Haute Houses

The latest local architectural trend glosses over the desert.

BY ROBRT L. PELA

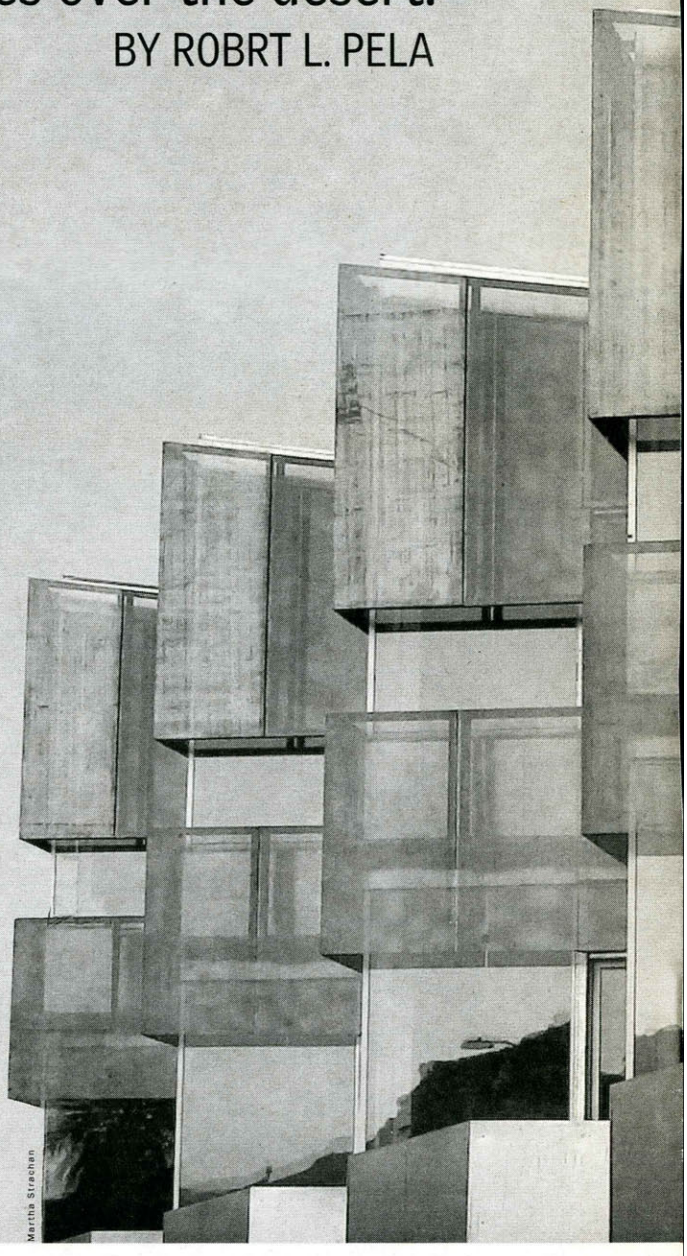
Leesa Stuck's house is where birds go to kill themselves.

"They fly directly into the glass walls," Stuck says, pointing a bare foot at one of the several floor-to-ceiling windows in her Paradise Valley home. "Mostly sparrows. You know, the little brown kind. They don't know about glass. They're just birds. They think they're flying into our house, and then they're dead."

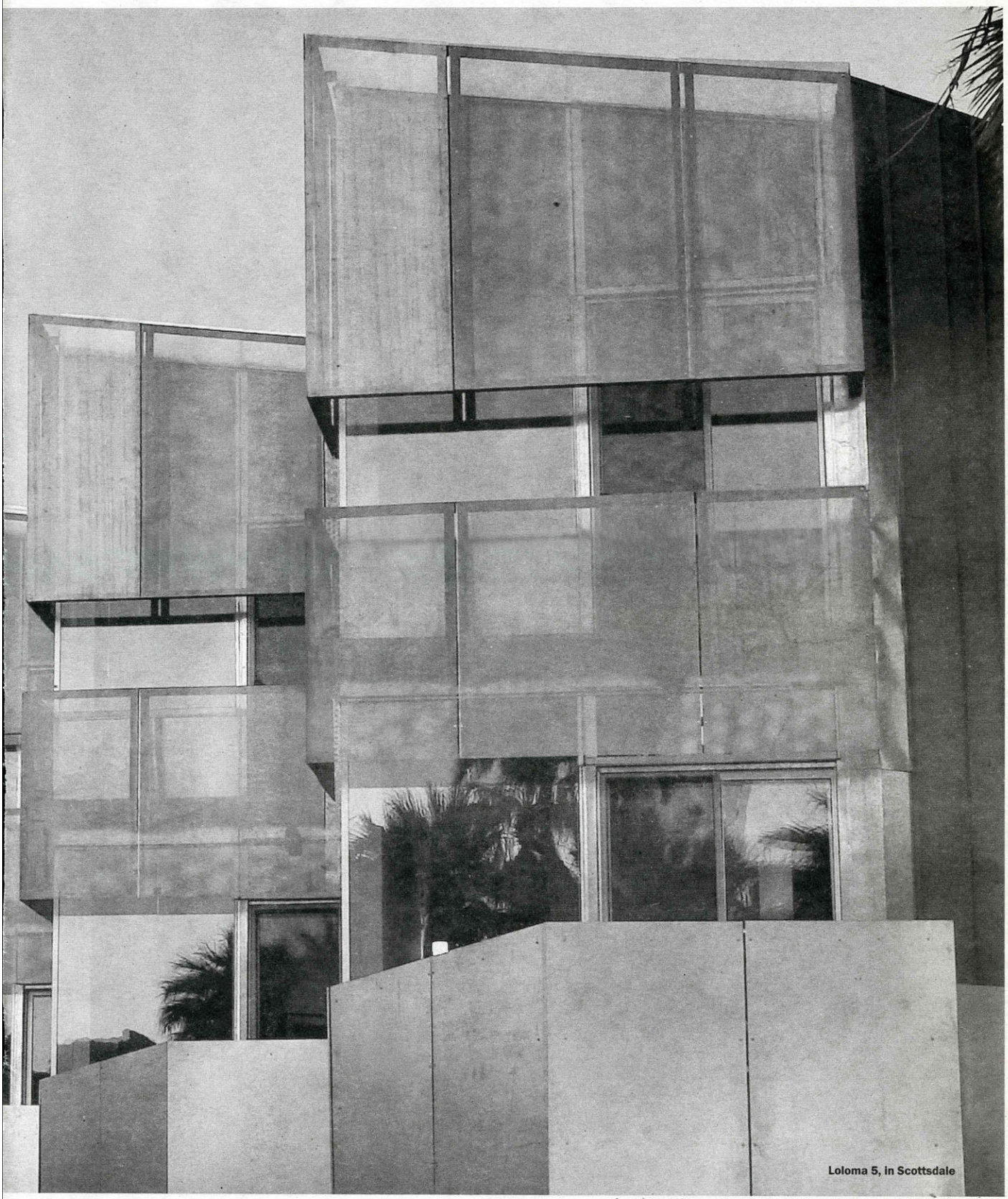
Stuck feels bad about the dead birds. She tried hanging tapestries over the windows in the den, because those are the most murderous windows. But her husband made her take them down.

"He says what's the point of living in a glass house if you're going to cover it all up?" Stuck says, giggling and shaking her Rod-Stewart-shag-cut head. But the question that Stuck has secretly been asking herself is one that many locals have been asking more and more lately themselves: Why, here in the desert, would anyone live in a glass house at all?

Yet they're popping up all over town, continued on page 19



Martha Strachan



Loloma 5, in Scottsdale

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in a city that never completely cools down in the summer, one where nighttime lows have increased nearly 20 degrees in the last 30 years, where houses made of heat-generating glass and metal don't seem like an energy-efficient choice. For proof, locals need look no further than the infamously impossible-to-cool Sandra Day O'Connor Courthouse; Marwan al-Sayed's equally notorious hot-as-blazes "House of Earth and Light," or any number of un-air-conditionable homes which, like Stuck's, run up gigantic utility bills in the summer and look like castoffs from *Jetsons: The Movie*.

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The Vale, designed by Will Bruder, features outdoor staircases made of metal and wide sheets of perforated steel.

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The hot staircase at The Vale.

There's the low, **continued on page 22**

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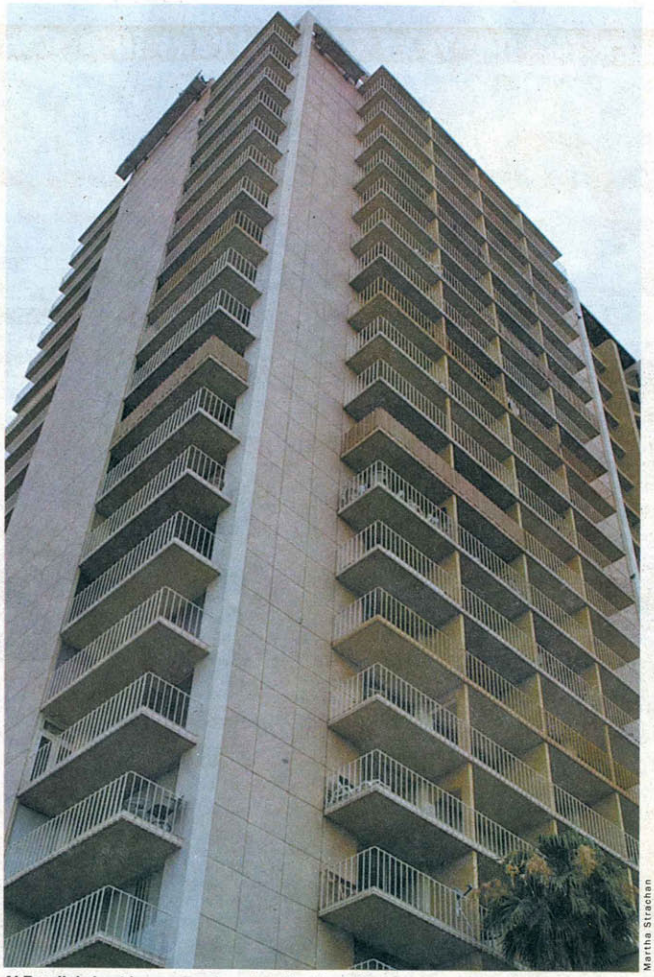
glass-fronted condo complex on North 36th Street known as The Boardwalk, one of renowned desert architect Al Beadle's more famous designs, which Stuck visited on a recent American Institute of Architects home tour and which she describes as looking like "a really beautiful car-rental agency." And the well-known Xeros Residence, a lofty, cantilevered glass box that towers over a late-1950s neighborhood, its exposed steel designed to rust over so that it blends in with the nearby mountain preserve. There's the stackable prefab v2 project, which promises to deliver as many design-it-yourself housing units as Phoenix can sustain.

And there's Stuck's own home, which she calls "My Der Wienerschnitzel" because of its tall, peaked roof, and which she claims to love even though it's costing her a fortune to keep cool; even though she has to cook with her microwave all summer because her gas range heats up her whole house so unbearably.

It's weird to see these often energy-inefficient homes going up all over town. What's weirder is that the futuristic look of all this glass-and-metal-and-Crayola-bright exterior construction doesn't say "sand and cactus" so much as it says "futuristic movie set." How we got from the mud huts of Old West Casa Grande to a town so full of glass houses it's starting to look like a prototype for Disney's Tomorrowland is a tale full of the usual suspects found in any story set in Phoenix: greedy civic leaders; naive businesspeople; unsophisticated consumers.

These are the players who are helping erect a skyline filled with the sort of eccentric modern architecture once offered only by high-end builders to folks who wanted a custom home that made a statement and could afford a seven-digit budget. Which meant that pricey, glass-box architecture was once tucked behind giant walls in the more remote reaches of the desert or in suburban Paradise Valley, where turreted faux castles spring up alongside Tuscan villas every other week. But these Frank Lloyd Wright-influenced glass boxes have lately been springing up on our city streets with regularity, made affordable by developers who are courting a new generation of homeowners who want, apparently, to live in toaster ovens.



Martha Strachan

Al Beadle's best-known local work is the Executive Towers, an energy-efficient residential high-rise.

There's The Vale, those big, boxy, bright-green condos over on University Drive in Tempe, designed by architect Will Bruder, who's wrapped them in shiny sheets of metal just as he did with Burton Barr Library and nearly all of his best-known buildings.

Or the Beadle View lofts at Catalina Drive and Third Street. Coming soon is Morningside Eight, a set of crayon-bright, glass-fronted "row houses" on Sixteenth Street near Indian School Road.

And Haven, a stucco apartment complex in Tempe that's being completely overhauled to look like something out of a low budget sci-fi film.And perhaps most prominently there's v2, a collection of prefab glass boxes that homebuyers can use to create an Erector Set dream home anywhere they want to.

This new glass-and-metal trend is what ASU's Harvey Bryan calls "the last remnants of Modernism." Bryan, a professor of architecture who champions sustainable building practices, makes no attempt to disguise his disdain over this glass-box craze, which he says grew out of the heralded designs of groundbreaking architects like the late Frank Lloyd Wright, whose houses combined steel, concrete, and glass with natural elements, and Beadle, one of the pioneers of Arizona architecture, who died in 1998. Beadle's hallmarks included the steel frames, stilted foundations, and wide expanses of glass that typified commercial buildings throughout the Valley in the 1950s and 1960s.

Scott Jarson, a fan of these Beadle buildings, thinks the last trend in residential design that really made sense for the desert was the ranch house, those smaller-scale, ground-hugging dwellings that stayed cool and, because they referenced the bunkhouses of a true western ranch, said "desert."

"That all changed in the '80s, when we went to the Spanish-stucco-box-with-ceramic-tile-roof look, which gave way to the faux Tuscan mansion," says Jarson, who co-owns Jarson and Jarson Real Estate, a com- continued on page 24

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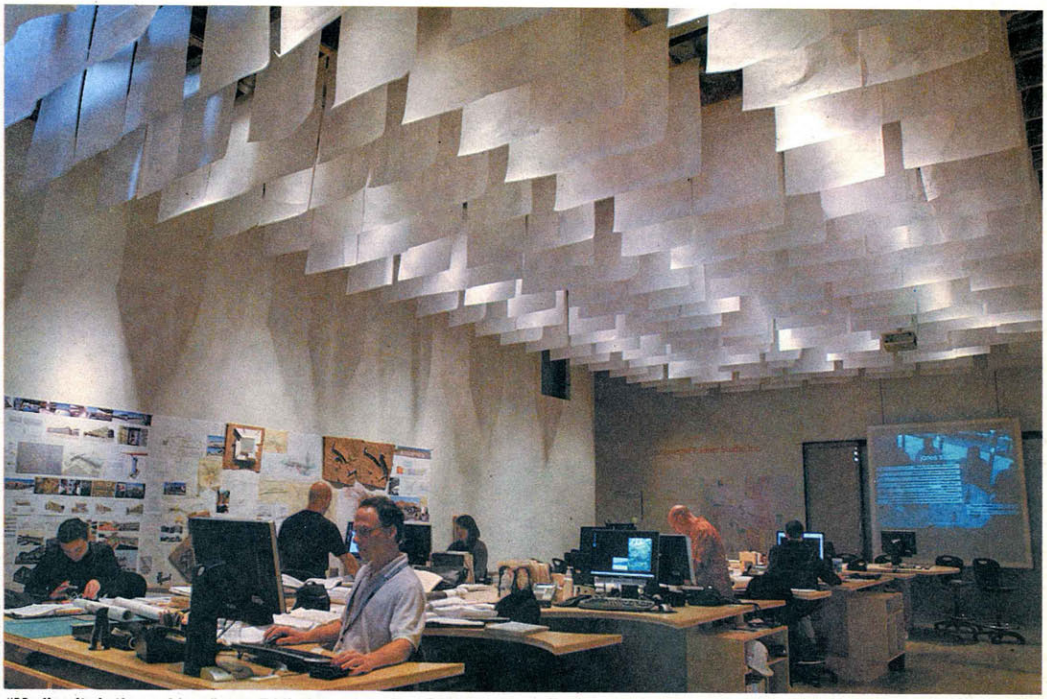
pany that specializes in selling "unique" local homes. "That change resulted in a sea of houses that don't belong here — throw a different roof on them and you could be anywhere."

Eddie Jones, who's widely recognized as one of the Southwest's most respected and talented architects, is tired of hearing that shiny chrome houses look funny in the desert. Modern architecture is back with a vengeance, he says, in response to all the ticky-tacky lookalike houses that Jarson was bitching about. "What does a Santa Fe mud hut made of chicken wire and a layer of stucco have to do with the desert?" he asks. "Why would anyone want to live in a house where the only way you know you're home is your house number is different? I love the hundred-year-old houses and the modern ones, and everything in between is shit."



Martha Strachan

"Mediocrity is the problem," says Eddie Jones (whose entire office is on display at Scottsdale Center for the Arts) of much of modern architecture.

The problem, Jones says, isn't modern architecture — it's the cheap knockoffs that people want to live in because they think it makes them sophisticated to live in a "mod" building. "Nothing, not poetry or painting or architecture, works well when it's implemented poorly. Mediocrity is the problem here."

Like most of his colleagues, Jones dodges the question about how houses that feature giant windows wrapped in stainless steel are reflective of the sandy tones and rocky terrains of the desert. Pressed to explain what about mountains and cactus says "glass and chrome!" all of these guys invoke a tenet of mid-century architecture popularized by the late Ralph Haver, the Arizona architect continued on page 26

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to-cool glass are there so that we can admire the majestic saguaro and the

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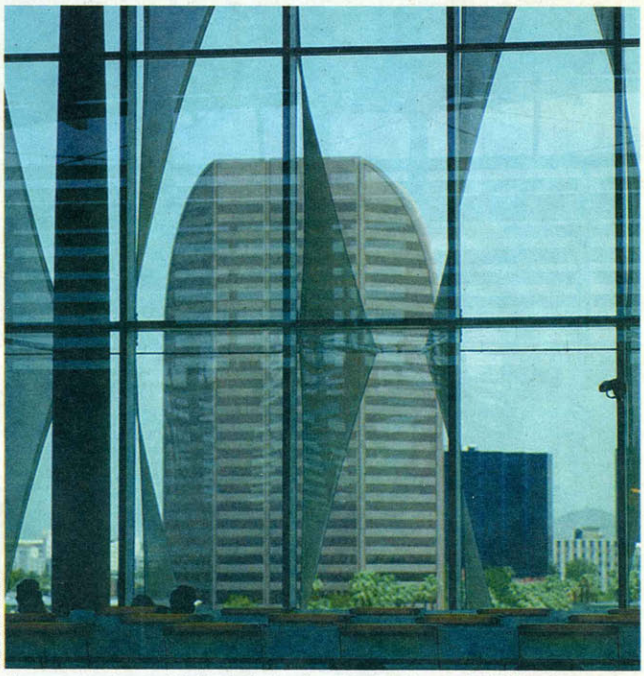
Architect Will Bruder lives in one of his own metal-clad designs.

renowned for his crafty ranch-style designs: the one about blurring the line between indoors and outdoors; about sparkly sand; so that we can invite the deep blue skies into our living rooms.

It's a nice thought. Except that



Martha Strachan

The massive glass wall in Bruder's downtown Burton Barr Central Library is cooled by an electronic shading system.

"bringing the outside in." These celebrated kings of desert architecture want us to believe that those sheets of hard- nearly all of these new developments are situated on busy city streets nowhere near the **continued on page 28**

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desert. Most all of them look out onto not-so-majestic telephone poles, sparkly paved streets, and skies brown with exhaust fumes. There aren't any saguaros growing on University Drive in Tempe. Osborn Road is bereft of sandy expanses.

Gustad Irani, a former student of Frank Lloyd Wright's Taliesin school of architecture, says that while Wright popularized the "outdoors in" design, he didn't mean for it to be applied literally. "Mr. Wright wanted the house to be a home, not a collection of manmade materials," says Irani, who designs homes for at his own Scottsdale-based architecture firm, Organic Design Workshop. Wright offset his wide windows with overhangs to provide shade, and warmed up metal and glass with wood and fabric

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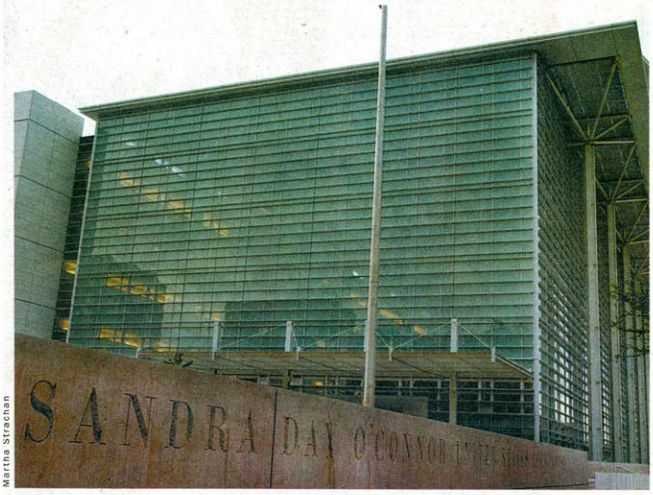

Martha Strachan

The ultimate hot box (or is it?): Downtown's Sandra Day O'Connor Courthouse.

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The problem with modern architecture, according to Jack Black, is the lack of consistency.

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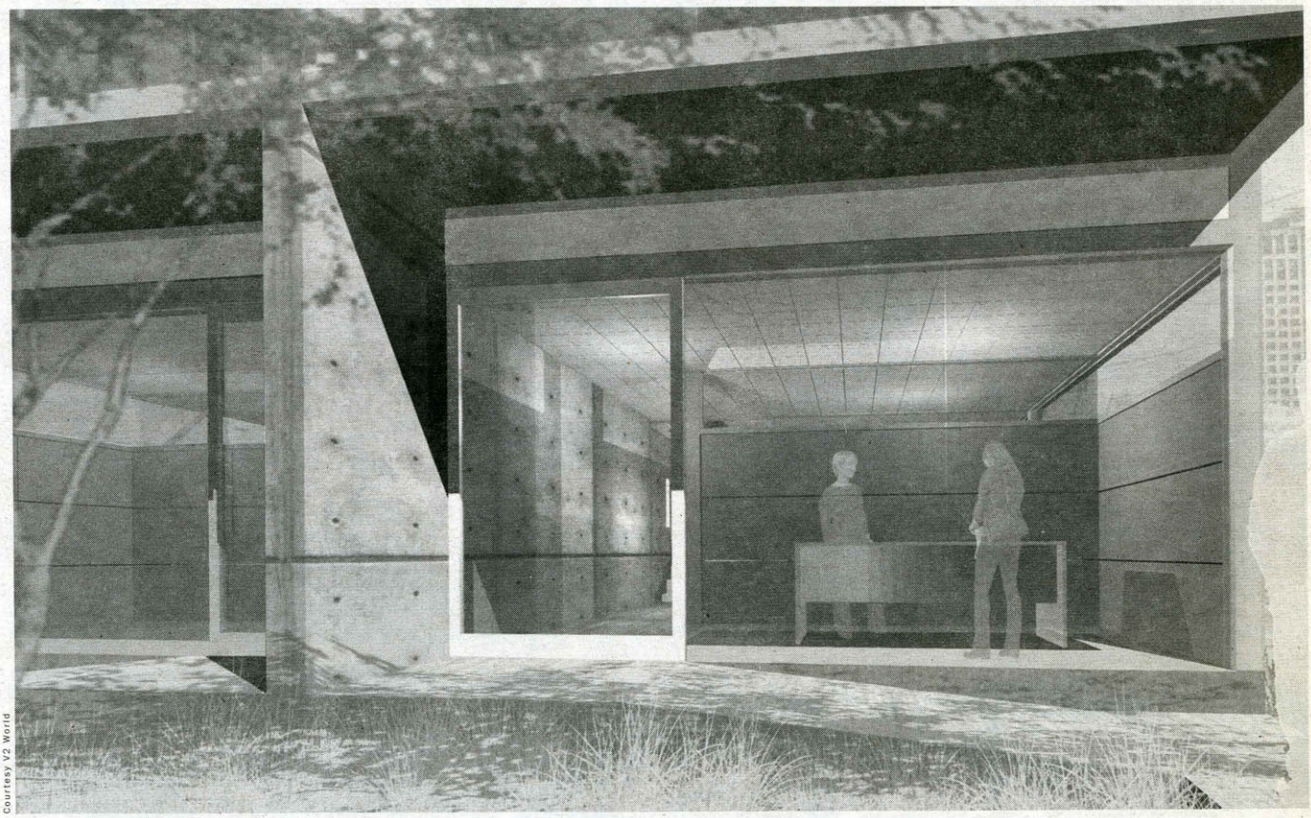
and desert materials, things that Irani says we're seeing less and less of lately. "Mr. Wright envisioned modern homes that reflected their surroundings," Irani says with more than a little reverence.



Courtesy V2 World

v2: Our prefab future, in a box.

"He didn't want the client to feel he was living in a glass and metal box."

So what happened to Wright's vision of desert living?

"There are much worse things than a city full of glass boxes," says Jarson, who sells them. "At least we'd have a signature, a look. People would say, 'Oh, you live in that glass box city,' instead of 'Oh, you live in that *beige* place.'"

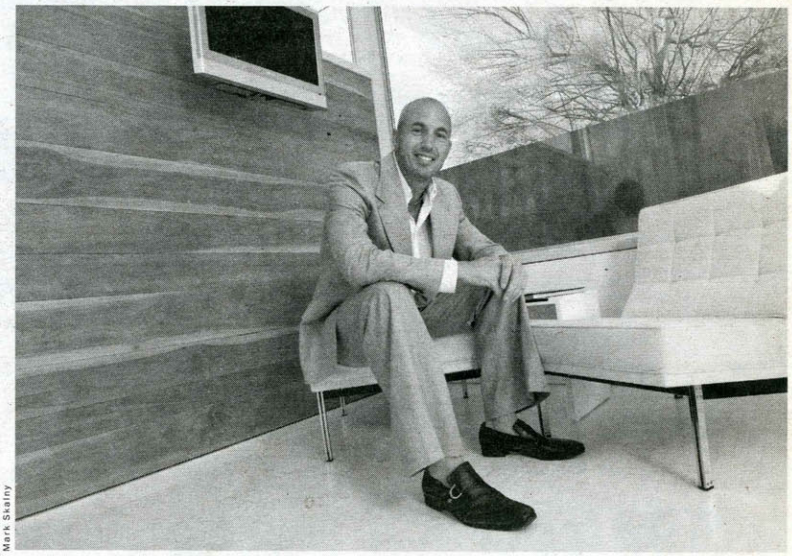
But modern architecture was born in more hospitable climates than our desert — Wright's in Chicago, for example — where there were fewer considerations about long, harsh summers; where a lot of sunshine didn't necessarily mean a lot of insufferable heat and therefore didn't require a ton of insulation. Harvey Bryan says that the environmentally responsive desert homes of the early Modern movement, like Haver's ecologically sound tract homes, have been abandoned in favor of buildings that pay tribute to the better design elements of Haver and his predecessors, without benefit of most of their eco-friendly attributes.

"We are designing buildings that are appropriate for Europe in the 1930s," Bryan says. "But most of these architects here haven't learned how to build for the desert in the early 21st century. They're all great guys, and I understand that they want to push the envelope. But they have to overlay things like climate and the extreme relationship we have with the sun on top of all the handsome designs, and they're not always doing that. And people are living in houses that aren't energy efficient. Why is that a good idea?"

It's not, and Leesa Stuck is living proof. She lives in a $1.5-million home with two full-size air conditioning units, one at either end, and she can't get her home below 80 degrees in July. She runs the dishwasher and washing machine at night because it's cheaper; she's trying to trim her $700-a-month summer electricity bills.

She doesn't like to tell people the name of the (largely unknown) architect or the very high-profile builders who built her home, because she doesn't blame them. She blames herself, and sometimes her boyfriend, because until three years ago they'd lived their whole lives in suburban Minneapolis and didn't know that a house with two 10-foot windows in front would be so hard to keep cool.

"I guess we just thought things like heating and cooling were all taken into consideration by the people who built the house," she says, rolling her eyes. "What did we know?"



Mark Skalny

v2 founder Tim Russell: "We are on the cutting edge."

It's this "what did we know?" mentality that's really behind the row of glass boxes marching across our horizon. "Modern architecture is going to continue to be popular with builders because it's built on less expensive materials," says Valley architect and designer Jack Black. "The problem is that there's no consistency. We have some very talented architects, and also some really stupid

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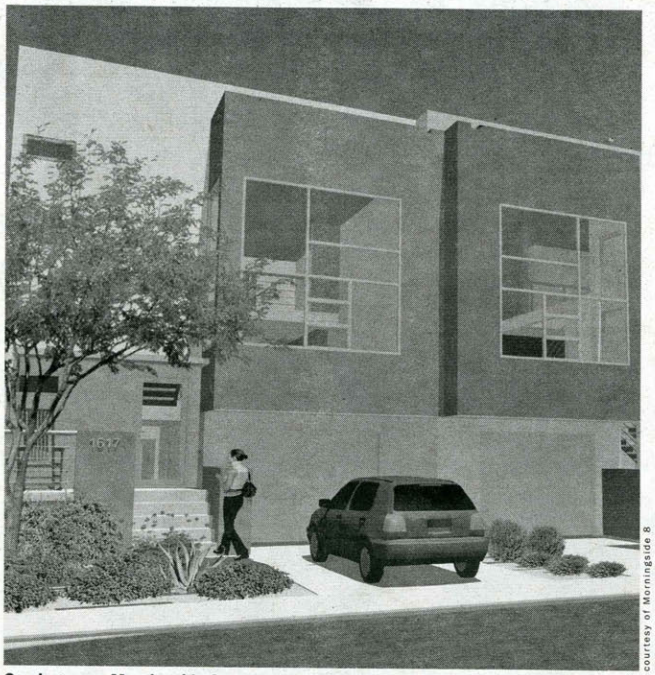
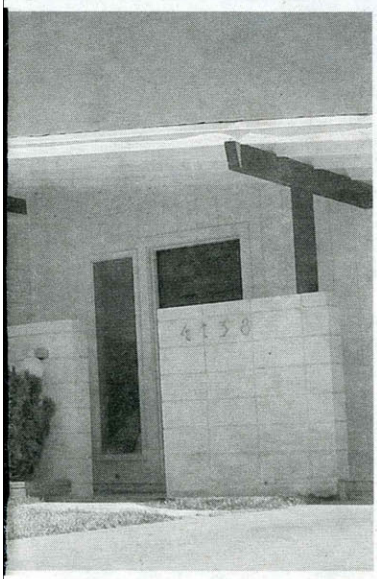
evaporative cooling system. The building's press liaison, Richard Weare, swears that the building's hot-as-balls past is behind it; that its cooling problems were rectified, not long after the building opened, with just a couple of simple tweaks to its existing system. (In fact, workers and visitors alike on a recent 108-degree afternoon seemed perfectly comfortable in the building's cool atrium and lobby offices.) But the damage to the courthouse's reputation has been done, and it comes up in conversations about bad structural planning almost as often as what people around here tend to call "the Lisa Sette House," but which its architect, Baghdad-born Marwan al-Sayed, dubbed "The House of Earth and Light."



courtesy of Morningside 8

Coming soon: Morningside 8, more glass-trimmed boxes.



Al-Sayed's house has become a local legend, although not so much for its environmentally sound materials or its cunning design as for its infamous heat-generating roof. The home, which has been written about in architecture magazines around the globe, features 18-inch-thick walls made of a mix of custom concrete and earth from the site that insulate the house from heat. But for some reason, on top of these heat-expelling walls, al-Sayed plopped a roof made almost entirely of stretched canvas.

"Imagine what it would be like to live in a tent in the desert in the middle of summer," says Peter Shikany, who bought the house three years ago with his partner, Scottsdale gallery owner Lisa Sette. "Our house was *hot*."

"Ah, the Great Glass Box with the Canvas Roof story," Bryan chuckles sadly. "What a tragedy! But not because these people who built it wanted to live in an art piece, a concrete box with a tent roof. And not because the architect convinced them it would work because people in the desert have been living in tents for centuries, which was foolish. No. The real tragedy is that all the strife led to the breakup of the owners' marriage. You can re-roof a house, but not a relationship."

After purchasing the home from the divorced couple, Shikany and Sette installed a more conventional roof of insulated steel and Sheetrock, but not before their home gained national attention, thanks in part to a story in *Dwell* magazine detailing how the original owners, **continued on page 34**

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who built the home themselves, agreed to al-Sayed's failed "experimental" roof.

"And he's one of the darlings of the architecture scene!" Bryan brays about al-Sayed. "If a doctor messed up like that, he wouldn't be allowed to practice!"

Will Bruder says metal and glass houses in the desert aren't a problem; they're an energy-conscious solution. Bruder, one of the Southwest's most celebrated architects and a student of arcology master and Arcosanti founder Paolo Soleri, lives in one of his own designs: the Loloma 5, a massive glass box on Marshall Way in Scottsdale facing Camelback Mountain. It's a building that Bruder says debunks any claims that shiny metal and wide views of the desert always mean a hot house and a scary electricity bill.

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Scott Jarson and his wife/business partner, Debbie, at The Duke in Scottsdale.

"I live in 1500 square feet," Bruder reports, "all of them very comfortable thanks to high-efficiency A/C units, appropriate window shading, and the placement of the building on the land. The main windows of the house face due northwest, and I've shaded 80 percent of the glass with a scrim of perforated metal. Metal doesn't draw heat in, it reflects it. You have to shade the glass, period. My maximum electricity bill in July is 150 bucks. Okay?"

Bruder's gotten good at explaining to laypeople why metal boxes are a good thing in the desert. "The metal is a skin," he says with measured patience. "It's not a factor in the thermal value of the wall." He designed his three-story, 46-unit Vale condominium complex with almost no east- or west-facing windows, and shaded its window portals with more of the perforated steel that's become a signature of his many well-known designs.

Mike, a twentysomething who's been living at his girlfriend's Vale condo for a couple of months now, says the place is "really cool," but he's not necessarily talking about the temperature.

"It's kind of strange that the outdoor staircases are all made out of metal," he says. "They look really great, but you can't really touch them during the day because they're like oven-hot. If you stand near the windows, you can kind of feel the heat radiating into the apartment. And forget about opening the windows, because you can't."

"Yeah," Bruder says when he hears young Mike's story. "You might want to keep your windows closed in the summertime in Phoenix, no matter where you live."

Someone threw a rock through one of the Vale's downstairs retail windows recently, but the place is a success: 80 percent of its condo units are occupied, and although it still looks deserted, the retail space is entirely rented out (a new furniture store/cafe will take residence later this year).

Jones is less patient than Bruder is with the whole "glass boxes are hard to cool!" discussion. "The problem isn't the wrong materials," he groans. "It's with uneducated home buyers. You know where the sun rises and sets. You see a house that's sited on the land so that its windows all face west, or one with huge windows with nothing to stop the heat outside of the glass. And you say, 'I won't buy this because the architect doesn't give a shit about my utility bill.' You simply don't buy a house that's about an architect's self-indulgence. Good modern buildings exhibit a responsibility toward their environment. Come on. That's Architecture 101."

But Doug Holton from Salt River Project's PowerWise energy information program doesn't think there's anything responsible about combining glass and metal in any living environment. "We haven't done any studies on this," Holton says, "but it kind of stands to reason that it's more difficult to insulate a glass wall than a stucco or frame wall."

Holton says that any building's

greatest heat gain comes through its windows, and windows wrapped in wood frames are the most efficient. "Designers will tell you that metal in front of glass reflects heat, but as a rule of thumb, glass surrounded by metal has less energy efficiency than by vinyl or wood, because metal and glass heat similarly as one unit, while the other materials keep glass from absorbing or drawing more heat."

The answer to living in a glass box and keeping it cool isn't so much about siting or materials or shading, according to Tim Russell, the man behind v2. It's all about size. Designed by architect Joe Herzog, a student of both Bruder and Wendell Burnette, v2's small-scale prefab boxes are being marketed rather hopefully (and somewhat redundantly) as not just modern homes but as "a world where the lifestyle you choose is reflected in the places you reside and the places you live." Whether one chooses to live in one of Herzog's houses or just reside there, one does so in cramped quarters. The basic unit, known as the v2flat, is a low rectangle of glass and movable panels that looks more like a car rental kiosk than a house. The 384-square-foot interior of the flat features a living room, kitchenette, and bathroom drawn in smoothly modern lines — a space perfect for anyone whose idea of bliss is pretending he's living in the Lunar Module. More rooms can be added on — even stacked! — to build a larger structure.

"I haven't had one person who's seen our product not contemplate whether they could live here," Russell says with no irony whatsoever. To prove how livable v2 is, Russell's business partner, Viné Saccento, plans to move into the v2 prototype this summer, which is currently resting in a parking lot on Washington Street.

"There were two cars parked here before," Russell says, pointing to the slick, shiny v2flat. "Now there will be people *living* here. Not to brag, but we are on the cutting edge of the industry with these homes. There aren't any others out there like ours."

That might be a good thing, according to Burnette, a Taliesin student and co-designer of Bruder's downtown library project. "If you have just one side of that thing facing west, you're not gonna be able to keep it cool no matter how much money you spend on A/C," says Burnette of v2, which he admits he hasn't seen since its early design stages. "If you're keeping the space small to make it easier to cool, you're also making it more oppressive. Also, a lot of windows aren't just helping to heat the place up, they're letting in a lot of light, and no relief from pronounced and abundant light isn't good. There are psychological issues to consider in good design, not just things like heating and cooling."

Burnette is pleased to hear that the v2 project is being marketed as completely "green," a term architects use to describe an environmentally responsible building, one that accounts for energy use, indoor air quality, and the proper use of natural materials. But the v2 kit doesn't come with its own landscaping, so the onus to shade its many windows with plants and trees is on the owner. And v2's smaller-is-better solution flies in the face of why many people want to live in the desert in the first place: the abundance of space; the luxury of sprawl. Despite its flashy Flash Gordon designs, v2 wants us to enter the space age, so long as we don't take up too much space doing it.

Meanwhile, Black is hopeful that the increasing popularity of the LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) Green Building Rating System, a consensus-based national rating system used to rank high-performance sustainable buildings, will lead to more energy-efficient buildings. "LEED is what's going to transform the building market by establishing a common standard of measurement," says Scottsdale Green Building Program manager Anthony Floyd. "It's built on well-founded scientific standards for sustainable site development and energy efficiency." He pauses dramatically. "There's nothing in there about curb appeal."

"There's a lot wrong with this whole glass box thing," Harvey says. "When we're not sensitive to our environment, when we use glass and metal indiscriminately in the building of houses because we think it looks pretty, we wind up with Japanese torture devices like those used in the old prison camps. This is what we're doing to our clients: locking them up in metal boxes to see how long they can tolerate the heat before becoming delirious."

You'd be surprised how much noise a tiny sparrow makes when it splats against a glass house. "The first time it happened, I thought it was kids throwing a brick against the front door," Leesa Stuck says. She's kneeling on a plastic shopping bag in front of what she calls her "bird graveyard." There are no tiny gravestones or any indication that she's buried a dozen or more sparrows here, other than a slightly scraped look to the desert landscaping next to her outdoor gas grill.

"I don't want to move," Stuck says. "I feel bad about the birds, but whenever people come over, they're like, 'You live in such a cool place.'" Stuck catches herself and laughs. "Well, maybe it's not *cool*. But I know what they mean. It's really great to live in something that's very up-to-the-minute, like you'd see in a magazine. They don't know I can't do the laundry whenever I want to. Or about the birds."

Harvey Bryan isn't all that concerned about sparrows. He's worried that, with all the Will Bruders and Eddie Joneses out there paying tribute to Al Beadle's work, Phoenix will wind up a sea of uninhabitable glass boxes.

"The only way to stop the glass boxes from taking over," he says, laughing a little, "is if we force the people who are designing and building them to live in one for awhile. In the middle of summer, too. That ought to make them think twice about making another glass box and calling it a house."

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