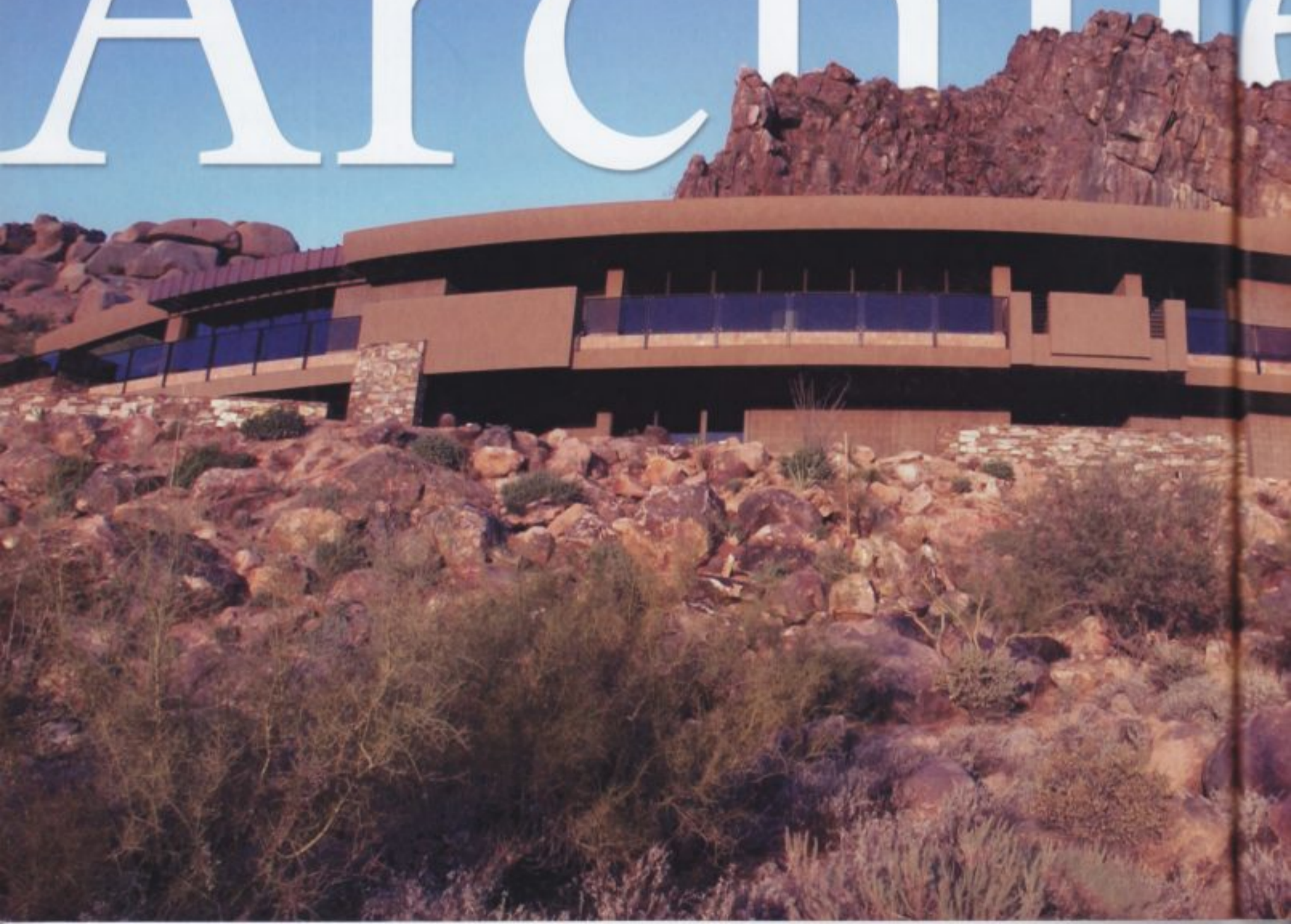


(writer Karen Werner)

Mark Sever uses the design-build approach
to create places his peers are proud to call home

the Architect's Architect



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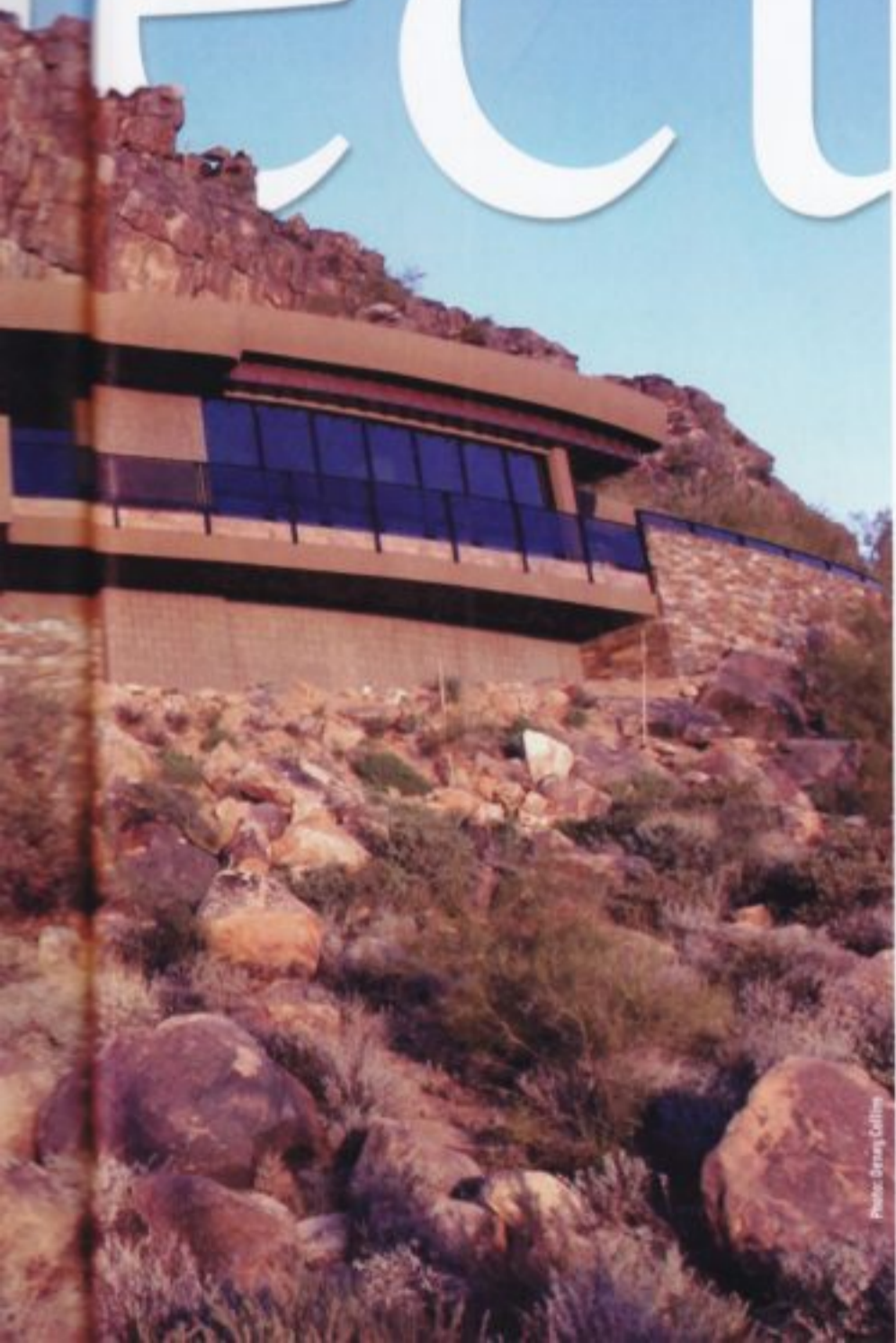


Photo: Beverly Collins

**left The radical geometry of this house on the east face of Black Mountain made it one of the most challenging homes Sever's firm has built. They eliminated retaining walls by using boulders excavated from the site and created landscape pockets within the boulders to house desert plants and trees. The end result is an incredibly organic dwelling. "It really looks like we flew a house in and dropped it on the lot," Sever says.*

**below To ground the house in the landscape, Sever used rock that complements the terrain. The warm, earthy décor of the formal living room underscores the selection.*



Photo: Dina Tolin

Horizontal roof lines, galleries of glass, geometric details framing Pinnacle Peak—Marvin Goldberg's new North Scottsdale home is filled with the Prairie Style elements he loves. A retired pediatrician turned commercial developer, Goldberg specializes in the construction of fine custom homes. But, though he regularly builds houses on the order of 20,000 square feet, he neither designed nor built his 7,200-square-foot Estancia abode. He left that to the architect Mark Sever.

That doesn't surprise Sever. "If you're a heart surgeon, you don't operate on yourself," he says, explaining why so many of his clients are architects and builders. Some, like Goldberg, turn to him to navigate out-of-state codes and regulations, while others prefer to devote time to their careers, rather than to the construction of their own homes. Either way, Sever's clients enjoy working with a meticulous professional, and one who's quickly gaining a reputation as an architect's architect.

Take Bill Burgesser, an architect from Dallas who runs a large firm specializing in restaurants, military buildings and golf-course clubhouses and facilities. He'd purchased a lot in Superstition Mountain, but realized that building in Texas and Arizona were two different worlds. "I knew that I wanted to find someone whose detail and finish I liked, so I wouldn't have to reinvent the wheel," he says. "I was driving around North Scottsdale one day, when I saw a house that literally stopped me in my tracks."

"One of Sever's favorite design elements is the fireplace. "Even though you can't burn wood in Scottsdale, I still want it to look like a really cool wood-burning fireplace," he says. The mantel of this massive three-sided model extends beyond its point of boring, while a sculptural steel element radiates heat into the space.



Photo: Don Teas

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It was one of Sever's. So Burgessier flew back to get acquainted with the way the Scottsdale architect approached design. "I found I was dealing with someone who spoke my language," Burgessier says. He was particularly impressed that Sever's firm handles everything in-house—from design to construction—thereby streamlining the process, lowering the cost and lessening the liability.

Sever Design Group employs the design-build delivery method, a marked departure from the way houses are typically built. Conventionally, a client hires an architect to create a design and then put the project out to contractors for bid. Critics of this process contend that clients often get stuck between feuding architects,

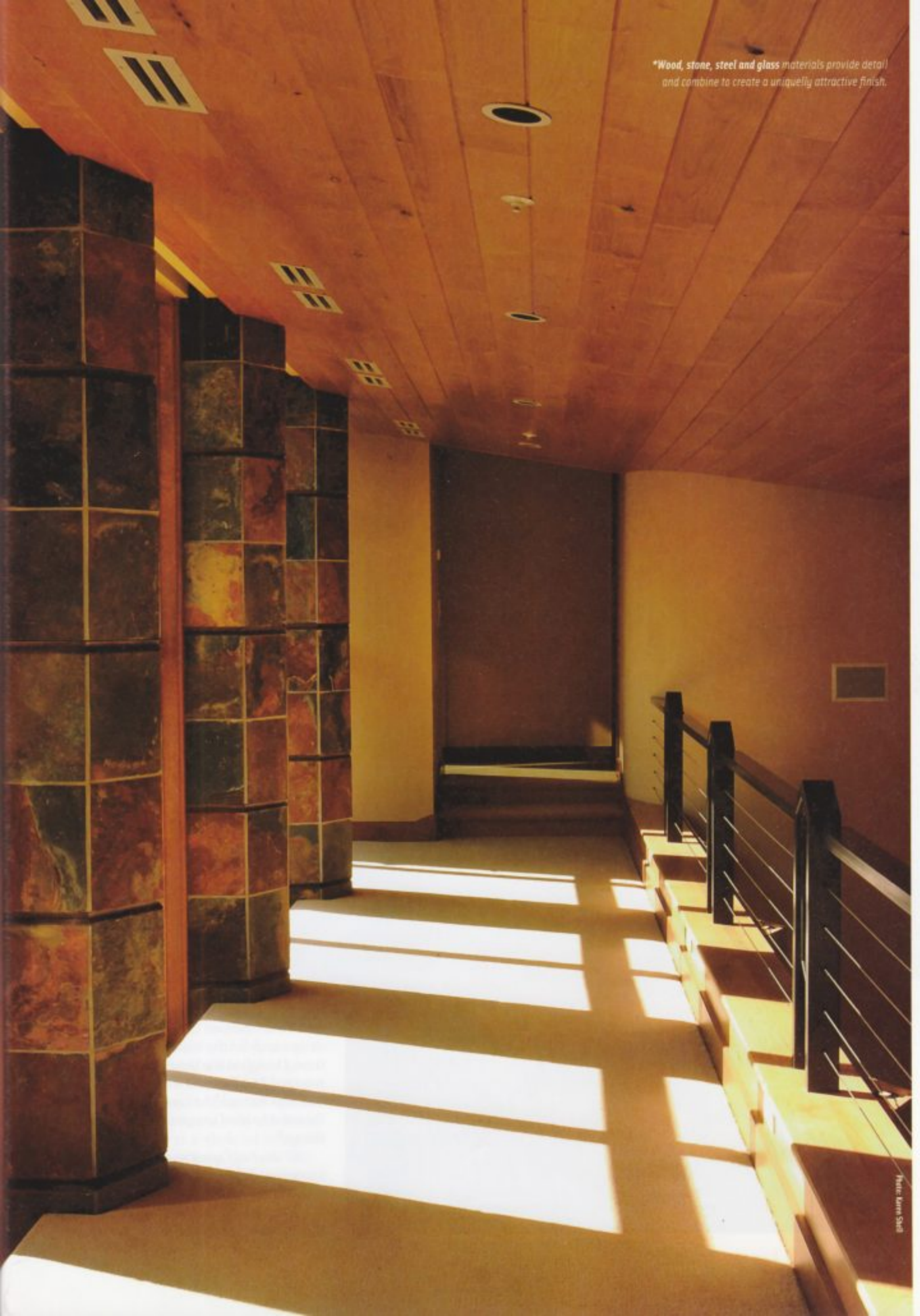
contractors and engineers. Under the design-build model, the client, architect and contractor collaborate from the start, generating designs and establishing costs. This, advocates say, translates into guaranteed prices, substantial time savings and a point man to go to when there's a problem.

Though the design-build method has been transforming commercial construction for years, it is still relatively new to residential architecture. And the number of design-build teams led by an architect is even smaller still. This strikes Sever as strange. Cars, appliances, airplanes—they're built by the companies that design them. Why should architecture be different?

"We started focusing on construction about seven years ago out of frustration more than anything else," says Sever. "We got tired of our designs being tweaked here and there just for the sake of a dollar." Accordingly, his firm went through a painstaking three-year process of accreditation so he could ensure his houses were delivered with the intent of the architecture in mind.

The characteristics of that architecture are readily apparent to fans of Sever's work. "If you line up a row of houses, you can always pick Mark's out," says Burgessier. "The lines are crisp and clean, the proportionality is exceptional, and the finishes are immaculate." His palette runs to the permanent: steel frames, stone veneer,

**Wood, stone, steel and glass materials provide detail and combine to create a uniquely attractive finish.*



***"I'm extremely involved in all the details
and I can be a very hard person to work for"***

exposed masonry, copper roofs and a real marriage to the site.

Sever—born and raised in Rapid City, South Dakota, but a long-time resident of the West has a real love for Arizona. "One thing that's nice about the state is that it doesn't have a long history, so we're all searching for a future." Sever articulates the hunt in several styles but says he's particularly fond of contemporary architecture, because "you have more of a license to challenge yourself."

It's the challenge that keeps things fresh. Sever grew up wanting to be an architect and remains obsessed with the ongoing quest for excellence. He has a drawing table set up in his basement and sneaks down to sketch at night after he's played with his kids. He scours shelter magazines and real-estate ads, on the lookout for unusual homes. He studies his peers' work, researches innovative building materials and keeps up with the latest technologies. "I hold myself to a very high standard," he says. "I get up every morning wanting to be the best, and I work on education all the time."

Sever requires that his staff do the same. "I'm extremely involved in all the details and I can be a very hard person to work for," he says. "But it's the end result that I'm after." Sever's attention to the tiniest element means the design intent always shines through. His firm devises driveways and walkways, patios and pools, ornamental iron, entry gates and site walls. They plot out landscape design, create furniture and find talented craftsmen to manufacture it. "The more the client asks of you, the more everything is related to your original concept," he says.

Those in the building business recognize the magnitude of this approach and are happy to hand over the minutiae. David Cohen, the co-president and co-founder of Hacienda Builders will soon move

**below: The low-slung cantilevered roof helps control the amount of sun that enters this Estancia home. "I employ the cantilever in every design I do, because it eliminates columns, shades glass and looks just awesome," Sever says*



into his second Sever-designed house. The first time, however, Cohen took Sever's design and did the building himself. "This time, I weighed the time commitment required and figured I'd focus on my business instead," he says. "I'm definitely thankful to have someone else handling things."

All this begs questions of cooks in the kitchen and the number of people it takes to screw in a light bulb. Sever welcomes working with fellow professionals and says that educated clients make his job easier.

**The back portion of the house is nestled into its amazing Pinnacle Peak setting. Stonework was selected to blend unobtrusively with the hillside surrounding the home.*



Photo: Karen Stahl

"It's almost better working with architects and builders," he says, "because they've been through the process in your shoes. They respect what you're doing and give you the freedom to be your best."

Burgesser agrees. "After spending time with Mark's firm, I figured why cheat myself? After all, they're a whole lot better at building houses than I am," he says. "But I always felt free to add my opinions and work together until we found a solution."

Sometimes Sever's solutions come about in surprising ways, as was the case

with Goldberg's new Estancia home. Goldberg's problem boiled down to an embarrassment of riches—too many breathtaking views. So he consulted several architects, asking for ways to best exploit his property's hillside setting. Goldberg told the architects not to spend much time drawing, but instead to submit a short concept statement.

Sever, inspired by the dose of healthy competition, put his firm on the project for two weeks. At the end of the period, Sever Design Group presented Goldberg

with four boards of sketches that succinctly took the Pinnacle Peak milieu into account. "That's my house," Goldberg said, and they went on to build it, making only minuscule changes. "Mark has a real artist's eye," Goldberg says, pointing out how beautifully his home blends with the rock formations surrounding it. "Almost anybody can build a house, but to perceive what it should be takes real and true talent. The devil is in the details, as they say, and there's nobody better at details than Mark." ★