

# WHEELER

MARCH 1984 FIVE DOLLARS



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Cover: Photograph by David Muench of Cleopatra's Hill, Jerome, Ariz. (see page 106).

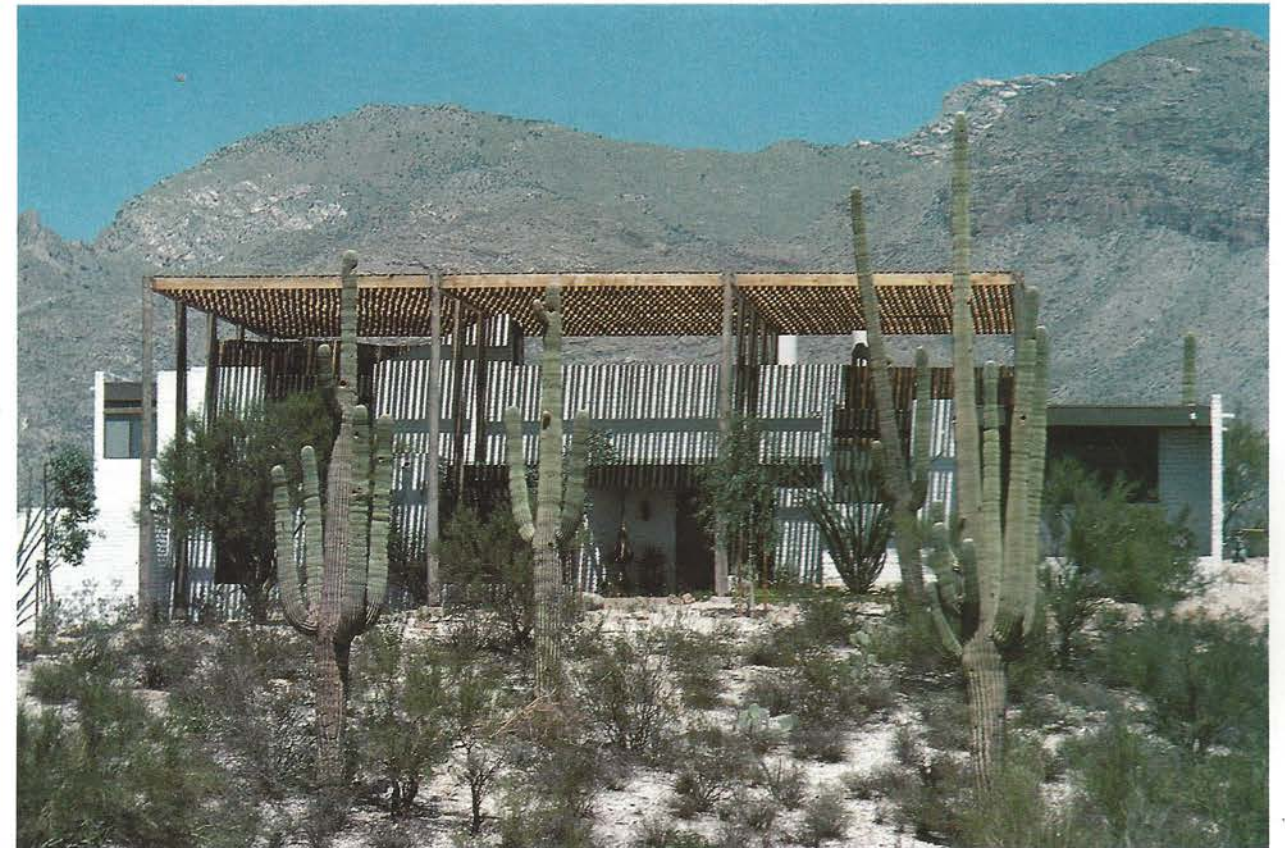
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## Reinterpreting Regionalism: Arizona

Three architects who respect the desert terrain and traditions. By Allen Freeman

takes a century for saguaros to fully mature into strange anropormorphous giants with prickly green arms reaching 50 feet more above the Sonoran Desert landscape. Although they e found only in southern Arizona, the southeastern tip of alifornia, and northern Mexico, the wonderful saguaros are rbidden—as are all cacti—in certain lushly landscaped devel- ments of million-dollar-plus houses in Paradise Valley, adja- nt to Phoenix and Scottsdale.

An extreme case of desert denial in Arizona's megaoasis etropolis, Paradise Valley is nonetheless indicative of think- g in the state's ongoing sandstorm of development, where air- nditioning and irrigation have helped dilute the region's archi- tural and natural identities. Evidence in the cities is widespread, m French Tudor spec houses to suburban lawns, grassy high- ty medians, and verdant golf courses. Some areas of Arizona ve become so humid as a result of irrigation that evaporative oling—the technique of lowering temperatures to comfortable els by simply raising desert humidity—has lost effectiveness. hoenix has clobbered its climate," remarks Judith Chafee, FAIA, th a definite Tucson bias.

And, says William Bruder, another outspoken Arizona architect: lthough I enjoy Mexican architecture, the biggest plague in oenix is the pseudo-Spanish style—the white stucco, tile

ft, Chafee's Jacobson house, Tucson. The ramada form over r shade house, above, is indigenous, but its size recalls shel- ing trees not found in the region. The masonry forms relate nearby houses out of politeness, not revivalism, she says.

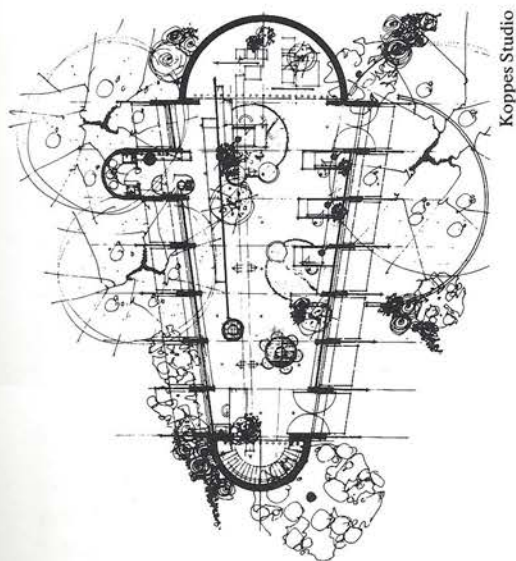
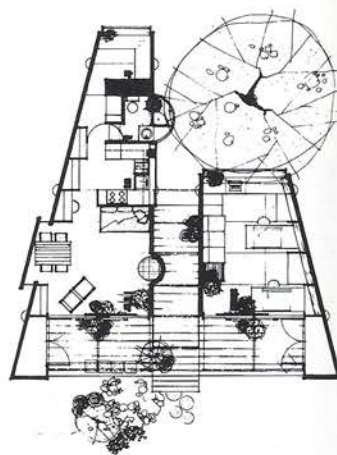
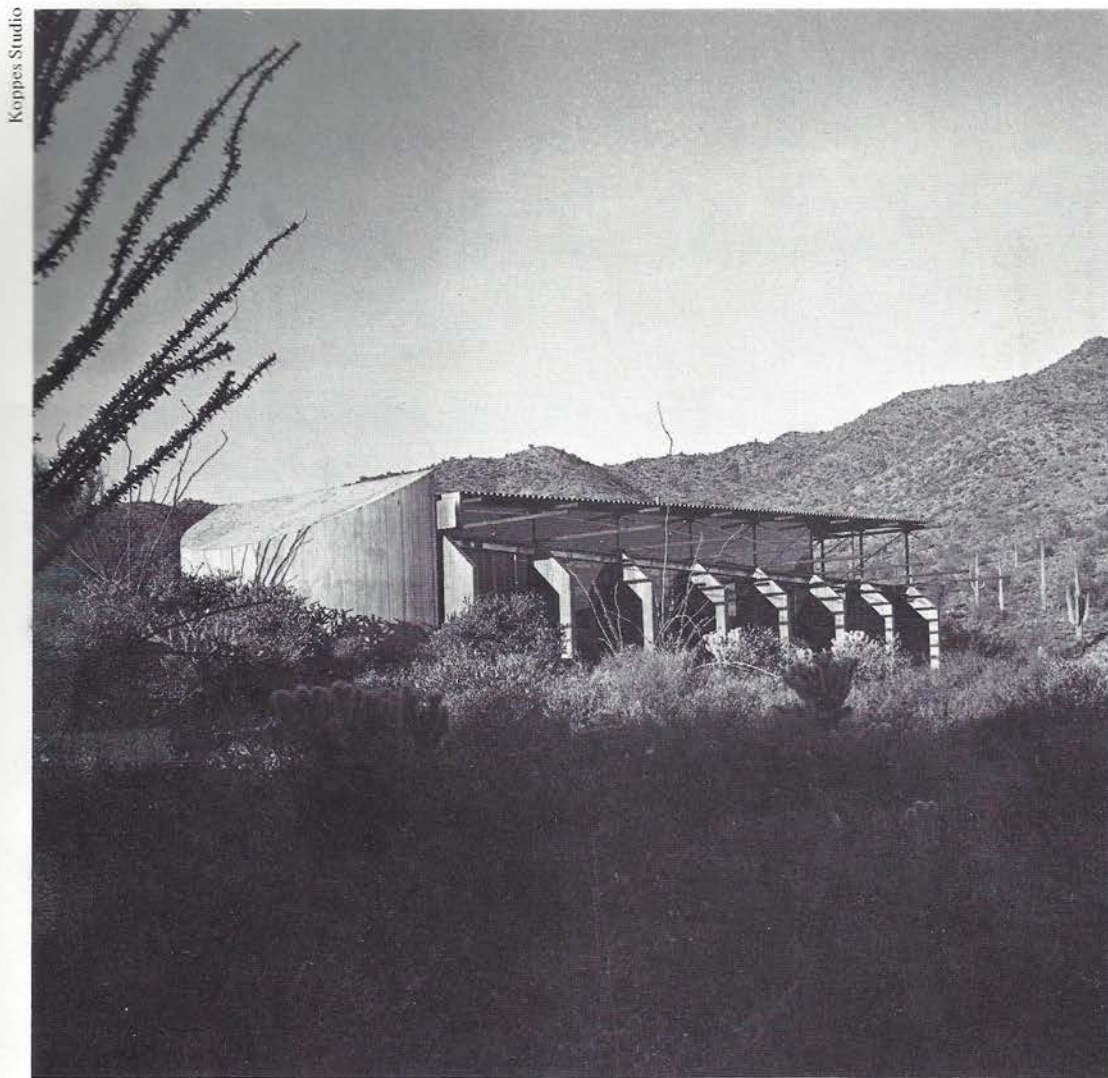
mansard, and a couple of arches. To people who come here from the East it appears Mexican or Southwestern in flavor. But if you go down to Mexico, the whole idea of courtyards and materials and shade and shadow and outdoor living is so well done; people just don't comprehend that here yet. We live in a sort of Disneyland Southwest, with developers and a lot of arch- itects who haven't looked at the meaning of what Southwest- ern living is."

Chafee, Bruder, and Fred Osmon, AIA, are among a handful of Arizona architects who respect the desert rather than attempt to modify it, interpret regional building traditions rather than imitate their surface motifs. Most of their work has been houses.

Chafee practices in a 100-year-old abode house—"the region's loft space," as she calls it—near downtown Tucson and teaches architecture at the University of Arizona. A native Arizonan educated at Bennington and Yale, she returned to Tucson 14 years ago after working in several strong Eastern design offices, including five years with Edward Larrabee Barnes. Today she revels in the diversity of her region and its implications for architects. One of her favorite assignments for architecture students, she says, is to "have them design something, say a conference center, requiring a lot of self-help construction on a site of their choice along the road from Tucson to the top of Mount Lemmon, a change in elevation of several thousand feet. Using materials at hand, they are supposed to respond to six climates going up the mountain, starting with the low desert where adobe is appropriate, into a rocky area, and then to the heavily timbered top where wood construction is appropriate."

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## Expressing the extremes of the desert.

Bruder is a former Midwesterner who moved to Arizona 17 years ago to work with Paolo Soleri (see "Six from the '60s," Jan., page 80). Many of Bruder's current ideas about desert buildings are embodied in his house and studio, two strong presences with subtle relationships to their site in the open desert of New River, Ariz.

Bruder's house was built in 1975, functioning as a combination dwelling-studio until the separate studio was completed nearby four years later. Clad in a dull, corrugated sheet metal over a wood frame, it perches on a slight grade of undisturbed desert. In plan the house flares from the south like a bell and is bisected by a north-south axial breezeway. The southern exposure, from which it is approached, is closed to the sun except for horizontal slit windows. As you walk through the narrow breezeway, reminiscent of 19th century Southern farm houses, the view to the north widens to reveal what the compact building's curious form is about: The house is a framing device for the view to the north, a restful panorama of unspoiled desert. Extending across the north side is a deck shaded by twin trellises casting gridded shadows on the floor and extensions of the east and west facades. From the deck you double back through glass doors to enter either the living space or the studio space, the latter now used by his wife, an archaeologist. Simple but not simple-minded, it is an inexpensive house geared to unpretentious desert living.

*The corrugated metal walls of Bruder's house, above, project beyond its enclosed space to frame the deck. His studio, left, flares in plan and profile, its western elevation protected from late afternoon sun by a nearby rise. The studio interior is bathed in soft light through the glazed northern wall.*

Bruder's studio is oriented toward the same northern landscape, and, like the house, it flares in plan and section. But here the longer axis is east-west (kicked five degrees to the northeast). The east wall, a large, concrete half-drum, shelters a client-conference nook from which the rest of the metal-framed structure seems to grow. A corrugated metal shed roof extends over clerestories on the south wall to control the sun, while the north elevation is glazed floor-to-ceiling. Protruding beyond the glass wall are concrete, buttresslike fins and extensions of the metal rafter elements. There are definite references to Wright's drafting room at Taliesin West.

Like the house, the studio is cut into the desert with no re-landscaping; plants grow four inches from the foundations. Bruder wants to draw nature into his buildings and at the same time express some of its extremes, such as intense summer heat and then sudden electrical storms followed by flash floods. "I like the energy of the desert," he says. "I want to combine the natural environment with expressive, creative use of structure and materials."

Bruder, Osmon, and Chafee are grappling with a difficult and subtle proposition, that of giving appropriate expression to a very particular place. Each has a strong voice in the desert different from any other's, but on one point they agree: The quest should be catholic in scope. Bruder is enthusiastic about a wide range of architecture, including that of Soleri, Wright, Bruce Goff, John Andrews, Arthur Erickson, Carlo Scarpa, and Paul Schweikher, the former architecture dean at Carnegie-Mellon now living in Sedona, Ariz., about whose work Bruder is writing a book. Osmon says he wants an expression that is inclusive rather than exclusive. And Chafee, writing in *Artspace*, a quarterly of Southwestern art, asks: "Is my place or my sex less universal because I am not? . . . This region is as far-reaching and as deep as my comprehension and understanding can make it." □