

phoenix city of kommerz

AN ARCHITECTURE FIRM IGNITES URBAN DESIGN

BY JUDY SNYDER PHOTOGRAPHY BY D2 PRODUCTIONS, INC.

With regard to Phoenix, Joe Herzog has become a glass-half-full kind of guy — but he wasn't always. The co-founder of Phoenix architecture and urban design firm [merz]project arrived in the Valley in 1998 to study at the graduate architecture school at Arizona State University. Prior to graduating from ASU with top honors in 2001, Herzog had considered taking his career to Boston, New York or Los Angeles.

Citing the reliance on cars and suburban sprawl that make the city "semi-dysfunctional," Herzog says, "I was getting very frustrated with Phoenix. I think as someone who wants to be inspired daily, I was finding troubles, you know, getting that inspiration here." He saw formidable

barriers with regard to Phoenix's evolution to a more architecturally coherent and efficient city.

But the opportunity to learn from internationally recognized Phoenix architect Will Bruder kept Herzog here. After working as an intern for Will Bruder Architects while at ASU, Herzog took a full-time position with Bruder after graduating. Calling him "the top architect in the city," Herzog speaks of his four-year tenure at the firm with obvious affection for his mentor. Says Will Bruder, who also describes Phoenix as a city coming of age, "Herzog's an architect that's concerned about the places between his buildings, as well as the context that surrounds them, to make quality places for people to live and work."

Herzog left Bruder's firm in 2002 to work for another local architecture heavyweight, Wendell Burnette. In 2003, while still at Burnette's studio, Herzog and close friend Chris Nieto decided to launch [merz]project. With a background in construction and project management, Nieto is [merz]project's business and construction manager. For more architectural talent, the founders recruited three of Herzog's graduate school contemporaries and friends from other prestigious Valley firms: Scott Roeder, also from Wendell Burnette; Jonah Busick, from Studio Ma; and Matt Winquist from Architekton. Together the heavy hitters form one of the most talented firms in Phoenix.

Whereas before Herzog was discouraged by Phoenix's limitations, he has now begun to see opportunities. "I think there's a cultural sort of *tabula rasa* right now in Phoenix," says Herzog. "We have the fifth-largest city in the United States, there's no way culturally that we even stack up to the other cities in front of us if you were comparing us to New York, Chicago, LA. So in many ways it felt like there's an opportunity to create our own destiny in some respect, to help define what the cultural identity of Phoenix could be."

The timely advent of more community-focused projects such as light-rail, the downtown convention center and new residential projects such as Bruder's Loloma 5 in Old Town Scottsdale, in which Herzog himself had a hand, represented to him a step forward in breaking down the Valley's obsolete, dysfunctional barriers. Indeed, the disintegration of barriers is a recurring theme for Herzog and for [merz]project's growing *oeuvre* of commercial and residential projects.

Witness The Galleries at Turney, which the firm designed as its first multi-unit residential project for new Phoenix developer Ed Gorman's firm, Modus. The high-density complex of eight upscale, detached single-family townhouses will break ground around the end of this month and is scheduled for completion in August. "I think [the disintegration is] showing in projects like The Galleries, where there's a lot of blurred boundaries of what spaces are. I think they're starting to break down some of the traditional ideas of what a room is," says Herzog.

Located at 27th Street and Turney Avenue, a critical feature of the project is its walking-distance proximity to the Biltmore business, retail and entertainment hub at the corner at 24th Street and Camelback Road. This proximity addresses one barrier: transportation and parking, and Phoenix's unfortunate dependence on automobiles. But, as Herzog hints above, [merz]project's design also confronts barriers on a smaller, more personal scale. "We have rooms that are connected with sort of these fuzzy barriers, right?" he puts rhetorically. "We actually have a den that has a glass balcony that looks down into what could be a dining room or a living room. It's letting the occupant have choice in how they really want to develop their own life within this environment."



FROM LEFT: CHRIS NIETO, JONAH BUSICK, JOE HERZOG, MATT WINQUIST, SCOTT ROEDER



Gorman shares Herzog's ideas about the potential of urban infill projects in the Valley. Before finding [merz]project, Gorman talked to a couple other architects, one of whom said to him, "I don't know why you wouldn't build Tuscan," recalls Gorman, with a chuckle. "I mean, that just still sticks with me." Tuscan, Gorman's projects — three in the works so far, all designed by [merz]project — are not.

Gorman and Herzog repeatedly use the term "modern" when explaining their projects. But rather than labeling the designs as modern, they use the term to describe the lifestyle and economy they want the designs to accommodate and engender. "I think the word modern gets misused quite a bit, actually. I hate to label anything we're doing," says Herzog. "It's not [modern] in the formal sense of like the '60s movement, it's modern in the sense of the ideals, it's about efficiency, it's about expressing materials, it's about utilizing structure," says Herzog. "It's about you don't necessarily need a 5,000-square-foot mansion in the desert, you know? Twenty-two hundred or 2,000 square feet will suit you just fine," he says. "There's an economy to this whole thing, and I think that's a modernist ideal in every sense."

Gorman discovered [merz]project in 2004 in what he describes as "just one of those fate things." He was brainstorming with a friend for his plan for Modus over coffee at Lux one day when Herzog's former ASU professor Nan Ellin walked in and Gorman's friend introduced them. Ellin referred Gorman to Herzog and he went directly from Lux to [merz]project's newly remodeled studio in the 1947 former Modern Food Market building near 18th and Washington streets.

Just like the fate encounter at Lux, Herzog is into creating connections. Creating new connections was a technique and a consequence of the work of the artist who introduced the word *merz* in 1918. Pronounced "mertz," the firm's moniker was used by German artist Kurt Schwitters as a label for his own work, a multi-media art movement he sought to offer to the world. Meaningless on its own, the syllable is from the German word *kommerz*, the pronunciation of which amused Schwitters.

The problem, or the opportunity as Herzog might call it, of connecting urban Phoenix's "little nodes of activity" — such as the Lux and Pane Bianco site near Indian School Road and Central Avenue, the My Florist neighborhood at Seventh Avenue and McDowell Road, and the nascent arts district south of downtown — was the focus of his award-winning thesis project at ASU, titled "[merz]phoenix." "You have all these little pockets of urban intensities, but none of them were connecting, so I was focusing my project on how to make those connections architecturally," Herzog says.

Again, though, the creation of connections for Herzog is important on a personal scale as well: connections between a building's occupants and its human and physical surroundings. "It's about views, it's about transparencies," he continues. "It's not about enclosing yourself off in your home, it's about opening yourself up to the street below or outside, and I think that creates a sense of connectivity between the public and the occupant. And again, I think that's something that can bring a city closer together." To Herzog, this lifestyle isn't pie in the sky. He has a concrete vision of how it is expressed, consistent with his focus on economy and efficiency, and it is profoundly different from what we so often observe.

"So many times there's people [who] try to accomplish things in life by just overwhelming force," he says, "and they think, 'I need to build a house for my family where I'm just going to build it as big as possible and then we'll occupy it. And the lifestyles we're talking about is really looking at your life and saying, 'what do I need?' ... It comes down to economy again, the economy of living smart, where you're not wasting materials, you're not using excessive labor to produce things.

"Economy has to do with where you're living, too, and I think that's the whole point of urban infill projects," he concludes. "On every level of your day you're creating shorter distances, you're rubbing past more people, you're engaging more people around you, and learning how to live in an environment that's maybe a little tighter. It's about community."

For more information, visit www.merzproject.com



THE GALLERIES AT TURNEY



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