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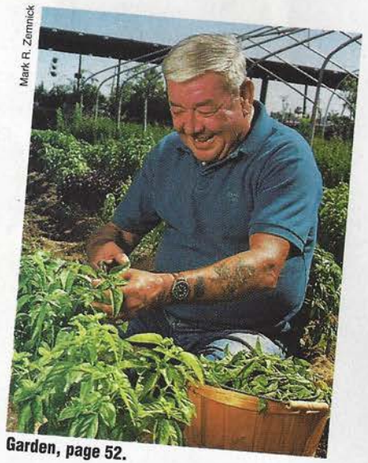

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FEATURES

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different

by Dave Eskes • photography by Michael Mertz

Passionate poet, sculptor, idea man Will Bruder is causing a stir as he takes organic architecture into the 21st century, using light and space and "honest" materials in his creations — from the behemoth Phoenix Central Library to modest Valley tract homes.

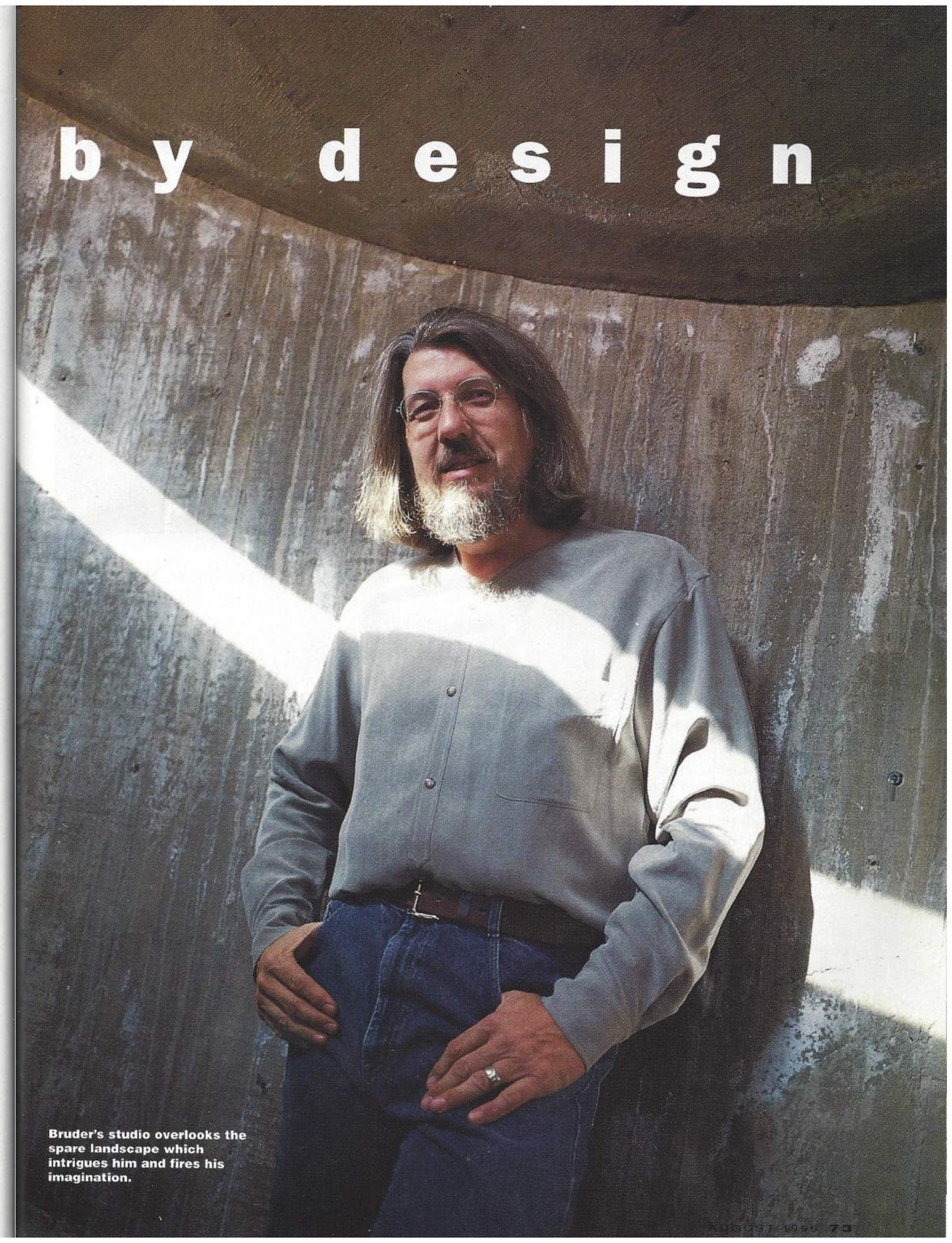
It is tempting to think of this small, corrugated metal structure jutting out of a spiny desert ridge in New River as a Potemkin Village. The whole thing is too ascetic. Too humble. Too... well, smug. The mattress on the bedroom floor, the unadorned walls, the spare little kitchen with its sink and breakfast bar. The weathered sun deck overlooking panoramic stands of saguaro. The only things missing are a grad student, a worn copy of *Steppenwolf* and a water pipe. C'mon now. Where's the real house? That Promethean edifice crammed with *objets d'art* and reeking of Vivaldi?

Then you notice Will Bruder standing there in sandals and jeans, his longish gray hair parted down the middle like Gregg Allman, earnestly explaining how, during one blistering summer month in 1975, he and his wife, Simon, built this 850-square-foot place with the help of friends. How it cost only $12,000 and won an award from *Architectural Record* magazine.

He tells you, words tumbling and punctuated with philosophical coinage, how sunlight plays off the house, changing it as the day passes. You recall Bruder's studio, a few yards uphill — a metal-roofed greenhouse of a place cluttered with books and drafting tables, sleeping cats and two large dogs — and the young apprentice quietly eating a Sunday sack lunch. You feel downright cynical. Of course, Bruder lives here. What would he do with a big house?

At 50, Will Bruder is perhaps the pre-eminent architect in Phoenix today. Certainly, he is the most controversial. With his design of the Phoenix Central Library, Bruder moved from the cool shade of the avant-garde into the public spotlight. The $28 million project was the biggest of his career and catapulted him from an architect of mid-range buildings to one of large public works. In a literary sense, it was like jumping from short stories to novels — not an easy task. But Bruder cleared the gap. It is unlikely anyone would confuse the 280,000-square-foot Phoenix Central Library, with its soaring "crystal canyon" atrium, sun-bathed Great Reading Room and "floating roof," with a padded version of a Bruder house. It stands on its own, as does all his work, ranging from the recently completed Temple Kol Ami Synagogue to the Rosenbaum residence in Cave Creek, which was featured in the Alec Baldwin-Kim Basinger movie, *The Getaway*. Bruder has also designed, among other buildings, the Cholla and Mesquite branch libraries, Paradise Valley Town Hall, Deer Valley Rock Art Center and IMCOR-Karber Air Conditioning. He has even designed a Weiss Guys Car Wash.

In a sense, the new Central Library mirrors Bruder's artistic credo. It explodes with light and space. The ductwork, elevator pulleys and cables, the concrete — everything is exposed. The indigenous materials are "honest" and the metaphor of a mesa is fitting. Up in the fifth-floor Great Reading Room, waferlike skylights puncture the metal roof, which "floats" on cables strung from massive candlestick pillars. At every level, the gleaming metal and glass elevators anchor the scene. Thanks to



Bruder's studio overlooks the spare landscape which intrigues him and fires his imagination.

There's not a single 90-degree angle in the Rosenbaum residence. Bruder also designed the furniture, rugs and brass fireplace.

foot-thick concrete walls, copper cladding and enough sun-harnessing windows to cover three football fields, the library is an energy miser. Fabric sails and computerized louvers shield the windows and manipulate solar intake. At night, interior lights render the thin, perforated copper cladding on the building's saddlebags (sides) translucent, revealing emergency stairwells and machinery to the outside world — and the outside world notices. In its first six months, the new library drew a half million visitors.

"There's so much natural light and openness, and the views to the north and south are quite wonderful," says Rosemary Nelson, Central Library administrator. At night, she says, a strange spell descends on the Great Reading Room. "The high ceiling is dark, and the only lights are those on the tables. Something settles on the room that causes people to focus. It's very quiet. I didn't anticipate that at all." Scottsdale writer Charles Sanford likens the tunnellike library entrances to a birth canal or near-death experience. "It's kind of pleasurable," he says. "Inside, it's like walking around in the girders of a skyscraper. That's not a negative, you understand."

Not everyone agrees. For some, Bruder's work is too high-tech, too impersonal. "I like Bruder's ideas," says publisher Mary Westheimer, "but, somehow, they don't translate into a warm environment. The results seem minimalist to the point of discomfort." Middle school librarian Charlotte Needham likes the spaciousness, the exposed beams — everything except the Great Reading Room. "It doesn't feel cozy," she says. "It's too stark during the day." Even John Meunier, dean of Arizona State University's College of Architecture and Environmental Design and an architect on the Central City Architecture Design Review Panel, which oversaw the design process, has mixed feelings. The Central Library is "highly practical," he concedes. It bears a "sense of quality and elegance" and is "climatically intelligent." But it is "hard to find a nice comfortable corner to settle down in. It's just a series of big, big spaces stacked one on top of the other." Bruder's archaeologist wife, Simon, says: "I like a lot of Will's work. I certainly don't like it all."

Over the past 20 years, Will Bruder has crafted a reputation as unorthodox, perhaps brilliant. And he has done it his way. Friends say Bruder views architecture as a religious calling rather than an occupation, and money as a means, not an end. He is by all accounts a good listener, a patient collaborator. But he will not compromise his vision nor resort to tricks. No wonder Bruder has been referred to as "weird," that catch-all word designed to put everyone from snake cultists to PBS viewers in their place.

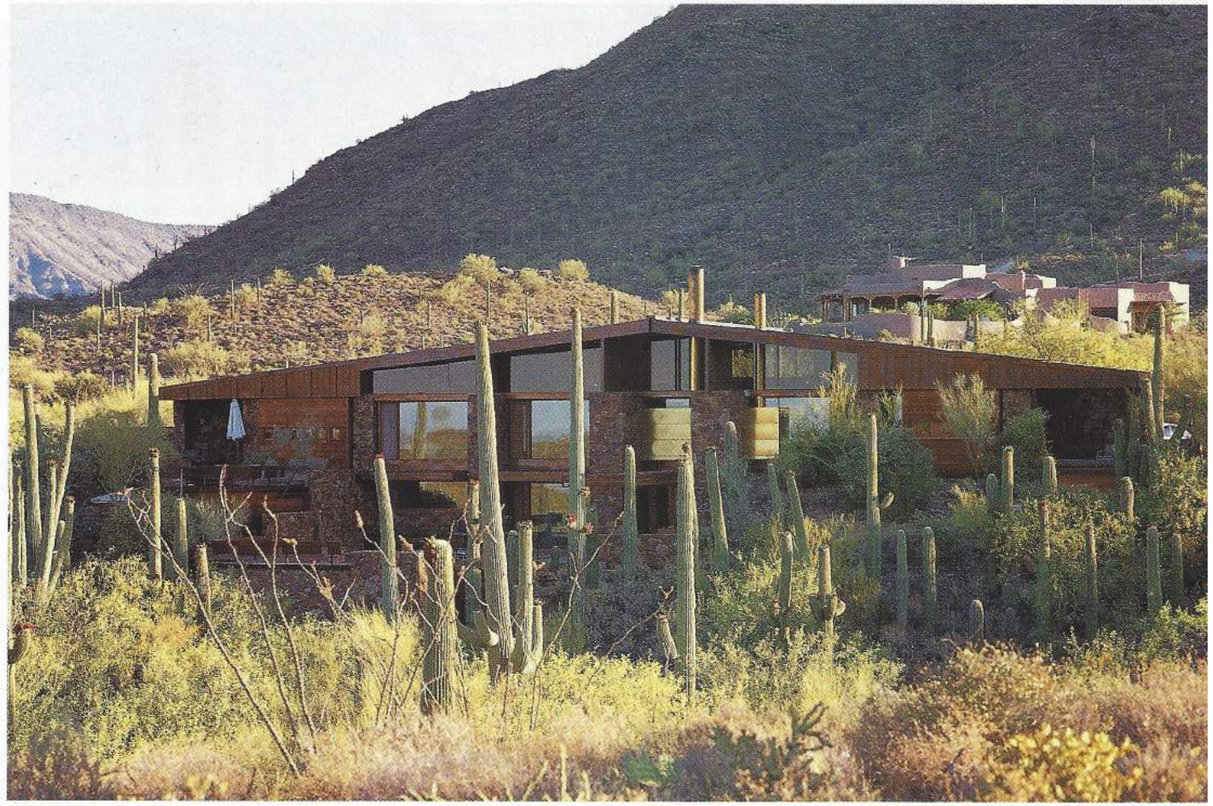
"He *is* Howard Roark," says architecture critic Reed Kroloff, referring to the incorruptible architect-hero of Ayn Rand's novel, *The Fountainhead*. "Completely self-assured and convinced in his own architectural rectitude, he'd rather blow up his own building than twist it into something he doesn't like." Kroloff, associate editor of *Architecture Magazine* and a former assistant dean of architecture at Arizona State University, applauds Bruder's righteousness. "He's never sold out to the mindless Arizona development culture, but he still has managed to build a flourishing practice. That's incredible."

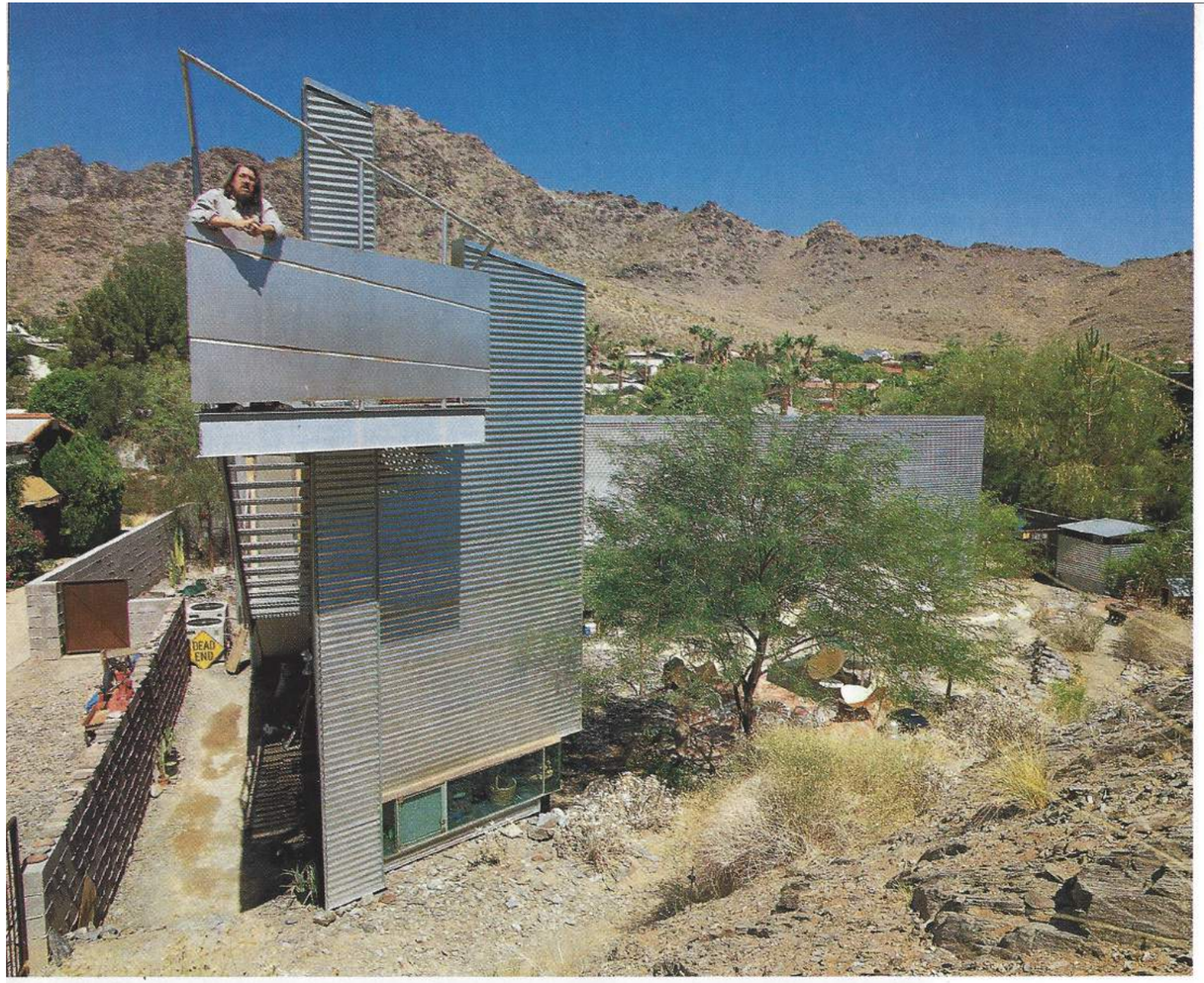
From the start, Bruder has followed his instincts. He pulled the plug on a promising career in automotive design by dropping out of the prestigious General Motors Institute in 1965 when a UAW strike soured him on "big industry values." He rejected an opportunity to attend the Illinois Institute of Technology, headed by famed architect Mies van der Rohe, fearing a formal architecture education would be too parochial. Instead, he opted for a fine arts degree in sculpture at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, cross-pollinating his curriculum with such courses as philosophy, music, urban planning and civil engineering. And a routine summer job at a small architectural firm near his hometown of Milwaukee turned out not to be routine at all. It had a profound impact on his life. "I worked as a carpenter by day and draftsman by night," Bruder recalls. "It was intense, vibrant. More than that, it was poetry." This Renaissance ideal — the synthesis of heart, mind and hand — remains central to his art.

When Bruder moved to New River in 1974, it was sprinkled with rednecks, misanthropes and part-time cowboys — "the back of beyond," as Kroloff puts it. But it had privacy, lush rolling desert, affordability and easy access to Phoenix. Bruder already owned 10 acres (and would add four more later). The desert had staked a claim on him, just as it had staked a claim on organic architects Frank Lloyd Wright and Paolo Soleri. It started when Bruder apprenticed with Soleri during 1967-68. Something about the spare landscape intrigued him. It gave no quarter, yet there was a symmetry and beauty, a take-it-or-leave-it honesty that fired his imagination. "When he went back to Milwaukee," says Kroloff, "he had a sort of epiphany, a point when he realized the desert spoke to him at a fundamental level. There would have to be an affinity between his architecture and the desert." After graduation, Bruder spent a year with renowned architect Gunnar Birkerts in Birmingham, Michigan, then migrated to Phoenix where he apprenticed for three years with Michael Goodwin and other Valley architectural firms before getting his license. Once at New River, he plunged into his work and never resurfaced.

"His world revolves around architecture," Kroloff says. "I remember distinctly Will calling me on a cell phone while driving through northern Europe at a high rate of speed. He wanted to talk about the architecture he was seeing. You know, in the middle of the day, just pick up a phone and call. It was very 'Will.' When I lived in Phoenix, he might call at 6 a.m. or at midnight. 'What are you doing?' he'd say.

Featured in the movie *The Getaway*, the Rosenbaums' stone, copper and glass house hunkers into a Cave Creek hillside.





Made of corrugated and galvanized sheet metal, the Hill-Sheppard house near Squaw Peak clings to a steep hillside.

'Let's go look at this.' If I could, off we'd go. More often, I couldn't. That's the difference between Will and me — he made the time."

From the start, Bruder rejected the stucco-and-tile cacophony of Valley developers. His work would be organic. It would hunker down in the desert, distinct and unbeholden. Reputation and clientele would follow. And little by little, they did. Bruder was an exotic — a sort of Haight-Ashbury figure with an ego and talent to match. He appealed to what Kroloff calls a "patron culture" of sophisticates "intrigued by the enigmatic quality of the man and his work." Simon recalls the first class they had together at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. "I didn't like him at all," she says. "He seemed arrogant, know-it-all. But then I got to know him. It was justified."

If Bruder's persona opened doors, his work secured his future. It was unlike anything on the shelf. "I had ideas," he says of those early years, "and I put them out there. But people can't say 'Hey, I like that' until you get some of those ideas built." That was the rub. As Kroloff says: "It takes a risk-willing client to engage Will Bruder. They're not going to get an average building or an average architect. They're not going to get an obsequious architect. If he has a strong idea, he's going to push it."

Bruder pushes but takes care not to alienate. He slips into his clients' lives, lavishes time on them, dines with them — all the while nudging them in the direction he wants to go. "I'm looking for ideas, what people's feelings are," he says. "I'm looking for all their scrapbooks and memories." In the end, he appropriates their dreams for his own.

Take, for example, the Rosenbaum residence, which hunkers into a Cave Creek hillside and overlooks rolling virgin desert. "We evolved with Will," is the way Cathie Rosenbaum describes their collaboration. "He tried to sell us these [rusted, steel] trusses, which we thought would overpower the room. We didn't want them. But Will did a drawing so we would understand. We questioned several things at first, but he was always right. He believes in himself." The Rosenbaum residence uses stone quarried from a mine in Cave Creek, plus copper and glass. The floor is oak and the wood paneling is red birch. Bruder also designed the furniture, rugs and brass fireplace. There is not a single 90-degree angle in the house. "Will is easy to work with," Rosenbaum says. "He thinks of nuances, of unusual ways to do things. But if a client wanted to change the design too much, he'd probably walk away."

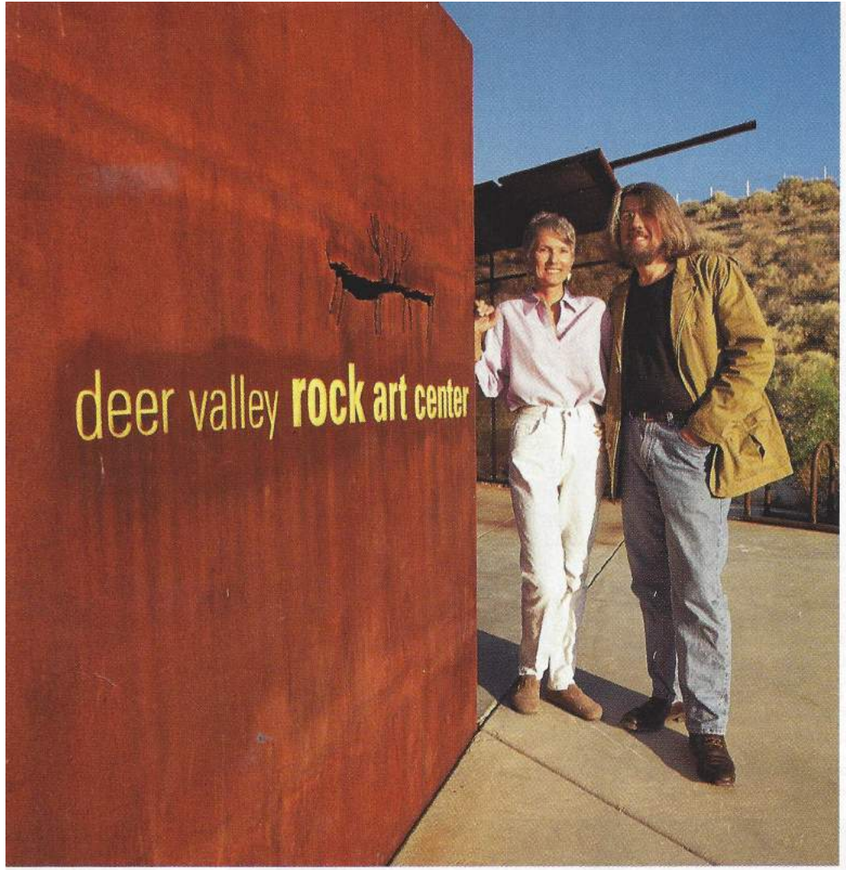
Like the Rosenbaum residence, the Hill-Sheppard house near Squaw Peak stands out like a neon sign. It is made from corrugated and galvanized sheet metal and clings to a steep hill like a rock climber. No hunkering down here. It's a tight fit at best, with space at a premium. But John Hill and his wife, Linda Sheppard, figured Bruder could pull it off. "We spent six months becoming friends with Bruder," Hill says. "We looked at houses, went to dinner together, told him we wanted a tin roof and metal siding. At the time, he was working on the Central Library. Later, he took his staff to Mexico. When he returned, he described the house to me, and that's the way it turned out." For Hill and Sheppard, the house is Xanadu. They like its "little surprises," its "logical flow pattern." They like the Great Room, a natural for entertaining and hanging art. "Bruder is keyed to the environment," says Sheppard. "He's very contemporary in a place where there really is no style."

When asked who influenced him, Bruder ticks off everyone from the Etruscans to Glenn Murcutt, an environmentally innovative Australian whose work he greatly admires. But there are several architects in between who rate special mention. Paolo Soleri, for example, taught him to do "a lot with so little." Bruder recalls using barbed wire at Cosanti Foundation to reinforce concrete inexpensively and straightening nails because "there was no money for nails." His Sedona mentor, Paul Schweikher, taught him the "poetry of detail," while Antoine Predock triggered an interest in metaphor. Frank Lloyd Wright, of course, taught everyone about blending architecture with the landscape. And, finally, Italian modernist Carlo Scarpa lifted the yoke of what Bruder calls his "heavy German pragmatism," and replaced it with a "lighter, more minimalist" approach. Bruder's conversion to Scarpa occurred in 1987 while a fellow at the American Academy in Rome. Bruder and his wife traveled extensively throughout Italy tracking down Scarpa's work. "The other Academy members were amazed that we were looking at modern architecture," Simon says. "They were looking at old Roman stuff."

To Bruder, architecture is the "power of the senses over the intellect." It is "sculpture," a "search for poetic possibilities," a "celebration of our time." What it is not is mere ornament and shelter. "It is important," he says, "that an architect be concerned with ideas and not get caught up with style or fashion." Bruder believes in using indigenous materials — in Arizona, principally masonry and copper — in an environmentally sensitive way. "They're very affordable," he says. "They blend with the landscape and work best in the harsh desert climate." Bruder insists that his materials be honest. Block should be used as block and not colored to look like fake brick. Plastic should look like plastic, not fake wood. Great architecture, he says, is taking the ordinary and making something beautiful out of it. It is sculpting light and space through imaginative use of materials to create architecture that "moves" with the changing days.

To achieve this, Bruder will work 18 to 20 hours a day. Sometimes around the clock. Architecture, Bruder tells you, is done *en charrette*, a phrase borrowed from the Beaux Arts to describe the intense, unrelenting labor leading to the completion of an artistic work. It is the nature of the profession. Though he talks freely about his work, Bruder says little about himself. He allows he is a video

Bruder's studio is a metal-roofed greenhouselike place cluttered with books, drafting tables, colleagues, students, sleeping cats and two large dogs.



Bruder and his wife Simon at one of his 250 projects, the Deer Valley Rock Art Center.

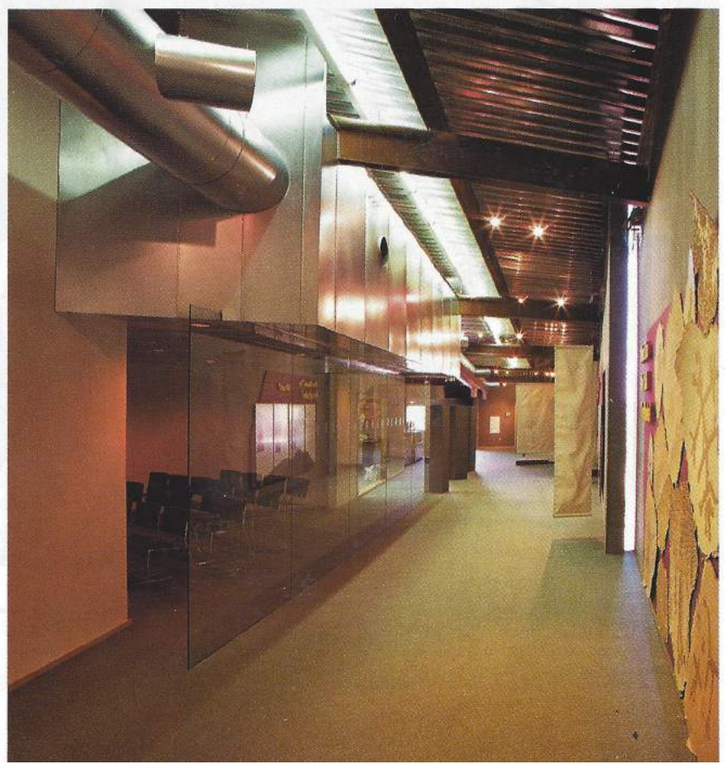
might be that the architecture wouldn't have been as good as it is. But it doesn't make it any less onerous." Cathie Rosenbaum says, "Will doesn't care about material things. He'd rather spend his money on travel." Max Underwood, associate professor of library design at Arizona State University, sees Bruder as a "poet" whose chief desire is recognition, or love, of his work. "The work is what it's about," he says.

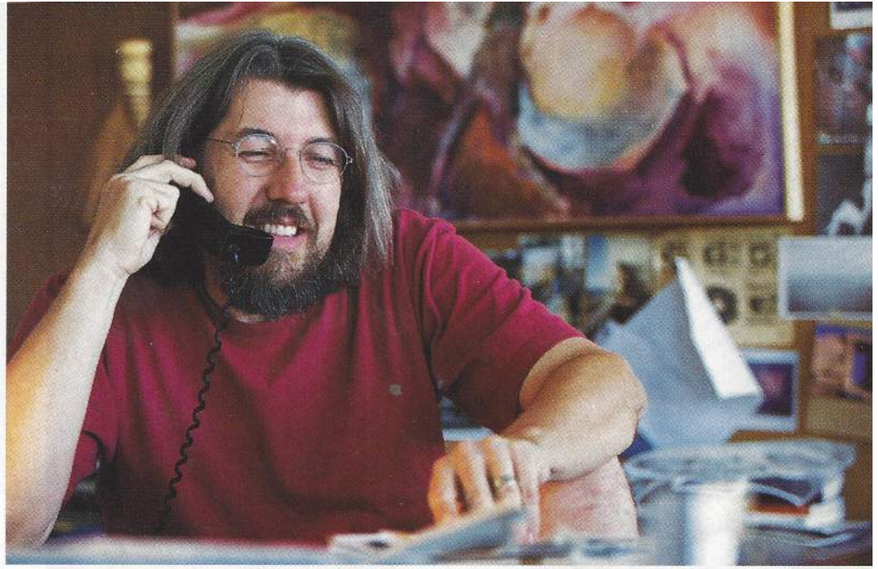
It also could be argued that Bruder's gregariousness and accessibility steals time and attention from the business of business. Then again, as Kroloff might say, accessibility is "very Will" — perhaps part of the creative process. Bruder is an expansive man and born proselytizer who takes pride in the number of visitors to his studio and his role in educating the public. Although he has no children of his own, he has "adopted" hundreds of others' over the years at school talks and workshops. It is not unusual to find Bruder leading a gaggle of kids on a tour of the Central Library. Bruder also serves on architectural juries and lectures extensively. Last spring, he commuted regularly to MIT via the red eye for a teaching stint. He plans to update his studio computer system and eventually conduct lectures from New River via video linkup. "I've lectured in three-quarters of the schools of architecture in America," he says. "I look at the students almost as clients — there's a great deal of interaction. But I almost feel guilty in that I try my best to communicate ideas. I think somebody experiencing my buildings can learn more than I can ever teach them."

buff, likes to read mysteries, travel, eat good food. That's about it. Bruder is so absorbed in his profession, it is hard to imagine him engaging in any other activity — say, swinging a nine-iron or taking in a Suns game.

"I fill my spare time reading and hiking," says Simon. "But Will isn't into hiking. I would like him to hike more. I don't spend a lot of time out there [New River], but when we are home together, Will cooks. He's a gourmet." Says Kroloff: "It is impossible to divorce Will Bruder from architecture as subject matter. They are one and the same."

With Bruder's work ethic, his loyal clientele and his growing reputation, it would be logical to assume he is well-off financially. After all, the Central Library architect fees were reportedly $1 million. Then there are all those commissions over the years. "William is a famous architect," Simon says, "but William isn't a rich architect. Money is a helluva concern, a continuing problem. William has never figured out how to run the business as a money-making operation. I don't necessarily fault him for that — it



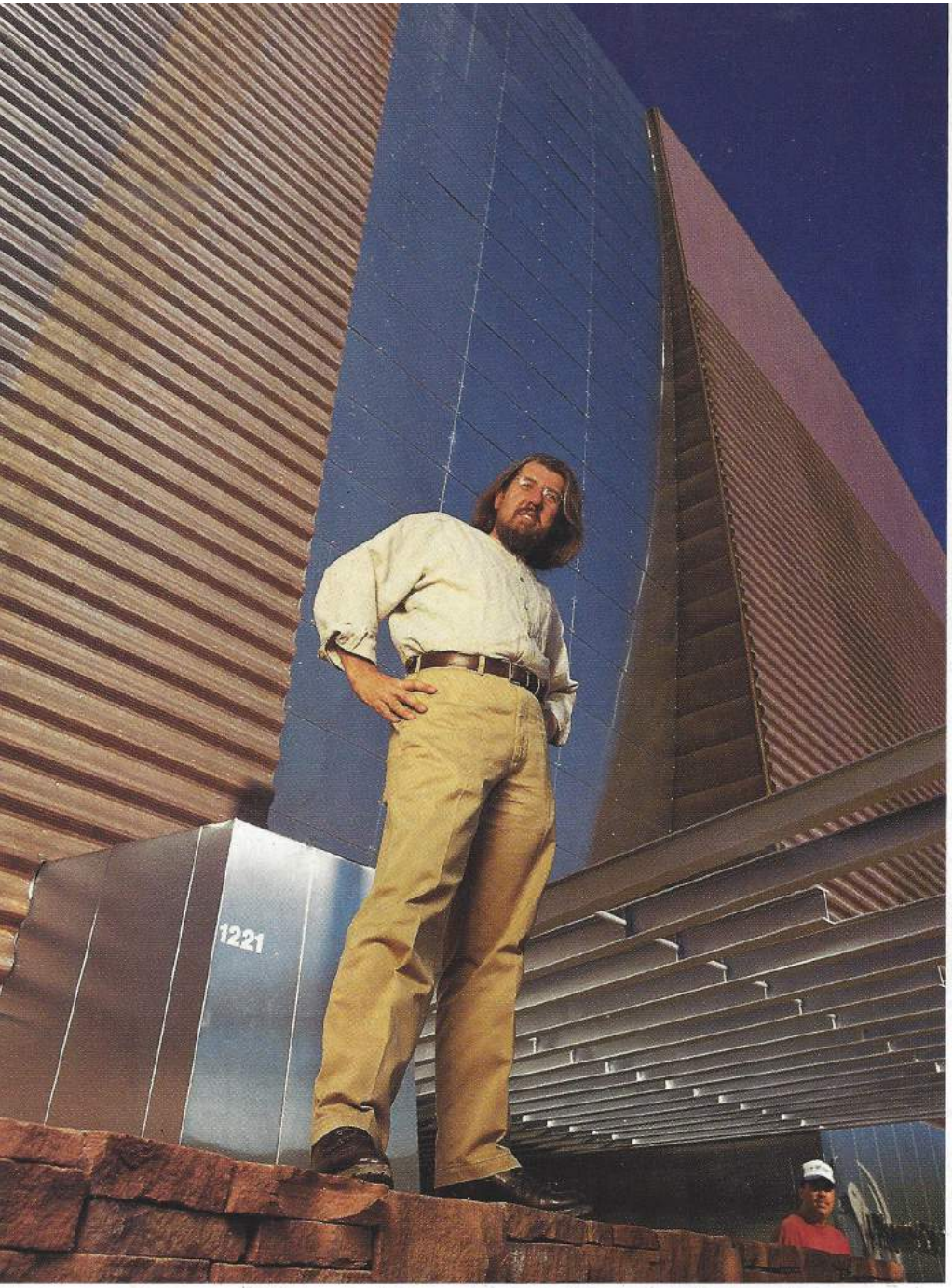


Bruder's gregariousness and accessibility are key to his success.

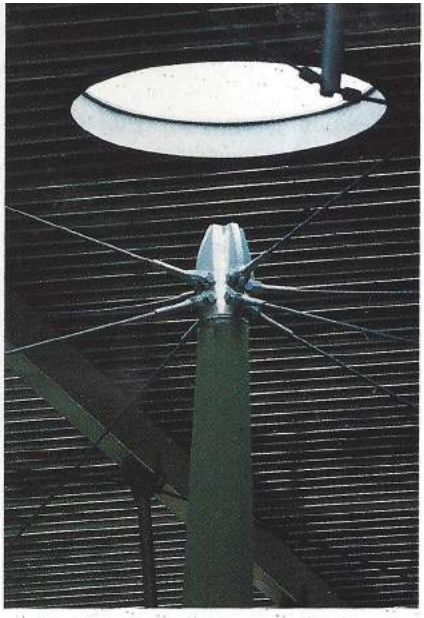
Which is a veiled allusion to Bruder's tangled syntax. Words cascade from him in a light show of free association and jargon. This "wordsmanship" as he calls it — his tendency at times to sound like a hybrid of James Joyce and Casey Stengel — drew fire during the Central Library project. Grandiloquence is to the media what a red cape is to a Pamplona bull.

Thus, KFYI talk radio, acting on a newspaper article in which Bruder used the phrase "kinetically energized arrival pavilion," invited him on-air to translate. "They thought they were going to have a field day with me," Bruder says. "They thought they were getting into the frivolous use of tax dollars. 'What's this gobbledygook? It's just a parking lot.' It was like the pots on Squaw Peak Freeway controversy." In the end, though, it didn't go badly. "The questions from the public were thoughtful," Bruder concedes. "And the host was pretty reasonable, even though he had been looking for something else." Still, the experience left a bad taste. "The media is into making superstars," he says indignantly. "It's self-serving and into making money. It's a dangerous part of our culture."

Yet few architects have gotten more coverage than Bruder, thanks in no small measure to his promotional savvy. Bruder is as patient and accessible to the media as he is to his clients. In fact, he can be downright proactive. He credits Richard Nilsen of *The Arizona Republic*, for example, with writing the piece that put Central Library over the top with the



With his design of the 280,000-square-foot Phoenix Central Library, Bruder moved from the cool shade of the avant-garde into the public spotlight.



public, not to mention apprehensive city bureaucrats. According to Bruder, he found a kindred soul in Nilsen while guiding him on a three-hour tour of the unfinished structure. Bruder had invited Nilsen on the tour after calling him up to praise an unrelated piece on art. "I told him [Nilsen], 'This article is so right on and so really looking at it, you know, the pulse of our community. Congratulations.'" After the tour, Nilsen surprised Bruder by writing a piece on the library that had "the impact of a Siskel and Ebert thumbs-up. It was that important. Nilsen writes for the common man, and I like to think I build for the common man."

The common man, as Bruder defines him, is a sheet metal worker, a lettuce broker, an average Joe with $70,000 and a dream. "They're as much a part of my client base as people of other means," he says. In 1993, for example, Steve and Colleen Rupp asked Bruder to redesign their modest south Scottsdale tract house. They set a budget of $20,000. In turn, Bruder provided plans and the Ruffs provided sweat equity. They buy material "as needed." When finished, the house will highlight a translucent corrugated fiberglass scrim (high facade) around the house and a backyard conversation pit using recycled patio concrete for a wall. Other changes will open up and soften the compartmentalized 1959 structure. The Ruffs now believe costs will exceed $30,000. "It's an ongoing project," says Steve, a graduate student in geology at Arizona State University. "It takes longer than you expect."

Architecture in general devours time, and it takes years to establish a reputation. As Max Underwood says: "There are no child prodigies in architecture." Many architects, in fact, never live to see their dreams realized. Time runs out and we are left with their ideas, like acolytes poring over Da Vinci's notebooks. This can't be said of Bruder. To date, he has completed more than 250 projects and appeared in scores of publications. He has landed public commissions in Manhattan, Wyoming, even Australia. And in July, he traveled to Spain to receive the DuPont Benedictus Award for innovative use of glass. "Depending on how he manages himself, this could be his breakout project," Kroloff says, referring to the Central Library. In addition, Bruder recently agreed to donate most of his books and papers to ASU's College of Architecture and Environmental Design. "It's a significant addition to the archives," Kroloff says. "It will join material by Frank Lloyd Wright."

In the meantime, Bruder continues to live what he calls a "totally luxurious lifestyle" amid the rolling desert of New River. "There's a certain quietness and repose out here that gives this rapidly developing career perspective," he says. "As I grow older, physical possessions become less important. These modest structures — the studio and the house — meet all our physical needs." Simon quite agrees. "I don't know what we'd do with more space," she says. PM

Dave Eskes is a frequent contributor to PHOENIX Magazine.