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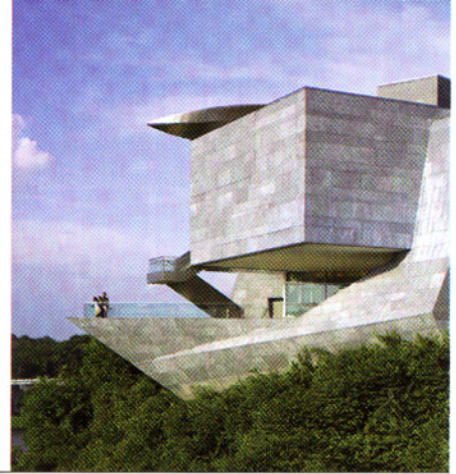
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ARCHITECTURAL RECORD

11.2005

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Modernism Comes Home to Tucson

Correspondent's File

By Kenneth Caldwell

Tucson's young architects are returning to their Modernist roots, and Modernism is returning with them.

Anne-Marie Russell, executive director and chief curator of Tucson's Museum of Contemporary Art, sees the city's early pedigree in Native American and Hispanic adobe building as intrinsically Modernist. She says, "When building in the desert, you are dealing with reduced forms and materials that respond to the climate. Tucson is naturally, indigenously Modern—or, at least, the ethics of Modernism are in line with the 'less is more' ethos that one must adopt while living in what can be a harsh and unforgiving environment. There is no room for waste in the desert; you conserve everything—water, your energy, and so on."

The Southwest's rapid growth immediately after World War II nurtured several skilled Modernists, such as Arthur Brown, William Wilde, Nicholas Sakellar, and later Judith Chafee. Using structural steel, poured-in-place concrete, glass block, and aluminum sliding doors, combined with simple rectangular forms, sculptural sunscreens, and flat roofs, their innovative work responded simply to the desert's austere beauty and continued the sensitivity of the early settlers. Modern architects in the Southwest desert also incorporated steel and glass, making possible an open architecture that embraced the

Kenneth Caldwell is a writer and communications consultant based in Oakland, California.

landscape and took advantage of the climate.

But then, according to John Messina, a research architect at the University of Arizona, the rapid growth of the 1970s and '80s, which was fueled in part by tax laws that played into the hands of developers, encouraged architecture of poor quality. Historical forms were divorced from their desert surroundings; strip malls crowned by plastic-tile mansard roofs lined busy boulevards; and neighborhoods sprouted gated subdivisions of tiny, multicolored stucco faux-pueblos.

A rebirth of Modernism

In the past few years, there have been promising signs of change. Comparatively favorable property prices and Tucson's stunning environs have attracted a knowledgeable client base. In response, locally born (or educated) architects, perhaps inspired by Rick Joy, AIA's national reputation, are expressing new ideas heralding a refreshing return to appropriate and contemporary desert design.

This reemergence can also be linked to the reinvigorated program at the University of Arizona's College of Architecture and Landscape Architecture, where Alvaro Malo, director of the university's architecture program since 1998, has established a Distinguished Visitor Studio and related lecture series that draws design professionals from all over the world.



Judith Chafee's Blackwell House (above), a Modernist landmark in Tucson, was destroyed in 1998. Rob Paulus's Puhler residence (right and below) was built on an infill lot and contrasts dramatically with its older neighbors.



The growing Museum of Contemporary Art has played an important public role, sponsoring several programs on architectural Modernism under the catchy title "Design Lab," such as well-attended lectures, tours, and exhibitions. Anne Nequette and R. Brooks Jeffery's excellent book, *A Guide to Tucson*



Architecture, gives Modernism equal weight with earlier styles.

"The choice between Modernism and southwestern kitsch is not one of style but of principle," says local architect Will Peterson, who has designed in the Southwest for years and says he is witnessing a renaissance of his style of choice in Tucson. Peterson's forms take cues from architects such as Frank Lloyd Wright and A. Quincy Jones, designing his houses to recede into

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the landscape. His Cook House features buff-colored concrete block, sandblasted to reveal the aggregate, and a weathering steel roof complements the color. In a Kahn-like move, Peterson organized the house around parallel masses of masonry, which vary in thickness from 4 to 8 feet.

Creating change

Despite increased awareness of Modern design, clients still have to be convinced. University of Arizona architecture graduates Miguel Fuentesvilla and Sonya Sotinsky returned to Tucson from Berkeley in 1999 and began FORS Architecture + Interiors. One of their first commissions was the renovation of a midcentury house designed by William Wilde and owned by a family member of the architects. Fuentesvilla and Sotinsky were eventually able to convince the owner of

the original design's value. "In the beginning of our practice, it was frustrating, since most clients were asking for some version of an imagined history," says Sotinsky.

Since early commissions can be difficult to secure, friends as well as family are often key. Luis Ibarra and Teresa Rosano grew up in Tucson, met at the architecture school, founded Ibarra Rosano Design Architects six years ago, and have developed a reputation for muscular yet sensitive desert dwellings. One of their first commissions, the Garcia House, came from a trusting friend who gave them a lot of freedom. The carefully framed views, fragmented forms, and multiple levels of the Garcia House brought the architects a lot of publicity, which

Ibarra Rosano converted a typical postwar Tucson brick bungalow into a Modern showpiece with dramatic vistas (right and below).



a codeveloper for two multifamily projects in neighborhoods adjacent to downtown where few had ventured before. Although his Barrio Metallico is the more daring of the two—in an industrial neighborhood and clad in corrugated metal—it contains nine single-family dwellings on two city lots. At the

helped launch their practice.

Beyond the commissions of permissive friends and family, many Tucson architects are also turning to fringe neighborhoods and infill projects, and serving as developers. Rob Paulus, another locally raised and educated architect, has been

Icehouse Lofts, a converted ice and cold-storage building from the early 1920s, Paulus has created 51 condominium units on 2.66 acres, a density almost unheard of in the desert. Interestingly, the project sold out quickly. Throughout the Icehouse, he reused several ele-

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ments, such as lumber, corrugated metal, and box-car siding. Paulus has now embarked on Indigo Lofts, a 22-unit project in a mixed-density neighborhood east of the university.

Another example of innovative development is "Dreamspace," Ibarra Rosano's partnership with a client and locally educated architect/contractor, Page Repp. They

TUCSON'S LOWER PROPERTY PRICES AND STUNNING ENVIRONS HAVE ATTRACTED A KNOWLEDGEABLE CLIENT BASE.

are developing a number of imaginative infill projects, for which Tucson's typical lots (50-by-125 to -150 feet) offer plenty of opportunity. Working with one of these lots, Rob Bass, another local who now works for ABA Architects, designed a modest duplex behind a small house. It fills its allowable building envelope with two mirror-image, 1,000-square-

foot shotgun units that were constructed for about \$80 per square foot in 2002. The sandblasted gray concrete block serves as the interior and exterior finish, and the variety in the facades is created by the placement of the windows and Cor-Ten-steel panels. He comments, "What is positive about the emerging interest in Modernism

here is that it is not a trend or a style, but an idea. Clients understand the harsh environment and want an appropriate response."

Like the first generation, the young architects are interested in the idea of Modernism, but they are also concerned with using as little energy as possible and integrating sustainable materials. Some, like

Paulus and Ibarra Rosano, are bolder in their use of forms, materials, or color.

Tucson's new identity

In the mid-20th century, most of Tucson's Modernist architects were out-of-towners; these new Modernists have come of age in the desert. However, much of the client interest is coming from outside the area. Most of the buyers in Paulus's Icehouse are new to Tucson, and about half of FORS's clients are from out of state. "It is interesting that the people who are in tune with what the desert can offer are often from somewhere else," comments Sotinsky. As *The New York Times* and National Public Radio (NPR) have reported, many Californians are moving to Tucson because of the relatively low cost of real estate and because it isn't as congested as Phoenix.

Yet, while the principles of Modernism may be moving toward a more sensitive and sustainable architectural movement, its cooper-

ative spirit has far to go in the larger context of planning policy. One promising sign is that Pima County, of which Tucson is the seat, recently created the Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan, which protects natural, historic, and cultural resources while regulating the built environment. Jeffery feels the plan's ranch conservation component could help define a much-needed urban growth boundary around Tucson. In 2003, a controversial zoning ordinance passed, limiting construction on the most visible peaks, but several grandfathered projects are still crawling up the mountainsides. Public transit is insufficient, and city-sponsored transportation improvements have been consistently voted down. Paulus jokes, "Here in Tucson we say there are two things we don't like: sprawl and density." The next challenge for Tucson's new wave of Modernists will be extending themselves beyond designing responsive buildings to finding solutions to this paradox. ■