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- robert mcculloch's thunderbird home
- william bruder's contemporary modernism
- eames house of cards
- elegance with eggs



contemporary modernism in the desert

Architect William Bruder creates a symbiotic environment for an extensive collection of classic modern furnishings

Text by Dana Hutt

Photographs by Bill Timmerman



OPPOSITE: The house's drama is accentuated by an undrilt stainless steel and a canopy of brushed aluminum. **THIS PAGE:** Against the rugged backdrop of Mummy Mountain in Paradise Valley, the Townsend House cuts a sharp profile with its tough, yet elegant materials of sandblasted concrete block, brushed aluminum, acid-etched galvanized glazing, and glass.

What makes a contemporary house "modern" these days? That was the challenge presented to architect Will Bruder when designing a new home for a couple who collect classic modern furniture. "Creating the right place for the collection was about creating a totally liquid space and thinking about a house without boundaries," says the New River, Arizona-based architect.

It all began as a modest remodel. The clients, Ann and Jim Townsend, were "empty nesters" who planned to renovate a 1971 house on a hillside in Paradise Valley to open it up to the spectacular desert views. At the time they were not thinking about a showcase for their ceramics, crafts, paintings, works on paper, and post-WWII furniture. The couple had begun to accumulate modern furniture in the early 1990s when original pieces were coming back on the market. Ann Townsend was particularly attracted to the sculptural forms and pure colors of '50s furniture, such as their first acquisition, an Arne Jacobsen spring-green Swan sofa.

They had been tracking Bruder's work for several years. "His work was distinctive without being radical or weird to us; it's just beautiful work," says Jim Townsend. As part of the design process, Bruder extensively interviewed the couple at their home and drew out their significant architectural experiences. These included visiting a Buckminster Fuller geodesic dome outside of Wichita, Kansas - the couple's hometown - in the 1970s. It was when Bruder saw

their collection of art and furniture that he envisioned a total environment of design. Two months later he brought them a drawing, and although it exceeded the scope of the original commission, the Townsends knew it had to be. With only one major change - flipping the location of the master bedroom for acoustical reasons - the final design follows the initial sketch.

Bruder's design concept for the Townsend Residence is based on the idea of continuous space and movement. The plan of the 5,100 square-foot house is organized around a geometrical motif of circles and curves inspired in part by the clients' collection of 1950s and '60s furniture. The curved walls form channels and a flow of space that seems to expand as you move through the house. This culminates with the great arc of the 175-foot glass façade, which cantilevers out into the desert landscape.

Central to his concept was providing generous space so that the furniture could be used and not just looked at. The focus of the circular dining area, which is enclosed by stainless steel mesh scrim and lit by a gold-leafed clerestory, is a Warren Platner dining set. The large sitting area in the living room easily accommodates a grouping of Pierre Paulin's Ribbon chairs, Studio 65's Bocca (Marilyn) sofa, Saarinen's Womb chair, and a pair of Poul Volther's Corona chairs. The house's curved, uninterrupted walls provide ample wall surface for the Townsends' framed art, including an extensive collection >

The lower level of the main living area provides ample, flexible space for the Townsends' collection of furniture and decorative objects: a leather Deep Rocker chair by Robert A. Bliss, an oil painting (*Eclipse Predicted*) by Emily Mason, and a Paul Henningson Artichoke lamp on cabinetry by Will Bruder and Kenyon Studios, a red Marilyn sofa by Studio 65, four Pierre Paulin Ribbon chairs, a chartreuse Womb chair by Eero Saarinen, and in the foreground, two purple Corona chairs by Paul Volther



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of landscapes by the Kansas-based Swedish artist Birger Sandzán. In response to the couple's request for a low-maintenance house, Bruder used a palette of durable, yet elegant materials: acid-etched galvanized cladding, sandblasted concrete block, polished concrete floors, smooth Venetian plaster, and glass. Natural light is modulated through skylights, slot windows, perforated screens, and 51 small square windows of varying sizes, placed during construction to capture specific views.

To complement their art collection, Bruder developed a high degree of detail for all aspects of the house. "The joint of two different materials meeting is where a lot of the magic, detail, and personality of my work is derived from," the architect notes. His concept of fluidity literally takes shape in translucent aquamarine fiberglass, which forms the curved garage screen-wall, four sets of staircases underlit

with neon, a cantilevered platform and stairwell down to the lower library, as well as a bathing and shower basin in the master bathroom. Custom-made elements range from an elaborate cherrywood desk in the main library to a concrete buffet in the kitchen, and a pair of stainless steel medicine chests in the master bathroom. The architect credits Ann Townsend's on-site involvement and the mastery of contractor Joe Costello for the high level of detail throughout.

While Bruder's discussions about the Townsend Residence make reference to his visits to modern houses by Pierre Chareau, Bruce Goff, and Mies van der Rohe, the Townsends' neighbors see a different modern image. Ann Townsend recalls: "One day, not too long ago, when my husband went up the driveway to get the newspaper, some guy walked by and said, hey, how do you like living in a spaceship? My husband said, 'Well, it's really very comfortable, thank you.'" ■



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: A Bubble chair by Eero Aamio rests at the entrance to the library; Near the fireplace, a blue Pierre Paulin Ribbon chair, a chartreuse Womb chair by Eero Saarinen, and a pair of Peacock chairs by Hans Wegner; The curvilinear motif extends to the kitchen with custom cherrywood cabinetry designed by Will Bruder and built by Kenyon Studios, a concrete buffet by Will Bruder, an Isamu Noguchi dining table, Arne Jacobsen Ant chairs, and a round skylight





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THIS PAGE TOP: The master bedroom brings together the couple's fondness for bright clear colors and curvilinear forms.

At left, two Eames lounge chairs and ottomen, oil paintings by Fritz Scholder (*Red Rose*) and Emily Mason (*Mineral Spirits*), lacewood and brushed stainless steel bed by Warren Ferzi, Elve bedding by Zofia Rostad, molded plywood chair by H.V. Thaden, a contemporary pipe vase by Koichi Hara, and an Eames plywood folding screen. **BOTTOM:** Within the main living area, a stainless steel mesh scrim demarcates the circular dining area, which is set off by a gold-leafed clerestory window, bush-hammered concrete floor, and a table and chairs by Warren Platner



The focus of the circular dining area, which is enclosed by stainless steel mesh scrim and lit by a gold-leafed clerestory, is a Warren Platner dining set

