

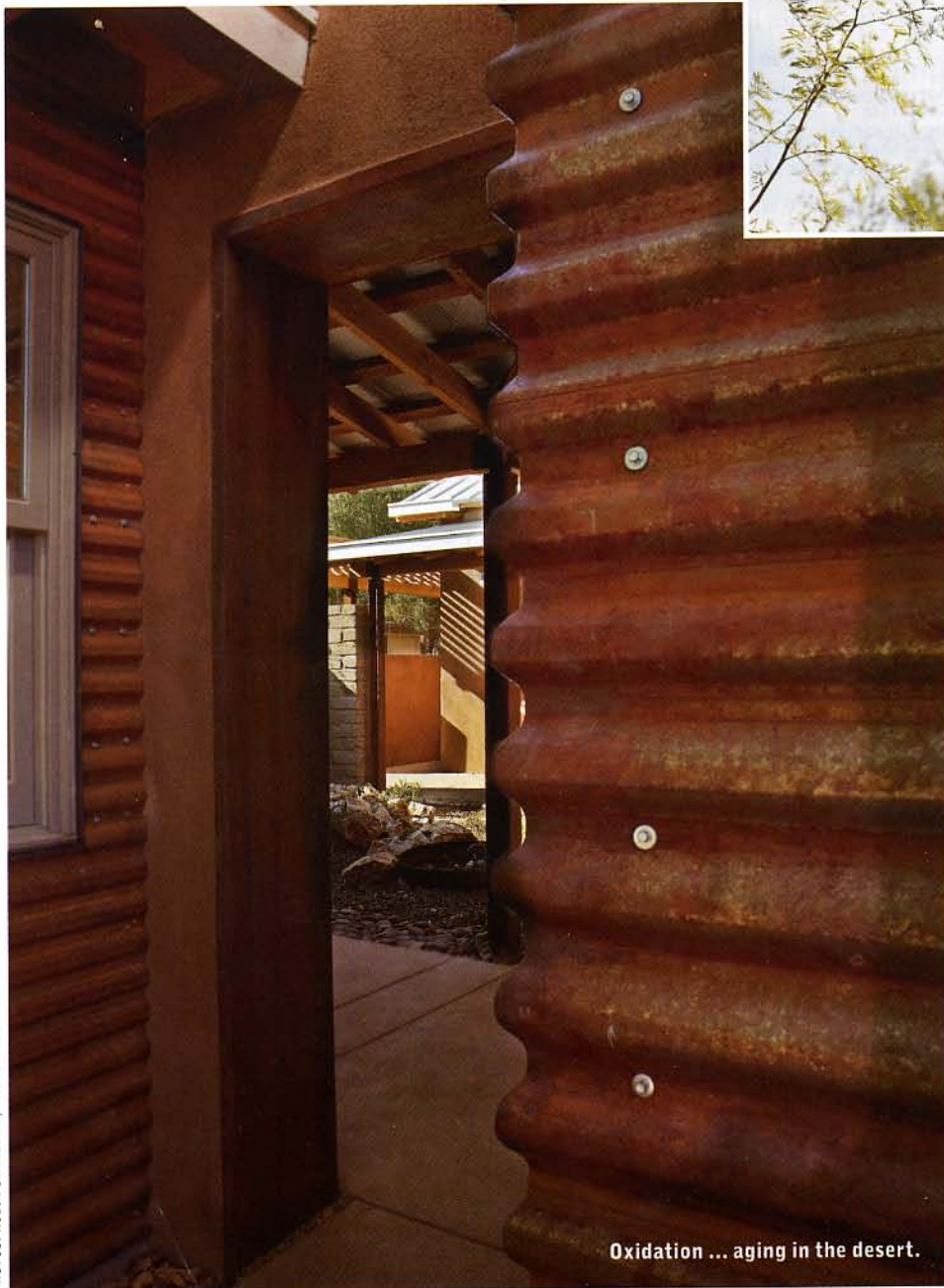
# A Tale of Two Hats

Paul Weiner, DesignBuild Collaborative, Inc.

By Sheila A. Consaul

Some scholars feel that in *A Tale of Two Cities*, author Charles Dickens asserts his belief in the possibility of resurrection and transformation, both on a personal level and on a societal level.<sup>1</sup> In more ways than one, Paul Weiner strives to achieve the same by designing and building homes and other structures that are infused with himself and have an impact on society. Paul encourages the resurrection of barren desert land by ensuring the homes he designs and builds are compatible with the environment.

A firm grip on a mixed palette of earthen materials.



Oxidation ... aging in the desert.

Paul's commitment to transformation manifests itself in several ways. His own office space is a reclaimed Midas muffler shop, gutted and rebuilt to meet the needs of his firm — the DesignBuild Collaborative, a tightly knit and philosophically aligned collection of architects and craftsmen. He also strongly believes that by working closely with his clients and respecting the nuances of the desert, he transforms both his clients' dreams into reality and a raw piece of land into a beautiful living environment.

## STARTING EARLY

As a child, Paul Weiner and his cousin used to play together in the basement. Unlike most little boys, their games didn't include imitating super heroes or slaying dragons, but consisted of drawing buildings. Little did Paul know at the time, but those drawings portended his lifelong passion of designing and building thoughtful living and working environments. Now an accountant, it is likely that cousin Larry made sure the drawings were to scale and the materials could withstand the expected loads, leaving Paul the creative design side.

Paul's first real exposure to the architecture profession was thanks to another cousin, Jack. While a student at the University of Illinois, Jack would bring home complex three-dimensional models he was working on for school projects. The models fascinated Paul.

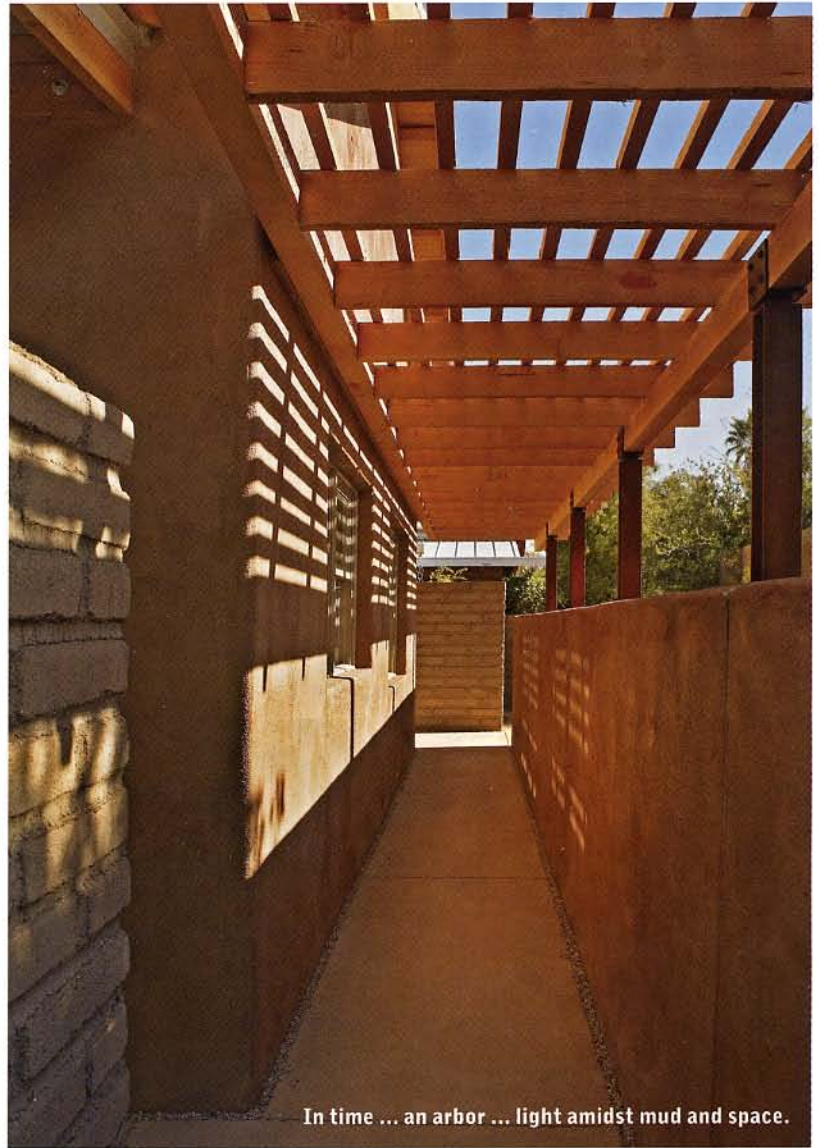
**I**t was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us...

— *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens

It wasn't just the intricacies of the models that influenced Paul Weiner's interest in design and construction early-on. He was also greatly influenced by his mother who was an interior designer. As a designer, Paul's mother spent the years of his youth creating spaces that stimulated the senses while being steeped in comfort. Her work revolved around the "quality of the environment," and creating a "place of refuge." The result of his mother's efforts was to provide Paul with a sense of warmth from the rooms she created, and also a personal and visceral exposure to the concept of spatial relationships.

## WESTWARD HO

While in high school, Paul Weiner took a life-changing trip out west. Escaping from the suburbs of Chicago, Paul and a friend backpacked into the Grand Teton Range of the Rocky Mountains.

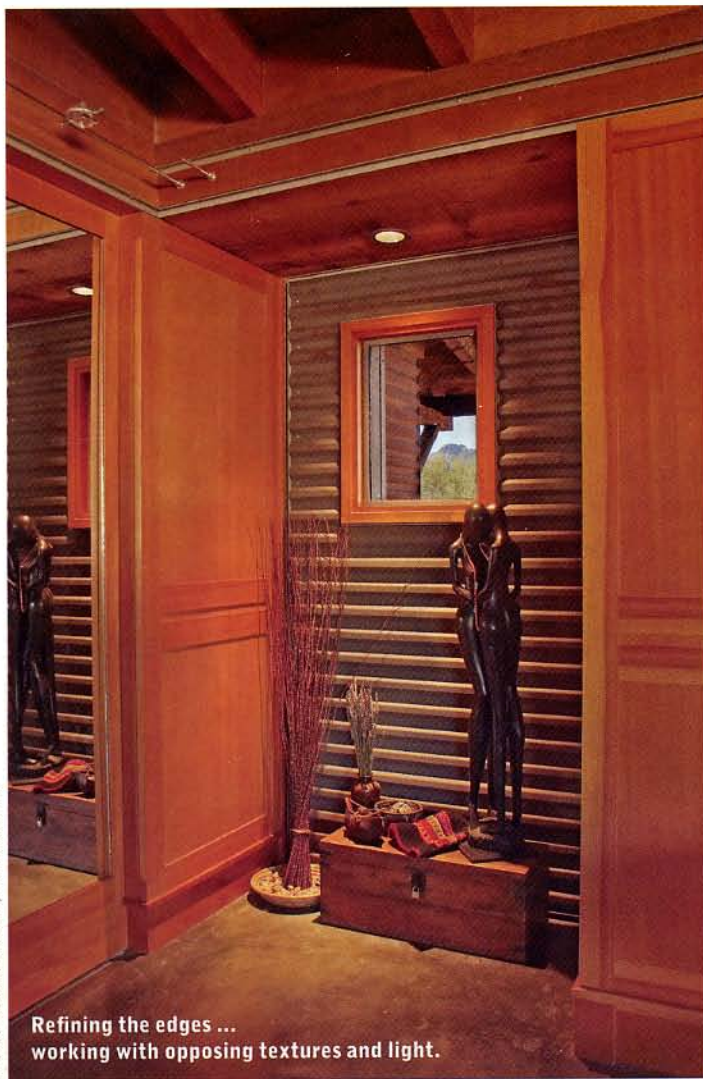


In time ... an arbor ... light amidst mud and space.



Simple space ... integrating earth on a modest budget.

PHOTOS: ROBIN STANCLIFF, PHOTOGRAPHER



Refining the edges ...  
working with opposing textures and light.

It was from this trip — along with spending summers in Canada — that Paul realized he was “far more comfortable as a human being” within nature. From then on, he felt himself being “fed by spending time with the ‘real stuff’ — rocks, plants, water, soil and animals.”

His strong connection to the land later brought him to college at the University of Arizona. There he studied land use, the environment, environmental planning and psychology of the human/nature relationship. He received a Bachelor of Science degree in Agriculture, but wanted to learn more. Following college, Paul worked for the Pima County Planning and Zoning Department as an environmental planning consultant. There he compiled natural resource inventories for various county area plans. Because of the increasing development pressures on western communities, many of the proposed new projects had to be “resource-based” and having long term plans in place was critical to allocate resources properly.

## THE GROUND UP

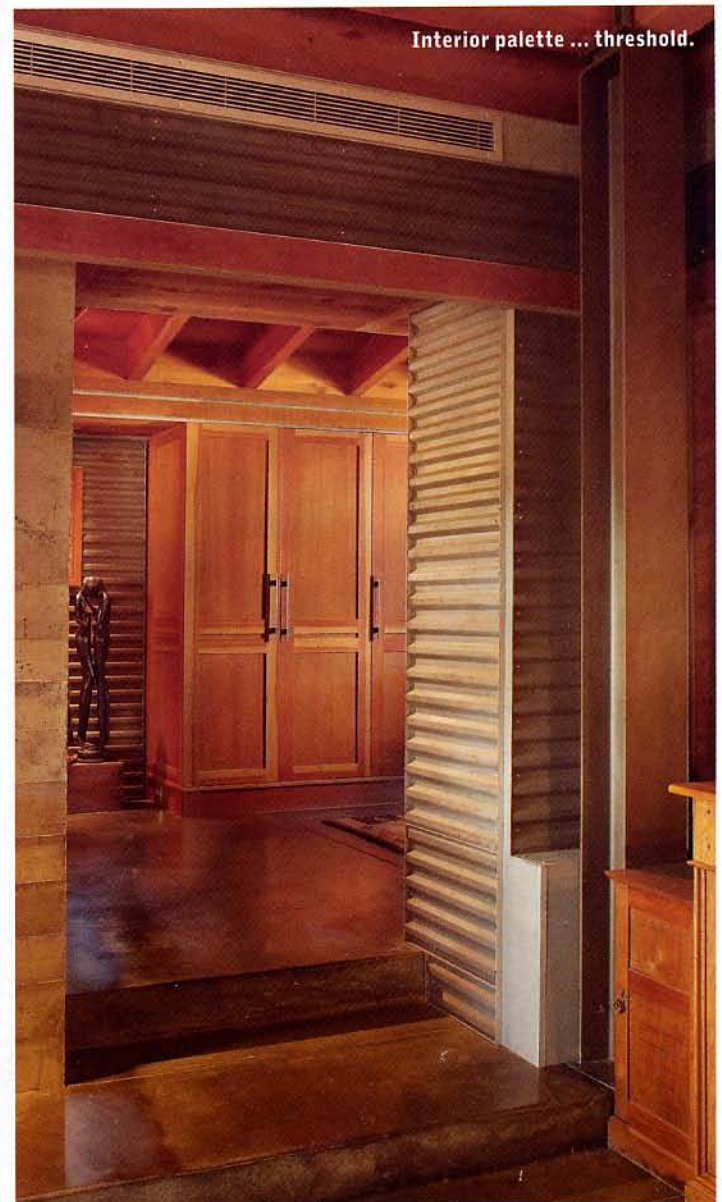
Paul Weiner invested nearly five years in learning about the land, which only added to his appreciation of its beauty and his commitment as a steward of nature. As an experienced wilderness traveler and rock climber, he toyed with the idea of exploring nature further and working directly with kindred although troubled spirits, by working as an Outward Bound<sup>®</sup> instructor. Instead he decided it was time to go in another direction — and that direction was up.

Paul decided to combine his love of nature and appreciation for the built environment by pursuing a degree in architecture and an ultimate practice

in design/build. But first, in order to test his mettle and to more fully understand what it took to build from the ground up, he began working as a carpenter’s apprentice, and then ultimately as a carpenter. Eventually, Paul worked his way through architecture school as an independent builder. Upon completing his degree in 1984, Paul started his firm — Design + Building Consultants, Inc. (recently changed to the DesignBuild Collaborative). The company employs architects, contractors, project managers, supervisors and support staff, and specializes in regionally relevant and personalized residential and commercial work.

## HISTORICAL INFLUENCES

In addition to his passion for nature and design, Paul includes a genuine interest in history to the mix. He has participated in efforts to preserve and revitalize the El Presidio historic district of Tucson, and harkens his use of natural materials to the way building was done before the railroads brought in processed materials, such as lumber and steel. The early use of native materials created “simple, beautiful, functional buildings” and were used to “respond to the climate and provide a refuge from the intense heat.” Today, Paul uses similar earthen materials though modernized with updated technologies. One such material, locally developed by Tucson architect Paul



Interior palette ... threshold.

Long view, full palette ... subtle separation of spaces.

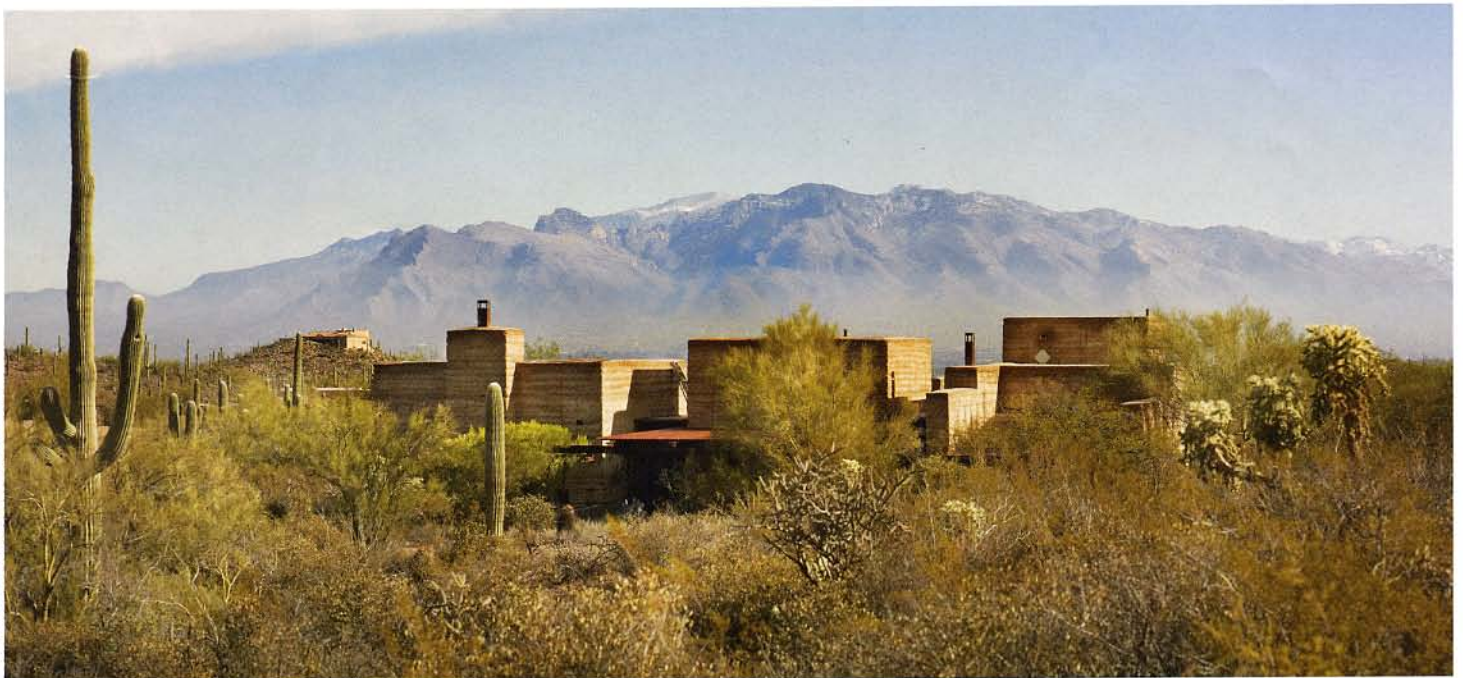




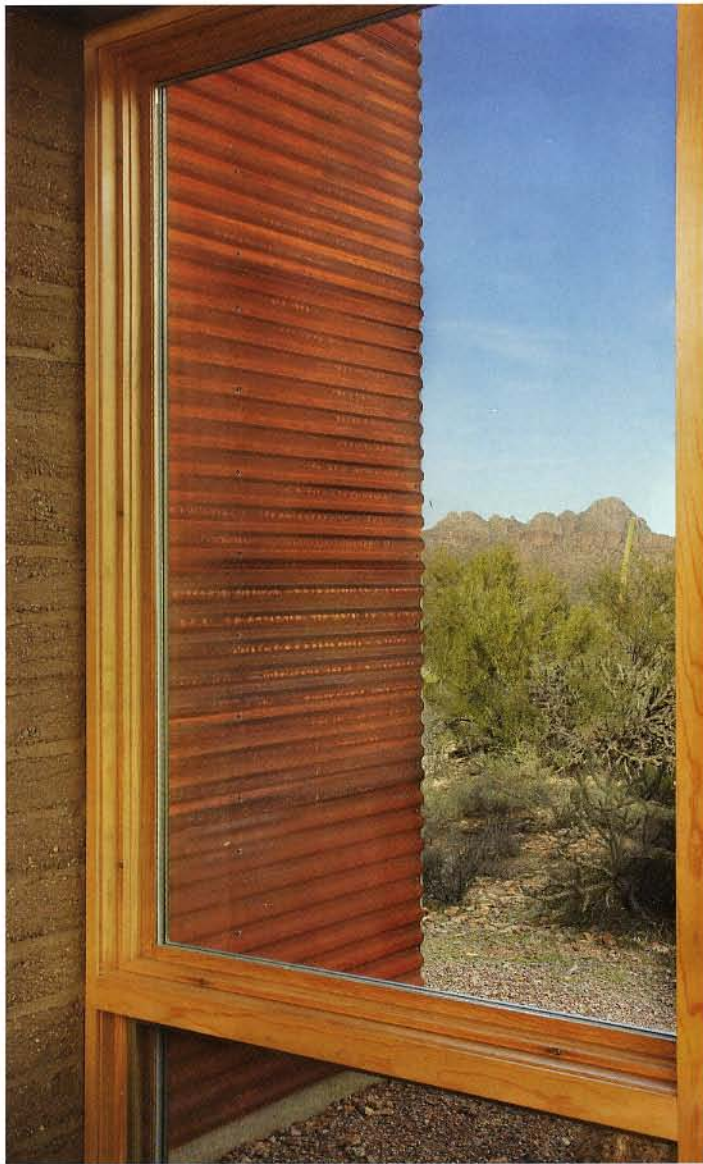
Containment ... release.

Schwam, is scoria, a small volcanic stone similar to pumice, which is crushed and mixed with cement and water to develop lightweight air entrained concrete, thus making the material effective as a natural insulating material.<sup>3</sup> This material is further insulated by placing insulating foam “shingles” within the form work prior to the pour.

Modern day environmentally friendly heating and cooling systems that Paul employs — such as capturing, filtering and reusing water and harvesting photoelectrons to power a home — can also be attributed to methods developed long ago. Paul uses these energy conservation practices, particularly in projects that are out of reach of more traditional city services.



PHOTOS: ROBIN STANCLIFF, PHOTOGRAPHER



## TWO HATS

As the principal of DesignBuild Collaborative, Paul wears the hats of both architect and builder. The name of the company — “Collaborative” — describes a mindset and a way of doing business. Because the firm handles design and construction, there is a smooth — although admittedly labor intensive flow — between the two. Unlike other companies that focus on one or the other, DesignBuild Collaborative can easily make modifications to either the design or construction as the project progresses. What may traditionally be thought of as part of the architect’s domain or the builder’s prerogative, often are not that defined in this environment. The overlap of the architects in the office and the construction team in the field ensures there is the utmost cooperation and respect infused into each project.

Thanks to the blurred line between these roles, clients benefit tremendously. For example, before dramatic, but impractical, designs are too far along, the architects and builders working together can adjust the plans accordingly. Or before a builder takes liberty with a design due to cost or other impediments, the architect will have an opportunity to rework the concept using less expensive materials or a different approach. This ongoing collaboration between the architects and builders creates a synergy that *can* save money. But more often — as Paul puts it — results in a superior process and product.

What is more difficult for Paul than melding the process of design and construction is balancing the concept of business versus art. Clearly, Paul Weiner would like nothing better than to create designs that reflect what he believes to be “a relevant and contextually appropriate response” to and connection with the Tucson landscape. The “exposed, raw, real” topography of the desert is the perfect canvas for Paul’s creative expression. Many of his projects develop a property from rough and rugged terrain, to a calm and serene space. Paul strives for designs that fit the individual property and are in balance with the surroundings. Paul appreciates the “harshness of the desert,” and describes the landscape as “fragile and austere.” But it’s also that “rawness” of nature on which Paul thrives.

## HEART AND SOUL

Paul’s work as a designer and builder is very personal. His connection to the land is recognized by his clients and staff. He makes himself “very available,” because he knows those on his team are contributing their time and talent to his business. Likewise, not everyone will be comfortable with quite so much of Paul’s heart and soul pouring into their home. But that’s okay with Paul. He’d rather pass on a job than work for a client not in sync with his beliefs. One of Paul’s personal philosophies is that you can “never be successful working against [your] belief system.” Most of his clients come by referral or after reading about his work. He also admits some clients just arrive through “grace.”

Such personal commitment and individual attention means Paul’s company is generally building only one or two projects at a time with perhaps three or four other designs in process. About 70 percent of his designs are residential, with the remaining 30 percent a combination of commercial and mixed-use



PHOTOS: ROBIN STANCLIFF, PHOTOGRAPHER

properties. For Paul, “each project opens up a new realm.” So don’t expect Paul’s designs to be in mass production any time soon. In fact, he admits to the occasional business struggle and being grateful that he has had the good fortune to connect with enough like-minded clients to have sustained his way of business for more than 20 years.

Paul describes DesignBuild Collaborative as “a sincere attempt towards an extremely horizontal organization.” In addition to being personally involved in the projects, Paul selects his staff for their own passion and commitment to the work. Their “work touches them.” The firm prides itself on precise, in-depth communications, using carefully selected words to ensure everyone knows their responsibilities. That goes not just for the staff, but for the clients, subcontractors and vendors as well.

According to Paul, what makes DesignBuild Collaborative different from others in the local



PHOTO: ROBIN STANCLIFF, PHOTOGRAPHER

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#### Background information:

- Raised in suburban Chicago
- Bachelor of Science in Agriculture, University of Arizona, 1977
- Bachelor of Architecture, University of Arizona, 1984
- Adjunct Lecturer, University of Arizona, College of Architecture

#### Past experiences:

- Environmental Planning Consultant, Pima County Planning and Zoning Department
- Residential Designer/Carpenter/Builder

#### Published in:

- Architecture
- Fine Homebuilding
- Architectural Record
- Sunset Magazine
- Awareness Journal
- The Straw Bale House

#### Exhibitions:

- Meliora Architectural Gallery, Tucson 1996. “Paul Weiner, Architect/Builder: 12 Years of Work in the Desert”

#### Locally visible public projects:

- El Presidio Inn Bed and Breakfast
- Educational and Animal Care Facilities at the Arizona Sonora Desert Museum
- Rincon Market
- Old Pueblo Grill

industry is serving the dual roles of architect and builder. As architects, the firm feels a responsibility for the construction process that brings a “level of reality and urgency” to the detailing of the construction documents, as well as a need to understand and be responsible for “construction methodology and cost awareness.” As builders, there is high level of responsibility to, and understanding of the design intent of a project, which serves the ultimate quality of the work.

### CONTINUOUS CONTRIBUTION

In addition to serving the needs of his clients, Paul feels a “very strong obligation” to contribute to the physical improvement of the Tucson community.” He also contributes to the next generation of architects and builders as a member of the faculty at the University of Arizona College of Architecture. He finds the time he spends with students rewarding, and enjoys that he’s still “learning every day.”

He also writes on topics of interest to him, and his articles have appeared in a variety of publications. He often writes about the use of natural materials in contemporary construction, and alternative building and energy technologies.

But what really makes Paul tick is the connection he has to both the design and building processes. Intrigued since those days of drawing in the basement with his cousin, he describes what he does as a, “rich and difficult profession.” So for Paul Weiner, *it is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done ... to wear two hats — those of designer and builder.* ■

<sup>1</sup> Spark Notes Study Guide.

<sup>2</sup> The mission of OUTWARD BOUND is to conduct safe, adventure-based programs structured to inspire self-esteem, self-reliance, concern for others and care for the environment.

<sup>3</sup> Ask the Expert, [www.greenhomebuilding.com](http://www.greenhomebuilding.com).