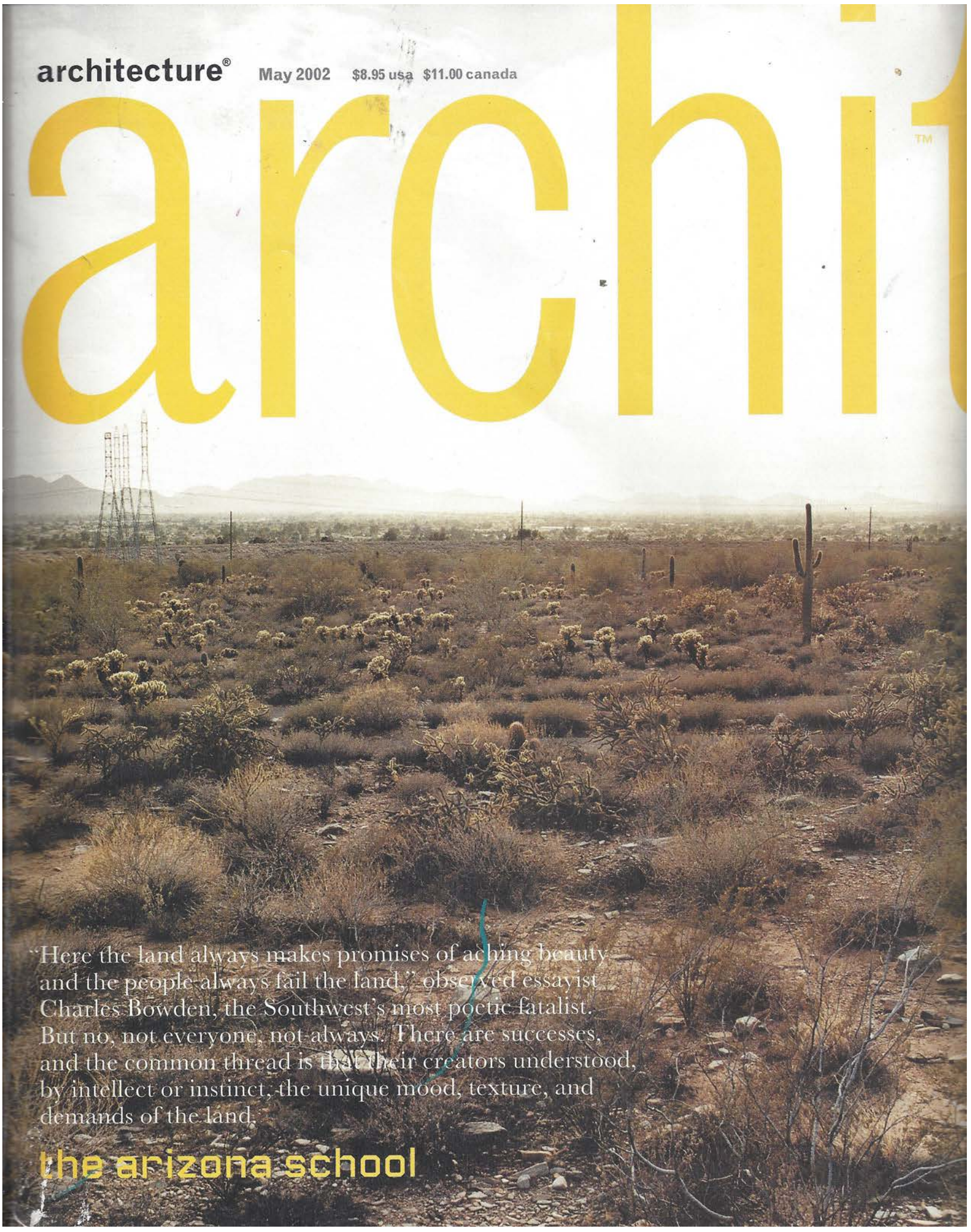


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"Here the land always makes promises of aching beauty and the people always fail the land," observed essayist Charles Bowden, the Southwest's most poetic fatalist. But no, not everyone, not always. There are successes, and the common thread is that their creators understood, by intellect or instinct, the unique mood, texture, and demands of the land.

the arizona school

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# the arizona school

crafting a desert sensibility

**COVER AND TABLE OF CONTENTS:** For this month's special issue, *Architecture* commissioned artist Justine Kurland to photograph Arizona's landscape, landmarks, and architects. The cover image shows a particularly barren patch of desert in north Scottsdale. On the table of contents appears a canal near Taliesin West, part of a vast, federally built system carrying water from the Colorado River to farms in Arizona, California, and Nevada.

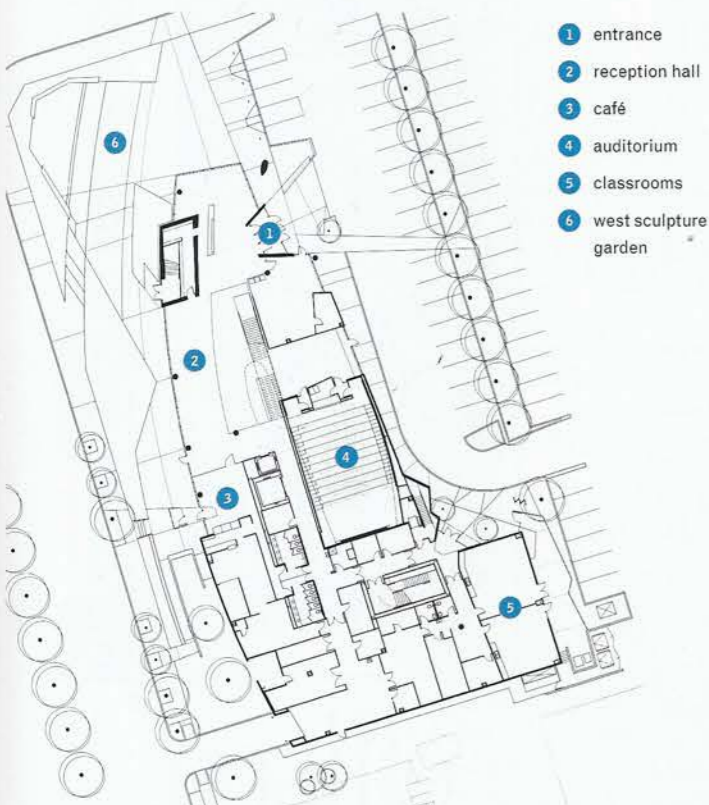
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*Architecture*® (ISSN 0746-0554; USPS 009-880) is published monthly by VNU Business Media, Inc., 770 Broadway, New York, NY 10003-9595. Copyright 2002 by VNU Business Media, Inc. For subscriptions: Single copies [USA]: \$8.95. Single copies [Foreign]: \$11.00. 1 year: \$59.00. Canada: 1 year: \$69.00. Foreign: 1 year: \$199.00. Allow 4-6 weeks. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. Canadian Post International Publications Mail Sales Agreement No. 40031729. Printed in the U.S.A. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *Architecture*, P.O. Box 2063, Marietta, OH 43305-2063.

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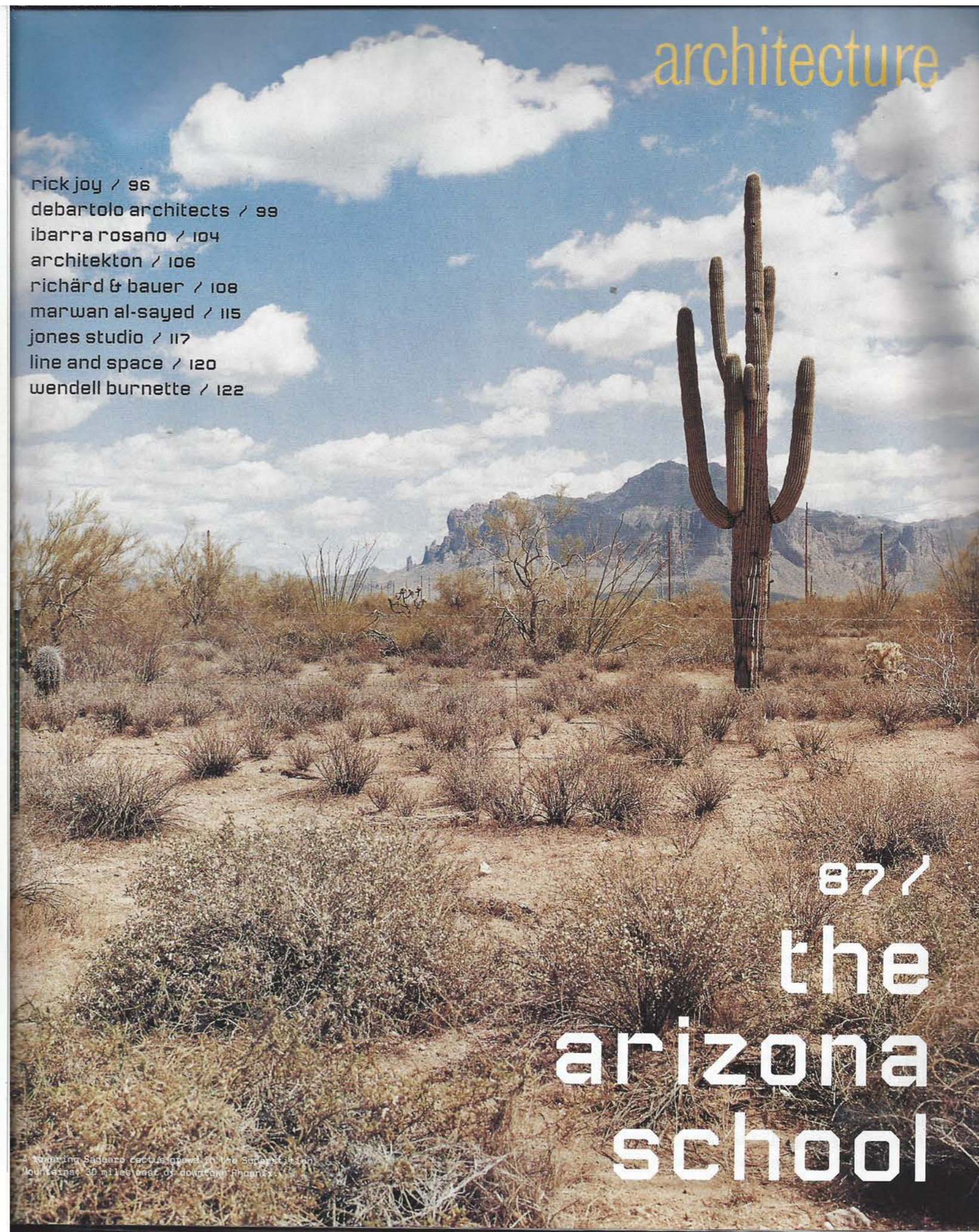


### > WILLIAM P. BRUDER ARCHITECT NEVADA MUSEUM OF ART / RENO, NEVADA

"In Western cities, the landscape is much better than most of the architecture," says Arizona architect Will Bruder, who, throughout his career, has turned to that same landscape for inspiration. Bruder's 1995 Phoenix Central Library (page 122), which has been described as a "metaphorical mesa," helped to define the vigorous school of critical regionalism taking root in the Southwest at the time. When his latest project, the Nevada Museum of Art in Reno, is completed in 2003, Bruder will have added one more building to architecture's side of the ledger.

Though located in downtown Reno, the \$22 million, 55,000-square-foot building invokes the landforms of the distant Black Rock Desert more than it does any of its immediate neighbors. Three of the building's four stories are clad in dark zinc panels; each has a different texture. The ground-floor gallery is glazed and open to the street. At the narrow northern edge of the museum, the zinc is arrayed in three orderly bands that correspond to the floors inside, but as one moves around the curving western side, these levels begin to slip and overlap, suggesting the colored striations one sees in mesas.

The museum's dark and purposefully mysterious outward appearance belies the more traditional amenities within. A café, a 200-seat auditorium, and a store flank the entry hall, which features a light well to draw visitors up through the galleries to a rooftop terrace and sculpture garden. From these gardens, one can look past what Bruder calls "the neon bright and pastels" of Reno toward the mountains around the city, which, for him, is where it all begins. **ANNE GUINEY**



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the  
arizona  
school

A | A.D. 1100



## the making of the arizona school

by lawrence w. cheek / photography by justine kurland

### LEARNING FROM WUKOKI

Twenty miles northeast of Flagstaff, the great ponderosa forest of the Coconino Plateau evaporates suddenly into a sere desert of pale red sand, black volcanic cinders, and the occasional lonely juniper, stunted by a skin-flint 8 inches of precipitation a year. It is stark, lovely, and hauntingly evocative, the sort of landscape that inspired the English novelist J. B. Priestley to describe Arizona as “the oldest country I had ever seen, the real antique land, first cousin to the moon.”

There is a real antique building out there, a prehistoric ruin that forms the perfect template for architecture in Arizona—not as it

is, but as it could be. Every few years I make a pilgrimage to Wukoki Ruin (A), preferably at dawn when nobody else is around, and I meditate on the relationship of humans and landscape. In few other places on earth is that ecology so delicate as in Arizona.

Around A.D. 1100, an optimistic Sinagua family built this six-room pueblo on a sandstone outcrop, taking the floor plan from the natural contours of the rock and chiseling the masonry from similar formations nearby. This is architecture in deep conversation with the land, the apotheosis of Wright’s declaration that a house should be *of* the hill. It seems profoundly respectful of its environ-

ment and yet defiant, expressing the courage the family would have needed to pry a living from this desert.

I romanticize. Wukoki may have “expressed” nothing to its makers except necessity. But the forces that have driven Arizona architecture and civilization in its later centuries of Hispanic and American occupation—fantasy, hubris, nostalgia, expedience, rapacity, an itch to rehabilitate the desert into something softer and greener, and, most persistently, insatiable urban sprawl—have produced little that responds to the land as gracefully as Wukoki. Arizonans have imposed wave after wave of styles on the place, but few have stood still long enough to let the land explain what it wanted.

There is an emergent “Arizona school” of architecture, however, one that maybe began with Wukoki or with Frank Lloyd Wright’s unbuilt but influential San Marcos in the

B | 1797



Desert resort, and that now persists in the work of a scattering of modernists, most in the Phoenix area. Unlike the Bauhaus Brahmins, their work is rooted in place, not dogma, squarely facing Arizona’s unique issues and opportunities: dramatic landscape, brutal heat, a deceptively fragile environment, and cultural traditions that are at once profoundly deep and veneer-thin. The good news is that these architects’ influence is expanding; the bad is that Arizona’s population is exploding even faster than that.

### PARADISE LOST

Arizona’s architectural history has been a pastiche of imported styles, attempts to impose the sensation of home on an unfamiliar land. The most spectacular imposition was (and is) the mission of San Xavier del Bac (B), completed in 1797 and recently restored to its original head-spinning baroque glory. San

Xavier was intended to dazzle the indigenous Tohono O’odham Indians not only with the majesty of a new God, but also with the power of the Spanish crown, and it rides the desert with a conqueror’s resplendence.

Anglos began dribbling into the territory after the Gadsden Purchase of 1854; the trickle became a tide after the railroad arrived in 1880. The newcomers were not intrigued by the vernacular Mexican architecture they found. “The adobe does not make an attractive or clean building,” huffed the *Arizona Citizen* in 1877, “and Eastern people find it somewhat repulsive... It is hoped that all new buildings of any pretensions will be built of brick and the unsightly adobe discarded.” This has the not-so-subtle whiff of racism—and predictably, the moment the trains began rumbling in with bricks, lumber, and craftsmen, Anglo Arizona dressed itself in Victorian cosmetics. In Florence, a sad-eyed town

between Tucson and Phoenix, someone built a remarkable two-story Italianate Victorian house in 1884—of adobe. The railroad, you see, never made it to Florence.

What happened next illustrates a deeply rooted Southwestern paradox. In 1893 California crashed the Columbian Exposition with a replica Spanish mission, and that building triggered a stampede out West. The Mission Revival was a way for architects to declare independence from the Eastern design establishment, and for an eager Anglo public to sip from the spring of the land’s real and imagined Hispanic history. Non-Latin Americans have long romanticized Latino culture, while at the same time often remaining wary and inwardly contemptuous. Architecture provided Anglos with a way to insinuate themselves into an exotic culture without a more threatening commitment.

The Mission and Spanish Colonial

C | 1937



revivals produced some magnificent buildings in Arizona—homes, churches, schools, court-houses, even barns—although the interiors seldom fulfilled the romantic promises outside. In the 1970s, though, a virulent epidemic of cartoon revivalism (I term it Taco Deco) became the pervasive vernacular, a quick way for newcomers to sink roots into an exotic land. Unfortunately, the authentic Mexican architecture of Arizona, the adobe house with enclosed courtyard and *zaguán* to channel ventilation through on a hot day, has been almost ignored as inspiration.

Modernism marched into Phoenix without critical contemplation. The city, its post-World War II boom ignited by the twin blessings of air conditioning and irrigation, needed to convince the country that it was to be taken seriously, so it sprouted groves of office towers, most of mind-numbing banality, a few clad in mirrored glass so as to bounce

sunlight around in a place that hardly needed more of it. Phoenix never saw itself as a desert city, so it ignored desert issues. Palm trees, laughably useless in providing the one thing Phoenix desperately needs—shade—still form an endless cortege down city streets. Suburban developers dredged so many artificial lakes that the legislature finally had to ban them as an unconscionable waste of water. Tucson, poorer, more liberal, and less ambitious than Phoenix, has always felt morally and intellectually superior, and it enjoys a far more enlightened attitude toward water conservation and xeriscaping—but in architecture, its most notable achievement remains San Xavier, completed two centuries ago.

Modernism produced some desert jewels in Phoenix, thanks mainly to the Miesian Al Beadle and his influence. Beadle embraced both the aesthetics and the ideals of the Bauhaus (and doggedly stayed the course

long after both had been heaved out with the bath water), and produced a prolific number of well crafted houses, apartment complexes, and commercial buildings. He fixed the inherent discombobulation of glass boxes on stark, bumpy desert sites by floating buildings like his own house in Phoenix (D) on elegant legs, and he embraced the climate with the “garden office” concept, wrapping buildings around atriums and filtering the sun with a scrim to create a temperate forest within. The forest also provided office workers with a fantasy environment, a few hours a day of refuge from the growing visual chaos outside.

#### AN ACRE AN HOUR

Oceans of khaki stucco and salmon tile flood into the desert in every direction from Phoenix and Tucson, tsunamis of development lapping over foothills and pouring into canyons, turning aside only where dammed

D | 1963



by a National Forest or reservation boundary. The current fury of expansion, the wealth surging into Arizona and demanding a place in the sun, is simply staggering, whether one views it as economic orgasm or environmental cancer. In 1995 the *Arizona Republic* calculated that metropolitan Phoenix was metastasizing at the rate of an acre an hour, a pace that has not slackened since. In the first 12 months after the 2000 census, Arizona grew by 155,000 people, two-thirds of them arriving from other states or countries.

The engine powering Arizona's built environment has always been cheap land (and lots of it—even at an acre an hour it would take Phoenix 8,328 years to fill up the state) as well as an endless tide of newcomers and speculators eager to buy something, anything, in sun-splashed paradise. To interact gracefully with a landscape and ecosystem takes an investment of time in the place, and not many

Arizonans have that. For every three who arrive, two leave. The demand for an appropriate and respectful architecture is an occasional wail in the wilderness.

Phoenix is a relentlessly horizontal city, its arterial grid a 40-mile-square checkerboard, except where inconvenienced by a mountain. Even the ranch-style houses seem stretched, like brick limos. Phoenix boasts close to the lowest population density of any major U.S. metro area, but it ranks among the world's highest rates of home ownership, at 65 percent. As Grady Gammage Jr., a Phoenix planning and development lawyer, points out, Frank Lloyd Wright's utopian vision of “Broadacre City” has been realized with eerie prescience in the acre-an-hour metropolis. What Wright would say about its architecture would be unprintable, but he would applaud the egalitarian freedom that its sprawl has enabled. In the sense that the new cities of the West

offered people the opportunity to escape the squalor of 19th-century working-class life back east, Phoenix has succeeded more spectacularly than anyplace else.

But sprawl has imposed its own brand of squalor. As the sociobiologist Edward O. Wilson has written, humans animals have been conditioned across evolutionary time to seek shelter on a hill or mountain, the better to scan the savanna for game or enemies. This ancient instinct, fueled with 20th-century wealth, has been a disaster for Arizona.

Phoenix is punctuated with colorful buttes and mountains; Tucson is dominated by a towering range 9,157 feet high. But their slopes support low-rise thorn forests of cacti and lacy trees such as mesquite and acacia, and roads and houses on them read as scars. The houses are increasingly prominent and pretentious—wannabe castles and Mediterranean villas—and zoning, even



where it restricts houses to one every 40 acres, has failed. People who buy such properties tend to have both the means and the ego to blow up half a mountain for a driveway.

The mythic attractions of the West—big skies, heroic landscapes and the sense that one can own it all and do whatever the hell he wants with it—remain a vivid cultural force in the Southwest, even as the crowds thicken. The land itself, larger than life, feeds the myth.

“Here the land always makes promises of aching beauty and the people always fail the land,” observed essayist Charles Bowden, the Southwest’s most poetic fatalist. But no, not everyone, not always. There are successes, and the common thread is that their creators understood, by intellect or instinct, the unique mood, texture, and demands of the land.

#### OUT OF THE STUCCO JUNGLE

Will Bruder came to Arizona in 1967 to study

with Paolo Soleri, who had arrived in 1947 to apprentice with Wright. The latter had first ventured into Arizona in 1928 to design the San Marcos resort, aborted by the Depression. There is not a shred of stylistic or philosophical continuity in this lineage, but influences passed among them in other important ways.

Bruder, for example, says of his work with Soleri: “It was all about invention with modest means, and never assuming you couldn’t do something because you didn’t have the money to do it conventionally. What I took away from him was the ethos of looking at materials in new ways, trying to find the extraordinary in the ordinary.”

Bruder, now 56, has in turn influenced a rising generation of Arizona architects: Jack DeBartolo 3, Wendell Burnette, and Rick Joy all worked in his studio. “None of the stuff we’re doing now would be possible if Bruder hadn’t paved the way, hacked through the

stucco jungle,” said Jim Richârd, another young Phoenician.

Wright was the first Arizonan, at least since Sinagua times, to interpret the land itself in architecture. In the San Marcos project he mimicked the massing of the mountain behind the hotel and echoed the vertical fluting of the saguaros around it. In his desert masterpiece of 10 years later, Taliesin West (E), he evoked not only the textures of the land, but also, miraculously, its mood—quiet, angular, paradoxically delicate. “The dotted line is the line for the desert,” he wrote, suggesting a principle of broken, irregular massing and articulation that still influences architects wise enough to listen today.

Wright reacted to the desert instinctively and romantically; others have responded metaphorically. The late Judith Chafee, who would bristle at talk of “style” in her work, once lowered her guard enough to explain



where the decisive, muscular mood of her southern Arizona houses came from. “I still have a sense of frontier about this part of the world,” she said. “The houses are lonely, kind of freestanding worlds unto themselves.” Bruder’s acclaimed Phoenix Central Library (F) is an abstract mesa riddled with canyons and mineral treasures hidden inside. His Deer Valley Rock Art Center is crusted in black slag from a copper mine, which visually establishes the building as kin to the basalt rock pile next door while making a statement on waste: *It can be beautiful—and useful!*

The Arizonistas can bow to a dramatic site or abstract the environment in a provocative pose—both are legitimate and dramatic additions to the landscape if they’re done well. Les Wallach virtually lets the site design his buildings, taking fastidious care with the topography, views, sun angles, and vegetation. The architecture merges with the desert.

And every architect working in Arizona has to acknowledge the sun and light—creatively, defensively, or provocatively. There is no single solution, no formula. Wright liked to break it up with his “dotted lines” or invite it in, filtered into harmlessness as by the original canvas ceiling of the drafting room at Taliesin West (updated provocatively in Marwan Al-Sayed’s House of Earth + Light, page 115); Antoine Predock created a well in his Nelson Fine Arts Center at Arizona State University, where diffused sunlight becomes an unearthly work of art. The Arizona school lately has been using more metal—as cladding, scrim, or sculptural form—because of its infinite possibilities in filtering, reflecting, and sharply articulating light and shadow. It also bakes in the relentless sun without minding.

But here, finally, rises the core question: Can a scattering of good buildings make a difference in a place that grows by 155,000

new souls a year, where the architectural forms most Arizonans encounter on a given day are the woozy nostalgia of the stucco subdivisions and the amorphous frenzy of the commercial strips?

It might, because Arizona’s big skies and dramatic landscapes have always nurtured dreamers with grand ideas (and crackpot schemes—the 1970s relocation of London Bridge to Lake Havasu qualifies as both). Arcosanti (E) is by any rational judgment a failure, both as architecture and in its attempt to renovate humans into social insects. But Soleri is right about one thing: Six billion people cannot live as suburbanites. Its antipode, Broadacre City, is equally preposterous, and yet, after a fashion, it’s working. Perhaps a landscape gets the architecture it deserves. It did at Wukoki; it could again. I think, though, that more of us should make that pilgrimage. ■

## GLOSSARY

**Adobe** a load-bearing building material made of sun-dried clay or earth mixed with straw.

**Acacia** (*Acacia*) a large genus of leguminous shrubs and trees native to Africa and Asia that typically have gnarled bark, and that bear clusters of yellow flowers.

**Arroyo** a small stream or gully in a typically dry area.

**Mesquite** (*Prosopis*) a genus of deciduous shrubs and trees native to the Sonora, Mojave, and Chihuahua deserts. The trees can grow up to 30 feet and bear yellow flowers and beanlike pods.

**Ocotillo** (*Fouquieria splendens*) a plant native to the Sonora and Chihuahua deserts whose many woody canes form an inverted funnel shape that can reach up to 20 feet. Leaves emerge immediately after rain, though small red flowers emerge in early summer regardless.

**Pueblo** a large communal dwelling built by Native Americans in Arizona and New Mexico. They are typically constructed out of stone or adobe, have flat roofs, and are several stories high.

**Ponderosa** (*Pinaceae pinus ponderosa*) a large evergreen tree with an irregular crown that, as it grows to its mature height of 200 feet, develops a flat top or short conical crown. Also known as the Western yellow pine, it is found in the Rocky Mountains from Canada to Mexico.

**Ramada** an outdoor, shaded work structure with open sides that permit the passage of wind.

**Rammed earth** a building material used primarily for walls, and comprised of a mixture of screened earth, portland cement, and water. It is poured into formwork and then compacted with a pneumatic tamper.

**Saguaro** (*Carnegiea gigantea*) a cactus native to the Southwestern United States and Northwest Mexico that takes 150 years to reach its full height of 40 feet.

**Sinagua** the best-known regional group of the Western Anasazi people. The Sinagua occupied an area between Flagstaff and Phoenix between A.D. 500 and 1300, and lived on corn farming and subsistence hunting.

**Tohono O'odham** ("Desert People") a Native American people related closely to the Pima and whose lands lie along the border between Mexico and Arizona. The O'odham traditionally migrated between villages in order to follow the annual rains.

**Xeriscape** a school of landscaping that is based on the conservation of water. Popular in areas with little rainfall, xeriscaped gardens typically make use of native plants or those well suited to the local conditions.

**Zaguan** a large entrance porch or corridorlike vestibule that is a typical feature of Mexican architecture. It typically runs perpendicular to the road.



FROM LEFT: DOUGLAS BROWN, EDDIE JONES, JACK DEBARTOLO 2, JACK DEBARTOLO 3, JAMES RICHARD, WENDELL BURNETTE, NEAL JONES, LES WALLACH, HENRY TOM, TERESA ROSANO, WILL BRUDER, LUIS IBARRA, JOHN KANE, JOE SALVATORE