



The Real City Center

HOW ONE BUILDING SLID INTO THE URBAN INFILL SCENE, AND WHY IT'S NOW ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT STRUCTURES IN PHOENIX

RUSS HAAN WILL NEVER WAX philosophic about his building being a metaphor for a desert sunset, or how it's like a phoenix rising from the, well, whatever phoenixes rise from. He will tell you point-blank things like "this is the *only* example of small-scale, mixed-use urban infill on less than a quarter acre in downtown Phoenix," and, "Incentives? We didn't receive a single incentive for our urban infill project from the City, yet there are major developments downtown receiving huge incentives. If that money were spread out to 100 entrepreneurs like myself, downtown would be filled with buildings like these in no time, each one done by a local architect. And *then* Phoenix would become a mecca of mixed use ... and maybe downtown would be worth going to."

But he'll say it all with the charm of a

person who's paid his dues and suffered through utter exhaustion to build a place where he and his business partner/life partner, Mike Oleskow, could live, work, entertain, dream, and enjoy the fruits of over 20 years hard work.

Haan and Oleskow bought the vacant parcel of land about five years ago, at a time when their boutique design firm, Max & Lucy, was thriving and a second arm of their business, a creative agency called After Hours, was in the process of redefining itself. The site held promise – in between the Phoenix Art Museum and the Burton Barr Central Library – and challenge. "We started with the parking," says Joe Herzog, principal of the firm that designed the building – [merz]project – and co-owner of the builder, [merz]build. Since the building functions as a design agency by day, 11 spaces had to be

created. "They determined the building footprint and then it was about maximizing this urban site to its fullest potential," he says. "Extend the building by one inch and you'd lose two parking spaces."

Fullest potential meant a number of things for Herzog and project manager Scott Roeder. First, there was the extraordinarily complicated program – the building would house a residence, a design studio, retail space/art gallery, substantial storage space, and hybrid areas that could serve for anything from creative writing to overnight guest visits. There'd have to be an elevator, a killer kitchen, and spaces that could evolve programmatically as the years went on.

"This building is years ahead of its time," says Herzog, verbally gesturing at the modern-day need for modular space that accommodates changing needs.

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Previous: From McDowell, the three zones are visible—work (lower right), gallery (lower left), and residence/deck (above). Note the protruding staircase at right, designed not to eat up square footage. Above: While the kitchen is attention-getting, check out the view in the narrow window. Below: The residence, as seen from the 1,400-square-foot deck.

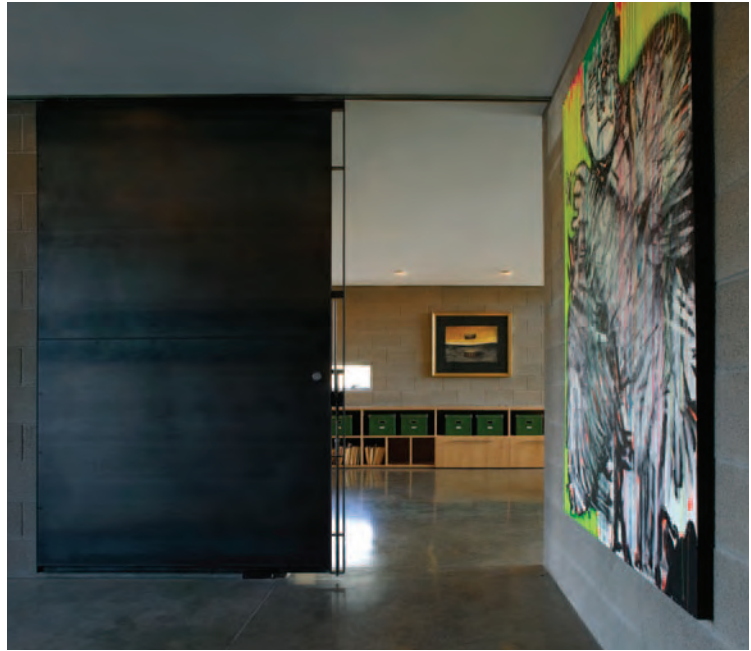
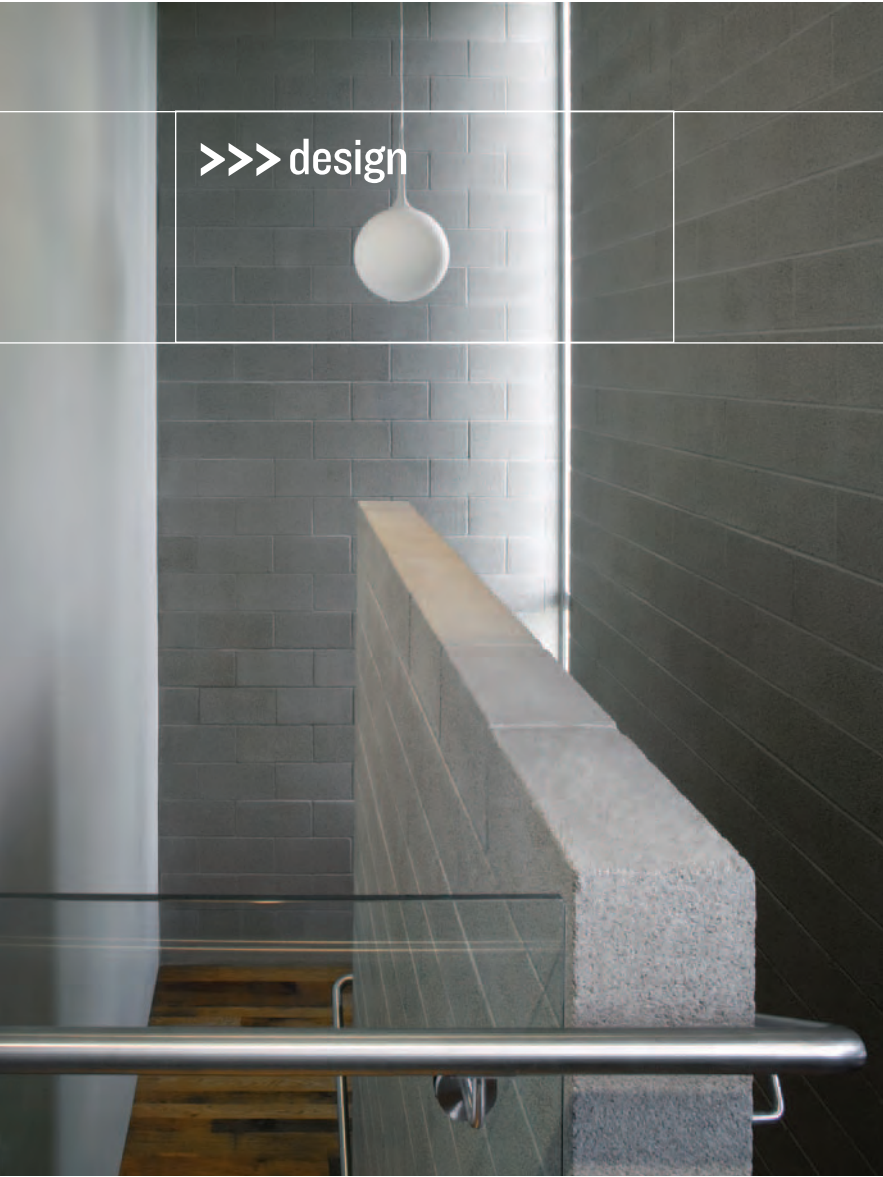
But is the building's style considered "modern?"

"I don't know if I'd call it modern," he says. "I'd say it's a thoroughly executed building with a Modernist thread. It's extraordinarily efficient and it's the most thought-through building we've ever designed."

Case in point: After Hours' energy bills have hovered around \$650/month for the total of 7,500 square feet. "That's about a quarter of what APS estimated we'd spend." The west-facing wall of foam-filled masonry is windowless, and the upper portion is covered with an outer skin of corrugated galvalume, buffering the actual building from direct rays. Every space in After Hours receives natural light, but none of it comes in directly, save for the top-level main living space which, although it receives early-morning sun, enjoys 180-degree, unobstructed views of Central Avenue, from past Camelback Road well into the presidential streets to the south.

One of the reasons Haan and Oleskow needed this building so badly is they knew it had the potential to raise their own personal creative bars. They now call the building After Hours, named after their business of screenwriting and creative consulting services. When asked if the building contributes to their creative

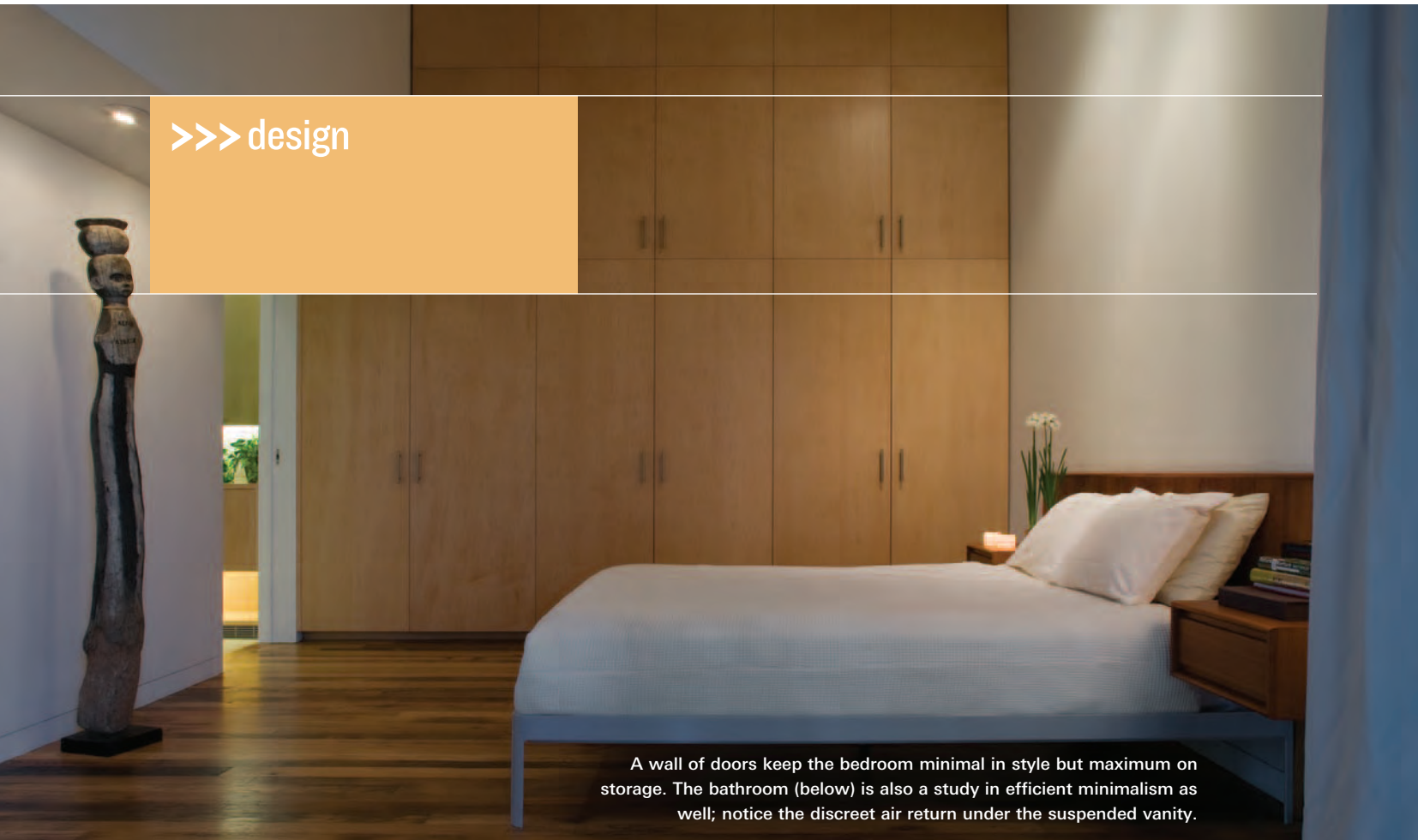
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Clockwise from above: Stairway to the residence, leading into a guest quarters/writing studio; notice the wrap-around handrail. Second-level executive office overlooking the studio. The public/client entrance features a hot-rolled steel door. The main work studio for Max & Lucy design work. Looking through the studio towards the second-level executive office.



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A wall of doors keep the bedroom minimal in style but maximum on storage. The bathroom (below) is also a study in efficient minimalism as well; notice the discreet air return under the suspended vanity.

process, Haan simply says, “brilliantly.” Oleskow says, “Once we got in here, it was like anything’s possible.” Although he has a background in telecommunications, Oleskow even ended up taking classes at the Arizona Culinary Institute so he could fully utilize the kitchen, which opens up to that expansive deck.

In the residence, salvaged wood floors sourced from a Vermont barn add warmth to the otherwise minimal environment. “We found people who take down barns and sell the wood online,” says Herzog. “I’ve always been fascinated by barns, and the old wood adds patina to the modern space.” But the wood definitely wasn’t chosen for its affordability — “It’s a hot product right now and there’s a lot of labor involved — so it’s priced about the same as new wood floors,” says Herzog.

The diagonal roof line serves two purposes. Merz took a semantic approach to the City code, which specifies a maximum “median” height of 30 feet (After Hours reaches to 37 feet). This allowed them to design three levels into the building. And secondly, the residence’s rooftop deck is carved into this angle, making it semi-private, in between the north and south walls.

Standing up here, Phoenix feels more like a city with its act together. “We adhered to the guidelines of the Transit Overlay District, a document created by city planners that focuses on pedestrian-friendly buildings in downtown,” says Herzog. These guidelines call for simple design moves that make sense in an urban core — “Instead of minimum setbacks, the TOD sets up maximum setbacks,” says Herzog. “Ours was five feet. Parking was required to go behind the building, we had to replace the sidewalks and make them tree shaded ... but that stuff is in line with how we design anyway.” So maybe a document like that means Phoenix *is* getting its act together.

“At least there are two people here twenty-four-seven,” says Haan. “That’s two more than there were a year ago.” ■

