

**THE ARIZONA REPUBLIC**  
March 10, 2008

■ VIEWPOINTS online print edition



## **ASU Professor John Meunier calls upon architects to resist building 'pulp fiction' and instead create architectural 'literature'**

Mar. 9, 2008 12:00 AM

Most airport bookstores have shelves filled with *New York Times* best-sellers by authors with names such as Ludlum, Crichton, Grisham, Follett, Francis and Koontz that many of us buy to while away the tedium of the next few hours as we surrender ourselves to the passivity required of an airline passenger.

Recently, some of those bookstores are offering to buy back the book at half-price, knowing that it will not have much of a future life on our shelves at home.

Occasionally, we find ourselves at an airport with a more ambitious bookstore with a section labeled "Literature." The purchase of such books will be much more demanding, hence our hesitation, but all could possibly find an honored place on our bookshelves at home.

Such literature may even extend our understanding of the complexities of human nature or the formal riches of literary art.

In recent months, I have found it useful to evoke this experience that so many of us share when we might choose the less-demanding option of "pulp-fiction" or "mass-market paperbacks" over that of "literature." It's a way to explain my sadness and frustration with the caliber of architecture being proposed and built in many parts of Greater Phoenix but particularly in my own neighborhood of Paradise Valley.

As the previous generation of houses and resorts is being replaced by grander and more luxurious buildings, it is clear that the builders are more informed by the architectural culture of pulp fiction than by that of architectural literature.

During construction, this is particularly clear as the wood framing and the occasional steel column or masonry blocks are transformed into an unpersuasive simulacrum of a massive stone "Tuscan villa," a thick-walled "adobe pueblo," a heavily timbered "Hispanic hacienda," or - even worse - a hodgepodge of ideas probably gleaned from a scrapbook of seductive images in the lifestyle magazines.

As an architectural educator, I introduce to my students the notion that our buildings have a cultural responsibility to interpret both our place and our time. Arizona and its buildings are often the subject of my first lecture as we are so fortunate to live in a part of the world that has a particularly rich architectural history, from ancient Hopi villages such as Oraibi, (the oldest continually inhabited community in the United

States), to civic buildings such as the Burton Barr Central Library, which drew the world's attention to the emergence of what has been called the Arizona School, a set of buildings that embody a commitment to both time and place.

Frank Lloyd Wright, Paolo Soleri and Al Beadle are just a few of the names of those who have made great architectural contributions in Arizona. Now, there is a new generation of architects whose current work is attracting international respect.

These are the "authors" of our architectural "literature." Their work sustains Wright's admonition to tell the truth in our buildings, to realize the potentials of the site without destroying it, to address the challenges and opportunities of our desert climate, and to create a kind of beauty that challenges as well as rewards the eye and the mind.

Steel, glass and concrete have been joined with ancient materials such as rammed earth and native stone, not as stage-set veneers but as essential components of the structure and the expression of the architecture.

Greater Phoenix is poised at a moment of transition into one of the world's more important urban complexes, much as Chicago was more than a century ago.

Is it also going to become a major cultural center?

We have an opportunity to fulfill that ambition at least in the field of architecture, but only if we resist the easy temptation to build pulp fiction and seize the opportunity to build architectural literature.

This effort will require a commitment by all our civic, development, institutional and business communities, as well as each of us.

There are already important achievements building on the heritage of Taliesin West and the Arizona Biltmore, with arts centers in Mesa and Tempe; a football stadium in Glendale; a library, art museum and science center in Phoenix; some steel-and-glass condominiums in Scottsdale; fine educational buildings at the universities and the community colleges; and, just emerging, a unique set of light-rail transit stations, as well as a handful of superb modern homes.

Are these going to be swallowed up in a sickly sweet architectural stew of fictional mediocrity? Or are we, as a community, going to insist that the buildings of Greater Phoenix have the substance and enduring delight of a literate architecture?

There is a choice.

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