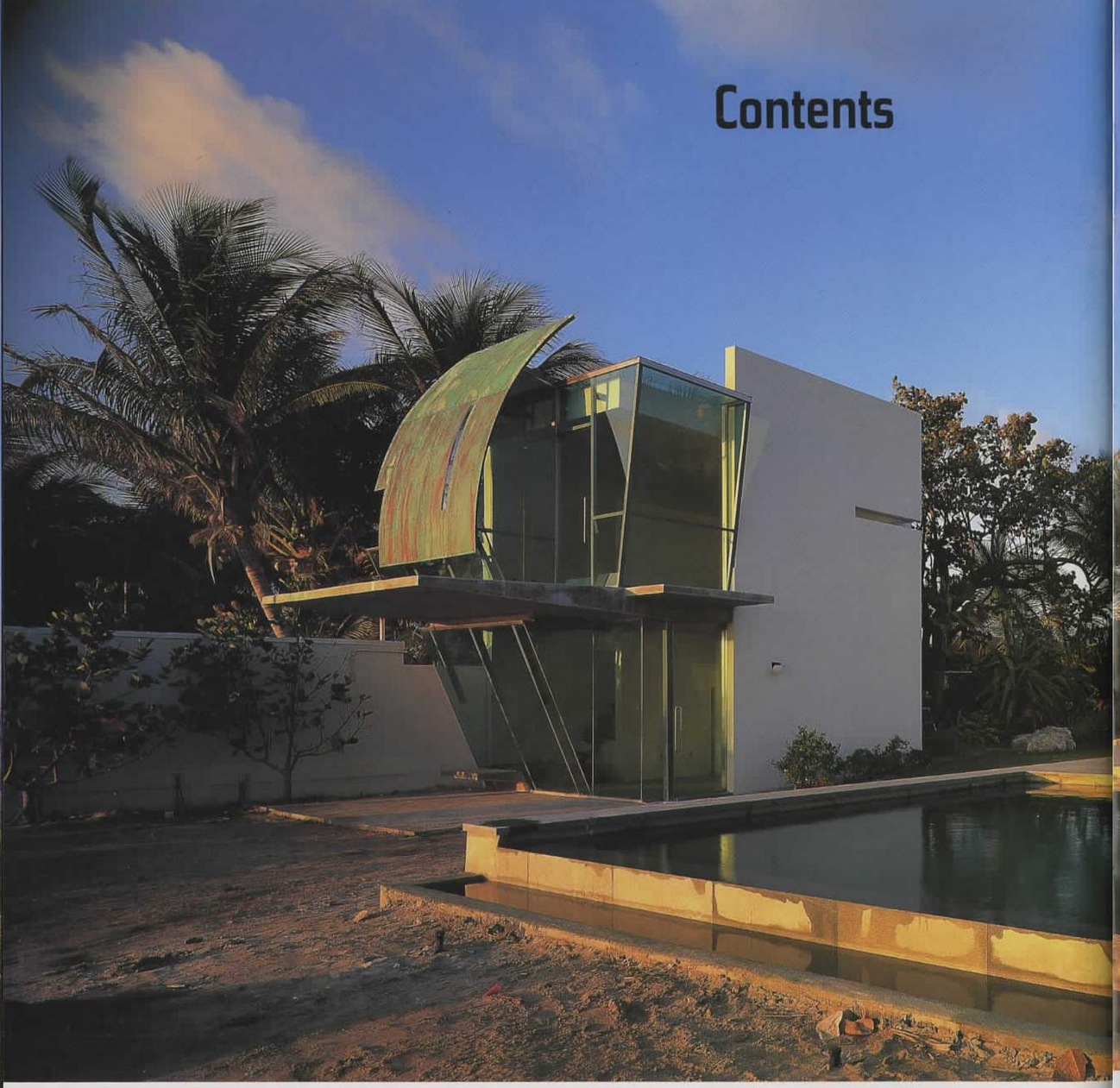


LANDES HOUSE
GOLDEN BEACH, FLORIDA
CARLOS ZAPATA DESIGN STUDIO AND UNA IDEA, ARCHITECTS
1994

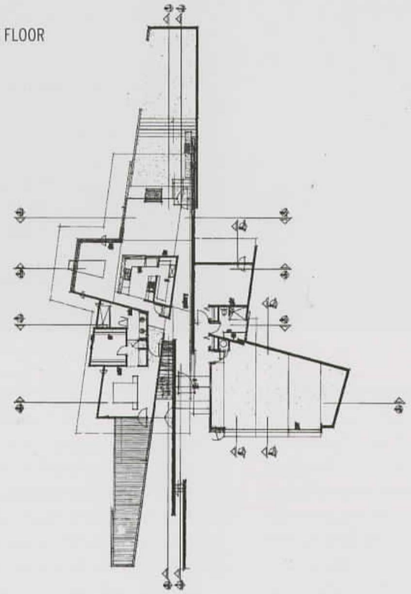
Byrne Residence
North Scottsdale, Arizona
William P. Bruder, Architect
1999

Byrne Residence

Spend some time with the architect Will Bruder and you'll hear as much about geology as architecture. The man knows his strata, canyons, and fossils. After all, he is married to an archeologist and has designed an interpretive center for viewing Native American rock art. A Midwesterner by birth, Bruder loves the desert and all its rugged glory the way a convert loves his adopted religion. Needless to say, geological metaphors abound in the Byrne Residence, a 2,900-square-foot house that appears to be at once anchored to and emerging from a rocky hillside about sixty miles north of downtown Phoenix.

First, there are the house's canted concrete-block walls, which evoke the sloped cliff faces of Western mesas. Not only do the masonry blocks inch out from the vertical plane as they rise, but the courses—exposed on the interiors and exterior—are laid at an angle to the floor, recalling rock strata that have shifted over time. In addition, parallel walls stand close together, forming compressed spaces that Bruder calls "canyons." With sunlight floating from clerestory windows, narrow skylights, and irregularly placed openings in the walls, the effect is dramatic, as if one were walking through a charged landscape.
"The original idea was to build a tilt-up concrete house, to have it unfold out of the earth," explains Bruder. But when contractors said

FIRST FLOOR



site conditions would make tilt-up construction difficult, the architect switched to concrete block. The resulting design, says Bruder, seems to be "extruded" from the land, rather than unfolding out of it. "In the end, I think this was the right way to go. You get a better sense of stratification and of layering."

Set on a five-acre site beyond the sprawl of the country's sixth largest city (and one of its fastest growing), the Byrne Residence presents an almost solid face to visitors approaching by car: concrete block, rusting steel, and copper cladding. It's an uncompromising façade—not as graceful as it might have been, but strongly connected to the desert terrain.

Visitors enter through a glass-and-metal seam between the copper-clad garage block and the elongated form of the house. The interior unfolds as a pair of canyons—one serving as the main-floor spine, the other leading down to the lower level. Each is defined by a thick masonry wall along one side and a clear-glass plane at the end that draws you along with the promise of a view. On the main floor, the canyon reveals the house's structural system: a great sloping metal roof attached to a concrete-block wall with seven steel brackets. By pulling the roof four inches from the wall and allowing daylight to creep in through a long narrow skylight, Bruder both creates and exposes the illusion of weighty elements floating in space.

Modest in size, the house draws our attention through contrasting shadow and light, architectural brawn and visual dexterity. While its north façade is mostly concrete block, the south side is just the opposite, with expanses of glass that reveal impressive views of arid hills and great sculptural cacti. If the front elevation is a cliff face, the back is a crystalline formation breaking free of the earth. The highlight of this transparent composition is a glass table set in a faceted, glass-enclosed dining room which projects beyond the rest of the house.

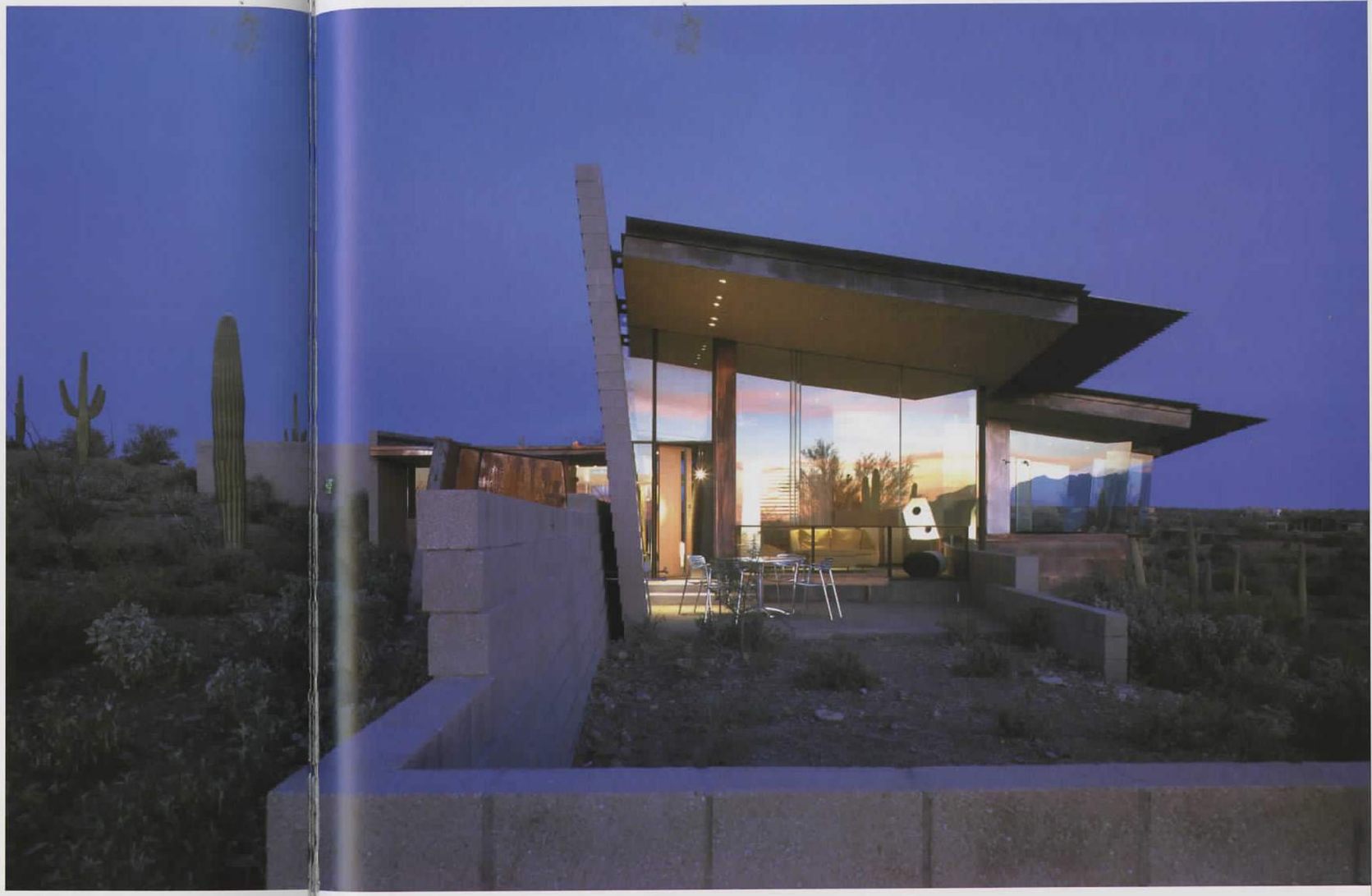
To take advantage of a climate that encourages outdoor living, the house has a patio off the living

room and a long terrace off the master bedroom that extend the interiors—providing casual spaces for enjoying an alfresco meal or reading a good book. Such weaving together of indoors and out certainly has roots in Frank Lloyd Wright's work, which Bruder has long studied, but the use of rusting metal mesh and canted concrete walls brings a 1990s aesthetic to the work.

Rather than designing an overly precious landscape, Bruder let the desert flora reestablish itself all the way up to the house's hard edges. The careful fit between house and site—requiring the removal of only a few cacti during construction—made the landscaping job easier.

By tucking the building up against a hillside, Bruder protects it from the desert sun's brute force and creates a cool lower level for guest bedrooms and home offices. The heavily glazed living room, though, faces southwest and can take a beating from the sun in the winter when rays are low enough to slip under the deeply cantilevered metal-deck roof. "This was a trade-off we were willing to make to get the views," explains Bruder. "And we're adding perforated fabric scrims to the windows here." The rest of the house stays cool most of the time, thanks to natural ventilation through screened doors and casement windows set within insulated glazed walls.

The clients, Bill and Carol Byrne, had lived in more traditional houses in New Jersey and Arizona. But both knew a great deal about architecture—he as a general contractor and she as a textile and interior designer. Before hiring Bruder, the Byrnes prepared a program calling for a "simple and basic" house that was "comfortable and modest," had natural materials, and was energy-efficient. They imposed no stylistic requirements other than a request for "organic architecture." Other architects who interviewed for the job looked at the rocky, sloped site and talked about all the problems of building on it. "When Will looked at the site, he got excited immediately," remembers Carol. "Within fifteen minutes he was already putting ideas down on paper."



Working as his own general contractor, Bill Byrne took on the job of building something radically different from the colonial houses that usually fill his work sheet. Concrete slabs, corbeled masonry walls, and a great cantilevered steel-framed roof were all new to him. The most challenging task, he says, was making sure that a canted block wall properly met a roof tilting in two directions.

Despite all the angles, the house never seems off-kilter or unbalanced. This is because every canted or angled element is structural and reveals the way it is built. "They're not faked with gyp board and studs," says Tim Christ, a member of Bruder's project team. In other words, these angles aren't just for show or for expressing some theoretical conceit.

In several of Bruder's recent projects, including Temple Kol Ami in Scottsdale, the Cox Residence in Cave Creek, Arizona, and the design of a Scottsdale Arts Center exhibition on twenty-five years of his work, the architect explored innovative ways of building concrete-block walls. Rotating, corbeling, and moving blocks in and out of plumb are some of the imaginative ways he has stacked these humdrum masonry units. The result is a rich palette of effects made from just one cheap material. And when sunlight is added, the rewards are even greater.

When asked about inspirations for his recent work, Bruder recommends a visit to Frank Lloyd Wright's Harold Price Sr. House (also called the "Grandma House") in the Phoenix suburb of Paradise Valley. Dating from 1954, the Price House has concrete-block walls that corbel out as they rise and an expansive roof that seems to float above bands of glass. Without trying to copy the look or feeling of a Wright design, Bruder has clearly borrowed a few of the master's ideas and taken them in his own distinctive, free-wheeling direction.

Clifford A. Pearson, 1999