



# PHOENIX: UP FROM THE DESERT

By David M. Brown



Photo courtesy City of Tempe.

**Top** Fred Weaver and Dick Drover, Valley National Bank, 1968.

**Above** Kemper Goodwin and Michael Goodwin, Tempe City Hall, 1970.

It is hard to imagine, considering the sprawling city that Phoenix is today, that it began barely 150 years ago as a small farming settlement of simple adobe mud and wood houses. The city has fine examples of the panoply of 20th century architectural styles, but it was only in the modernist period that Phoenix developed its own idiom.

"Phoenix has long suffered from an inferiority complex," says Mark C. Vinson, an architect, planner and preservationist, who serves as Tempe city architect. "It has typically looked to the outside for 'experts' to provide guidance in the proper way to do things." As soon as an individual or community could afford it, and the arrival of the railroad made it possible, he adds, "vernacular methods were abandoned and styles, materials and architects were imported from the eastern United States."

Frank Lloyd Wright, who began visiting the Phoenix area in the 1920s, established his residence **Taliesin West**, 12621 N. Frank Lloyd Wright Blvd., in nearby Scottsdale in 1937, which served as his winter home until his death in 1959. Taliesin West heralded a new sensitivity to building in the desert environment: the low-slung horizontal complex, which also functioned as a studio and school, mirrors the McDowell Mountains behind, and its native materials and colors blend with the surrounding Sonoran Desert. A national landmark, Taliesin West offers regular tours. Wright's Southwestern work — which helped resurrect his career — and his very presence in the area drew talented acolytes who designed many of Phoenix's most interesting buildings, and lifted architecture to a new level in the region.

Wright's **Grady Gammage Memorial Auditorium** (1964), Apache Blvd. and Mill Ave., originally designed in the mid '50s as the Baghdad

(Iraq) Opera House (never built), serves as a distinguished gateway to the Tempe campus of Arizona State University. Its president at the time, Grady Gammage, was a good friend of the architect. Wright's **First Christian Church** (designed in 1948/built posthumously by the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation in 1973), 6750 N. Seventh Ave., incorporates desert masonry, as in Taliesin West, and features distinctive spires. Wright's ten distinguished Phoenix area homes include the circular **David Wright House** (1952), 5212 East Exeter Blvd., designed for his son in north Phoenix (1950), and the **H.C. Price House** (1954), 7211 N. Tatum Blvd., with its graceful combination of concrete block, steel and copper in a foothills setting.

Wright's approach continued through his pupils, such as Albert Chase McArthur, who is generally credited with the design of the spectacular **Arizona Biltmore Hotel** (1928), 24th St. and Missouri Ave. Wright's influence on the building is clear in both massing and details, including the distinctive concrete Biltmore Blocks, cast onsite to an Emry Kopta design. The hotel was restored after a fire in 1973, and additions were built in 1975 and 1979.

Blaine Drake was another student who, with Alden Dow, designed the original **Phoenix Art Museum**, Theater and Library Complex and East Wing (1959, 1965), 1625 N. Central Ave. (Tod Williams and Billie Tsien Architects, New York, designed additions in 1996 and 2006.) Drake also designed the first addition to the **Heard Museum** (1929), 22 E. Monte Vista Rd., a Spanish Colonial Revival by H.H. Green.

Two lesser-known architects, Alfred Newman Beadle [See "Meet the Beadles," p. 60] and Ralph Haver, each contributed a variety of modernist structures to Phoenix. Beadle's geometric glass forms slice across space, defining it in minimalist terms with clarity and brilliance. **The Boardwalk Apartments** (1963), 4225 N. 36th St., feature interior courtyards providing openness and a sense of community. In mid-town, his **First Federal Savings** (1969), 5210 N. Central Ave., is shaded from the desert sun by a "floating" roof canopy. Nearby, the **Mountain Bell Plaza** (1971), 3033 N. Third St., is textbook Modernism with reflective glass and a simple metal frame. This last building will likely be demolished.

Beadle's early family home (Beadle House II, now the **Quist House**), built in 1963, 4323 E. McDonald Dr., unites steel and its

Photo by Michael Baxter.



Photo by Lara Corcoran, courtesy Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation.



Courtesy Arizona State University.



**Above, top** Frank Lloyd Wright, Taliesin West, 1937.

**Above** Frank Lloyd Wright, Grady Gammage Memorial Auditorium, 1964.

**Below** Ralph Haver, Danley House, 1954.



Photo courtesy of the Cosanti Foundation.

**Above** Paolo Soleri's Pumpkin Apse and Barrel Vaults at Cosanti, (1968–71) serve as offices.

site in an arroyo into a home design that is on file at New York's Museum of Modern Art. From late in his career, Beadle's **Novak House** (1995), 1340 E. Palmaritas Dr. in Phoenix, is set on steel columns, to maximize views of Mummy Mountain and the city.

Ralph Haver moved to Phoenix after the Second World War to work with his construction-trade brother and father. He designed and built a home for his family in uptown Phoenix, then developed adjacent lots into what became the Canal North neighborhood — the first of several "Haverhood" communities in the city. His homes and other projects feature clean, unadorned designs, low-slung rooflines and open plans. The open-air **Social Sciences Building** (1959), main campus of Arizona State University, in Tempe, is arranged around a four-story central atrium and cooled by sunscreens and ground-level openings. Unfortunately, this building will soon be torn down.

Among Haver's commercial projects is the **Lou Regesters Furniture** building (1953), since 1993 Copenhagen Imports, 1701 E. Camelback Rd.,

and the **American Express** building (1969), 2423 E. Lincoln Dr., now occupied by Charles Schwab. Both, through siting and simple details, were creatively integrated into residential areas. Haver's **Danley House** (1954), in the Arcadia neighborhood of East Phoenix, is representative of his many home designs: a clean-lined, extensively glassed 1,680-square-foot three bedroom for baby boomers to celebrate '50s prosperity.

Another former student of Wright's is himself a Phoenix institution. Futurist, planner and visionary Paolo Soleri, known for his ongoing Arcosanti project north of Phoenix at Cordes Junction, began building his home and studio, **Cosanti** (1956–ongoing), 6433 E. Doubletree Ranch Rd., after his break with Wright. A campus of uniquely formed concrete structures, Cosanti ("before things" in Italian) represents Soleri's "arcology," which unites architecture and ecology in an organic approach to creating urban environments: dense, three-dimensional, bounded habitats in contrast to automobile-oriented exurban sprawl. Although Consanti features a self-guided tour, guided group tours can be arranged.

The area's architecture schools have always been quick to incorporate new design trends, especially Arizona State University. Mark Vinson notes that Modernism was fully embraced and promoted from 1951 on by the ASU College of Architecture under founding Dean James W. Elmore, an avowed modernist. Elmore brought Calvin C. Straub from Southern California to teach at ASU, where he influenced young Phoenix architects. Straub's firm Buff, Straub & Hinsman worked on the famous California Case Study Houses in the '50s. His post-and-beam **Andeen House** (1964), with Denis Kutch, 5936 N. Hummingbird Ln., in Paradise Valley, is integrated into the desert hillside with natural local materials and deep overhangs.

Other notable houses include the **Goldman House** (1976), 9406 N. 38th St., with its lattice sunscreens; the **Corbus House** (1977), 11101 E. Bajada Rd., in north Scottsdale; and the **Funk House** (1978) 9230 N. 40th St. — all by Edward "Ned" B. Sawyer Jr., a Beadle protégé who used a modernist aesthetic to intimately connect his structures to the desert.



Photo by Neil Koppes.



Photo courtesy of City of Scottsdale.

Among the many stand-out buildings in Phoenix are Fred Weaver and Dick Drover's (now DWL Architects + Planners Inc.) pavilion-style **Hayden Library** (1967), Arizona State University campus, Tempe; the geodesic-domed **Orangutan Exhibit** (1978) at the Phoenix Zoo in Papago Park, 60th Street and Van Buren Rd.; and **Phoenix Sky Harbor International Airport Terminal 3** (1980), Sky Harbor Blvd., widely admired for its integration of local art and native landscaping. The firm also designed more than 20 branches for **Valley National Bank**, including the 1962 geodesic dome at Rural Rd./Apache Rd., now the ASU Visitor Center, and the finest example, the 4401 E. Camelback Rd. office (1968), with its free-standing umbrella "mushroom" structures, supported by dendriform columns that extend the building seamlessly into the parklike landscape.

**Tempe City Hall** (1970), 31 E. Fifth St., designed by Kemper Goodwin and his son Michael, is an inverted self-shading pyramid and "one of the first city halls to break the mold of tradition for civic architecture," says Phoenix architect James Abell. Also successful is Bennie M. Gonzales's **Scottsdale Municipal Complex** (1968), 3939 N. Drinkwater Blvd. (City Hall) and 3839 N. Drinkwater Blvd. (Library). The first, with its large skylighted interior and exterior pool, is intended, says the architect, to be "an open invitation for the citizens to participate in their government."

Phoenix saw the rise of new modernists in the 1990s, such as Will Bruder, who studied with Soleri and was influenced by Wright. Among his notable structures are the **Burton Barr Central Library** (1995),



Photo courtesy Arizona State University.

**Top** Calvin C. Straub, Andeen House, 1964.  
**Center** Benny Gonzales, Scottsdale City Hall, 1968.  
**Above** Antoine Predock, Arizona State University Art Museum, 1988.

designed with DWL Architects, 1221 N. Central Ave., and the **Loloma 5** condominium (2004), 3707 N. Marshall Way, in Scottsdale, one of the first projects built through the city's successful Green Building Program.

Among several fine arts centers are Antoine Predock's **Arizona State University Art Museum**, part of the Nelson Fine Arts Center (1988), 51 E. 10th St., in Tempe, the **Mesa Center for the Arts** (2005),

## SHOPPING

**2b Mod**  
4158 N. Goldwater Blvd., Scottsdale  
480/941-8192, www.2bmod.com  
Vintage and new designs.

**Biltmore Fashion Park**  
2502 E. Camelback Rd., Phoenix  
602/955-8400, www.shopbiltmore.com  
A 1963 open-air shopping mall, with fountains, courtyards and gardens.

**Copenhagen Imports**  
1701 E. Camelback Rd., Phoenix  
602/266-8060, www.copenhagenimports.com  
20th-century designs in the former Lou Regesters Furniture building (1953) by Ralph Haver.

**D.A.'s Modern**  
527 W. McDowell Rd., Ste. B, Phoenix  
602/881-1957, dougsgotit2000@aol.com  
A mix of 20th-century furnishings, art and accessories.

**Go-Kat-Go**  
5102 N. 7th St., Phoenix  
602/277-8528, www.go-kat-go.com  
An eclectic selection of vintage furnishings, décor, clothing and gifts.

**haus modern living**  
2440 E. Camelback Rd. at Biltmore Fashion Park, Phoenix (602/277-0111) and 4821 N. Scottsdale Rd., Scottsdale (480/423-5444), www.hausmodernliving.com  
Accessories and furniture from well-knowns like Knoll and Vitra, and newbies.

**Lumature**  
15620 N. Scottsdale Rd., Scottsdale  
480/998-5505, www.lumature.com  
Contemporary lighting and furniture.

**Phoenix Metro Retro**  
5102 N. Central Ave., Phoenix  
602/279-0702, phoenixmetroretro.com  
Vintage mid-century and Danish Modern.

**RED Modern Furniture**  
201 E. Camelback Rd., Phoenix  
602/256-9620, www.redmodernfurniture.com  
Modernist designs in a 1954 Ralph Haver building.

For additional information, see [www.modernphoenix.net/links.htm](http://www.modernphoenix.net/links.htm).



Photo courtesy AIA Phoenix Metro Chapter.

1 E. Main St., by BOORA Architects of Portland, with DWL, and the recently completed **Tempe Center for the Arts**, *Hardy Drive and Rio Salado Parkway*, designed by the firm Architekton with Barton Myers Associates.

Vern Swaback, a Wright apprentice, designed the **Hangar One** complex (2003), *15220 N. 78th Way*, with Adam D. Tihany, which combines an entertainment space, vintage car gallery and airplane facilities and features a dramatic, 108-foot titanium “paper” glider on the roof.

While the exploding Phoenix area spawns more mediocre sprawl than distinguished buildings, there’s hope in neo-urbanism, which is attracting more people and architectural creativity to the central cores of the area’s cities and towns. “Some of the newer residential work of the younger emerging architects speaks to the re-colonization of the inner suburbs,” says Victor Sidy, dean of the Frank Lloyd Wright School of Architecture at Taliesin West, “which may provide a rich context for architectural experimentation down the road.” ■

*A 25-year resident of the Phoenix area, David M. Brown writes about travel, entertainment, food and wine and high-performance cars.*

**Top** Vern Swaback and Adam D. Tihany, Hangar One, 2003.

**Above** Will Bruder, Loloma 5 condominium, 2004.

## SIGHTS

### Arizona Science Center

600 E. Washington St., Phoenix  
602/716-2000, [www.azscience.org](http://www.azscience.org)  
Designed by Antoine Predock, 1997.

### ASU Art Museum

Mill Avenue and 10th St., Tempe  
480/965-2787, <http://asuartmuseum.asu.edu>  
Also by Predock, with contemporary and southern art, new media and American ceramics.

### Heard Museum

2301 N. Central Ave., Phoenix  
602/252-8848, [www.heard.org](http://www.heard.org)  
The original 1929 Spanish Colonial design by H.H. Green meets Bennie Gonzales’s 1968 addition. Exhibitions on Native American cultures.

### Phoenix Art Museum

1625 N. Central Ave., Phoenix  
602/257-1222, [www.phxart.org](http://www.phxart.org)  
Asian, European, contemporary, art of the Americas and fashion design.

### Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art

7374 E. Second St., Scottsdale  
480/994-ARTS, [www.smoca.org](http://www.smoca.org)  
Contemporary art, architecture and design in a movie theater renovated by Will Bruder in 1999.

### Taliesin West

Cactus Rd. and Frank Lloyd Wright Blvd., Scottsdale  
480/860-2700, [www.franklloydwright.org](http://www.franklloydwright.org)  
To book a tour, send email to [request@franklloydwright.org](mailto:request@franklloydwright.org).