

## NOTES FROM THE FOR-REAL SIDE

### Audacity Surviving by Lee Thorn

I remember discovering Repp Design + Construction a few years ago. I drove past one of their projects and asked myself, "Who could have done that? How could that be in Tucson?" Then I drove past another one of their projects and, deciding that I had to know who did it, I stopped and knocked on a randomly selected door.

After tracking the owner of the company down, interviewing him about what they were doing, and being shown more of their projects, I had one burning question that only time could answer: Could a firm as outrageously original as Repp continue doing its defiantly brilliant work in a town that's infamous for its cultural timidity? Time has answered my question in the form of a recently completed Repp project at 4551 E. Pima. The answer is exhilarating in its boldness and total lack of compromise. Here is Repp coming at you with both barrels blazing, this project as original and daring as any of the ones that caught my eye years ago.

As usual, in accordance with their low maintenance philosophy, Repp has taken unadorned concrete block (formerly known as "cinder block"), corrugated metals, concrete and glass and created a small fourplex that conveys a sense of such exquisite precision and elegance it takes your breath away. How can you get this grace, drama, élan from these plain, hard, unromantic materials? You might as well ask how Michelangelo got the Pieta out of a chunk of stone. The answer would be the same – creativity. I'm not confusing art with architecture or the Repp folks with Michelangelo. I'm just saying that – without the eternally inexplicable magic of creativity – block, metal, glass and concrete get you a second-rate lockup in a third-world country.

Repp starts with their very rigorous low maintenance philosophy and then adds the policy of bending design to the limitations of the available space. And this isn't their first project in which the available space was narrow. We end up with units that are 18 feet wide and 66 feet long. I must confess that I have never before seen an apartment that was only 18 feet wide. The width in itself is audacious. Although the long narrow space derived in part from site limitations, it results in a powerful sense of coziness. You don't feel at all squeezed in this space; you feel absolutely cosseted. As a practical matter, if one member of the household had to finish his income taxes and others wanted to party, a great deal of distance could be put between the conflicting factions.

Three powerful accents enhance the units' personality. Both the staircase and the floating bridge that connects the second story spaces are made of a creamy bright bamboo. Its warm glow contrasts so strikingly with the other materials that the effect is stunning. The idea of a bridge instead of an ordinary hallway, in addition to accentuating the vertical spaciousness of the design, adds an element of whimsy and even impishness. A third accent is the 18-foot glass facade that creates the back wall of each apartment. Again, vertical spaciousness is emphasized and north light with a mountain view are thrown in for good measure.

What is it about these Repp spaces that is so exciting and attractive? They seem to hold you securely aloft like a tree house. Getting back to earth, the designers had the good sense to provide more parking and bigger backyards than are typical of the neighborhood. The neighborhood itself is an old stable one

that evinces lots of pride of ownership. There's also a very active neighborhood association that has succeeded on at least one occasion in keeping the city from doing something truly stupid.

At 1640 square feet these apartments are clearly in the luxury class. They're either the only or almost the only luxury units in their immediate vicinity. I'm not sure if that makes good economic sense, but I figure, based on Repp's already amazing survival in the Tucson market, that they know it makes sense.

I guess the moral of the story is that you can never guess where things are going to pop up. The opera pops up in Santa Fe. The Taj pops up in Agra. The space alien industry pops up in Roswell. The Beatles pop up in Liverpool. An enormous 17-acre poetry center pops up on the campus of the University of Arizona.

And now Repp Design + Construction is doing things here that I'm pretty sure aren't being done anywhere else. If I'm wrong about that, would someone please let me know.

(Thorn welcomes comments, suggestions for future columns, and tips on local skulduggery that ought to be exposed. Write to Box 85571, Tucson, AZ 85754. E-mail: [Doid3@aol.com](mailto:Doid3@aol.com).)