

BUILDING

BY KAREN DAHOOD

from the Best

From urban infill to green building, the Sonoran Institute applauds innovative development

Every other year conscientious caretakers of our community—led by the Sonoran Institute—celebrate the Building from the Best Awards. In March at Hotel Arizona winners were announced at the signature event underwritten by Rio Development Company, whose Rio Nuevo project—Mercado District of Menlo Park—honors Tucson’s natural, cultural, and historical character.

Jason Meininger, who oversees the awards program, says an increase in nominations this year signals a shift to a more progressive approach to building. “The judges had a hard time making the final decisions. There were a lot of discussions and site visits to every one of the 23 finalists,” he says. The judges were Teree Bergman, a planner in Oro Valley; Andy Laurenzi, a land-use specialist on the Sonoran Institute staff; Annie Nequette, University of Arizona professor and expert on Tucson’s historic architecture; and Jane Ragle, citizen-at-large.

This year’s winners represent so many significant innovations, they would need whole books to aptly describe them. Here we offer a few distinguishing details.

* MIXED-USE DEVELOPMENT

FINALISTS Barrio de Tubac ■ Pennington Street Garage ■ Sam Hughes Place ■ Stone Avenue Standard

WINNER Pennington Street Garage

Located at the corner of 6th Avenue and Pennington Street

The City of Tucson ■ Dick & Fritsche Design Group ■ D. L. Withers Construction

A trend-setting, record-breaking, eye-catching parking garage isn’t something most people would aspire to. But Chris Leighton, coordinator of the city program Parkwise, believes downtown revitalization depends on accommodating automobiles with innovation and sensitivity. His startling result combines a pleasantly lit, colorful parking structure with a high-class restaurant, a meeting room, and budget-friendly features.

The building operates economically and efficiently on 65-kilowatt photovoltaic solar power. Leighton’s entrepreneurial team also sees shade as a natural resource: All but four of the 750 slots have cover, making this garage all the nicer. The same kind of dashboard tag that speeds cars through electronic toll booths back East activates the gates. The building’s Pueblo Deco style, with a wide arcade to shelter outdoor dining, attracted Café Poca Cosa. More surprising is the occasional car show held on a ramp when parking isn’t in high demand.

Leighton also wisely decided to use ground-up concrete from the building razed to make room for the garage in the foundation. In the lobby the concrete is polished to a high sheen. ▶



Pennington Street Garage

* CREATIVE REDEVELOPMENT & REHABILITATION

FINALISTS 1202 Studios ■ Casa Buena ■ Ice House Lofts ■ The Pines

WINNER **Ice House Lofts**

Located near 17th Street and Toole Avenue

Fremont Partners One LLC ■ Rob Paulus Architects ■ CaliberWest LLC

The four partners who advanced “smart growth” by turning a 1923 ice plant into housing saw lots of “cool” advantages for the owners of 51 loft-style homes. Most exciting are the trains, barely heard from inside the tightly engineered interiors but thrilling to watch through floor-to-ceiling windows.

The unique landmark was not only salvaged, but the combination of its authentic high ceilings, exposed pipes, and seasoned wood, along with new high-end storage, sophisticated lighting, and sleek finishes, give the development the distinct qualities urbanites love. And passive-solar design means their spacious interiors with European-style kitchens and designer plumbing have guaranteed heating and cooling costs ranging from only \$15.50 to \$63.16 per month.

Plus, the reconstituted residential area sits within walking distance of two popular food markets at the edge of Armory Park Historic Neighborhood near the heart of downtown.

Ice House Lofts

* URBAN INFILL DEVELOPMENT— SMALL SCALE

FINALISTS Barrio Metalico ■ The Double ■ Franklin Court ■
Morton House

WINNER **Barrio Metalico**

Located near 17th Street and Toole Avenue

Fremont Partners One LLC ■ Rob Paulus Architects ■
CaliberWest LLC

Barrio Metalico could be called a brainstorm development. When the Ice House Lofts project was being planned in the 80-year-old Millville neighborhood, the developers purchased adjacent domestic properties that needed improvement. The adobe houses couldn't be saved, so architect Rob Paulus designed a prototypical replacement dwelling that saluted the industrial character of the surrounding environment.

The nine loft-style, two-bedroom, two-bath homes (with super-insulated, energy-efficient but economical wall systems) have light-filled modern interiors and metal exteriors coated with a protective aluminum-on-steel finish called Galvalume. Huge cylindrical rain barrels for rainwater harvesting and solar-operated driveway gates count among the energy-smart features, as do the windows—small on the sunny walls, expansive where there are views of the distant mountains.

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Barrio Metalico

* URBAN INFILL DEVELOPMENT— SMALL SCALE

WINNER Franklin Court

Located near Court Avenue and Franklin Street
Contemporary West Development ■ Bob Lanning Architecture ■
Leo Katz Architecture



Franklin Court

Michael Keith knows one day maintenance and utility bills for an average house will exceed the fixed mortgage payment. That's one reason he pays so much attention to energy conservation. Another is his interest in the condition of the world. He dedicated himself to "green building" before most of us had even heard the term.

Keith's first love was historic buildings, having renovated more than 30 over a period of 20 years. The seven homes in Franklin Court El Presidio neighborhood resemble the early architectural styles around them. But their walls are Mikey Block, a locally manufactured ICF (Insulated Concrete Form)—energy-efficient, lightweight, recycled foam with recycled-steel reinforcement. Blue-jean denim recycled as cotton batting insulates the interior walls. This "stuffing" holds back summer heat radiating from outer walls and keeps rooms quiet. Woodwork of wheatboard (chaff composite), recycled rubber roofing, recycled fir flooring from wine vats, bamboo cabinets, toxin-free paints, and passive-solar orientation contribute to Keith's reputation for "healthy architecture."

The units all have two floors, private courtyards, insulated garages in the back, high-tech wiring, and energy-saving kitchens and baths. Beyond that, each is uniquely designed to the tastes and requirements of the owners, with decor ranging from Mexican Colonial to ultra-modern.



Glenn Court

* URBAN INFILL DEVELOPMENT— LARGE SCALE

FINALISTS Glenn Court ■ Mesquite
Corporate Center ■ Sonora
Cohousing ■ Stone Avenue
Standard ■ Stone Curves
Cohousing

WINNER Glenn Court

*Located near Glenn Street and
Craycroft Road*
KB Home ■ Landmark Engineering
■ O'Leary Construction

The neighborly siting of 85 two-story houses (garages in the rear) helped to quickly sell out this Fortune 500 company's first infill development in Tucson. Glenn Court lies near Fort Lowell Park playing fields and close to the Rillito hiking, biking, and equestrian trail.

The single-family homes cluster irregularly in facing rows on 12½ acres so each has mountain views as well as generous entryways onto a lushly landscaped common area. Mature trees and a wide variety of drought-tolerant plants enhance the peaceful suburban atmosphere. Three large basins for water retention prevent erosion and provide even more open environment.

This company takes the need for cost containment seriously, but is also willing to break the mold to meet people's changing needs. ▶

* WHAT IS THE SONORAN INSTITUTE?

Established in 1990, the Sonoran Institute is a nonprofit organization established to create "lasting benefits, including healthy landscapes and vibrant livable communities that embrace conservation as an integral element of their economies and quality of life." For more information or to learn more about the Building from the Best awards, visit www.sonoran.org or call 290-0828.

* NATURAL OPEN SPACE INTEGRATION IN A DEVELOPMENT

FINALISTS Milagro Cohousing ■ Pima Canyon Estates

WINNER **Milagro Cohousing**

Located near Silverbell and Goret Roads
The Committee for Ecological Living Developers ■
Morton & Mackey Architecture ■ Ollanik Construction

Eighty people live in balance with nature about 20 minutes west of downtown. The 28 baked-adobe, passive-solar homes with metal roofs sit clustered on just 8 of the community's 43 acres. The rest of the land remains as they found it, or has been improved. Milagro grew from the shared vision of nine people who wanted to build a neighborhood centered around ecological goals. It was no easy task, explains Patricia DeWitt, a member of the Milagro community. The first major hurdle was rezoning the land. "The neighbors thought we

were middle-aged hippies," she recalls. So many opponents attended the rezoning hearings some had to stand in the hallways. Nine variances and eight modifications later, two of these families had joined the cohousing group.

Today the air whispers around sand-colored structures solidly notched into hilly terrain, with varied rooflines, habitable porches, and personality revealed through ocotillo fences. All residents work to sustain this paradise, most visibly the gardeners who maintain two areas for growing food. Others include cooks, seamstresses, cistern installers, and rock movers.

All contribute to the "wetlands," where wastewater is purified naturally for reuse, never leaving the community. Rooftop collections funnel directly into landscape basins, and every piece of desert that was disturbed by building will be revegetated.

Milagro Cohousing



* GREEN BUILDING

FINALISTS Dancing Rocks ■ Edith Ball Aquatic Center ■ Red Monkey ■ Riverfront Residence

WINNER Edith Ball Aquatic Center

Located in Reid Park near 22nd Street and Alvernon Way
Burns Wald-Hopkins Architects



Edith Ball Aquatic Center

Burns Wald-Hopkins Architects found a way, on a restricted budget, to build a long-awaited parks facility for differently abled Tucson swimmers that includes sophisticated therapeutic equipment and a healthy environment for all users.

This translates to continually moving fresh air, water warmer than air, and just the right amount of sun. Challenge: The humidity and chemicals would work against an air-conditioning system. Solution: Create one indoor pool with AC and one outdoors under a vast tensile shade structure by BirdAir International using Teflon-coated fiberglass fabric. The 80-foot-tall, wind-resistant “umbrella” covers 16,000 square feet, blocking harmful summer rays while allowing winter sunlight in.

The indoor facilities require no mechanical ventilation and no artificial lighting. Doors over the therapy pool are opened in temperate weather. Thirty-two “solatubes” reflect daylight to refractive ceiling panels that light up the locker rooms. Other resource savings include circulating leisure-pool water through a rooftop solar heating system, draining stormwater and backwash into a zoo pond, and low-flow showers and waterless urinals in the locker rooms.



Sonora Cohousing

* LIVABLE COMMUNITY AWARD


WINNER Sonora Cohousing

Located near First Avenue and Roger Road

Martin Floerchinger ■ McCallister Corporation ■ McCamant & Durrett ■ Wonderland Hill Development Company

The Sonora Cohousing mission statement reads: “We believe that today’s neighborhoods have in large part served to isolate people from one another and encourage alienation from ourselves and our communities. Together we seek to create a neighborhood which strikes a balance... respecting individual privacy while encouraging social interaction.”

Tucson Neighborhood Development Corporation stood at the cutting edge when it chose this low-income neighborhood, qualifying for building-fee waivers because the cohousing project matched the city’s prescription for urban infill. The 36 households, grouped along meandering walks lined with trees, provide an island of cohesive domesticity in an otherwise neglected area.

The homes face each other on *placitas*, where adults visit and children play. In back, privacy walls have been negotiated one by one, resulting in a lovely orchestration of individuality. “I feel nourished here,” says resident Freda Johnson. And while the conflict-resolution specialist concedes that although community decisions take time, community meals served three nights a week make “nourished” more than a metaphor. 



Karen Dahood completed “design ambassador” training as a member of the 2004 class of the Tucson Community Design Academy sponsored by the Sonoran Institute.