



# BALANCING ACT

**The Sonoran Institute helps bridge the divide between green & growth**

"Luther says if Tucson is going to be our home base, then our work has to expand into the built environment," says Suzanne Bott, Ph.D., geographer, and planner hired by Luther Propst to manage Sonoran Institute's Building from the Best of Tucson program. Open spaces have always attracted people to this city. The institute's founder and executive director saw that improving the city would help conserve the desert.

BY **KAREN DAHOOD** • PHOTOGRAPHY BY **DANIEL SNYDER**



The 1905 George W. Cheney House in the El Presidio Historic District fell to near ruin after a 1981 fire.

But talking about improvements in cities can bring opposing views to a flashpoint. The institute's expertise lies in helping people who are struggling to come to a meeting of minds. However, Bott says, its best purpose is to get ahead of such difficulties by seeking opportunities to establish common ground. The organization conceived the awards program—Building from the Best of Tucson

(BBOT)—as a strategy for modeling careful and appropriate development. “BBOT is not about what’s wrong, but what’s right.”

### **Foundations for healthy land use**

The name of the organization, Sonoran Institute, sounds as though it delivers health care, and it does promote healing—of the land and of people

# BUILDING FROM THE BEST OF TUCSON AWARDS 2004

**Historic Preservation** The 1905 George W. Cheyney House in a historic downtown neighborhood was ravaged by fire in 1981. The owners consulted with the other El Presidio residents and carefully chose a rebuilding team to adapt the house with green technology and provide tenant space.

**Open Space** The Pima County Parklands Foundation and Colossal Cave Mountain Park are lauded for their preservation of archaeological, heritage, and natural resources and for expanding the recreational area in peaceful coexistence with ranching.

**Appropriate Regional Architecture, Contemporary** The 15th Street Studios complex by Phillip G. Rosenberg (PGR Construction) represents its time and place with modern materials (masonry, metal, glass) while reflecting Tucson's architectural traditions (overhangs, courtyards, scale).

**Appropriate Regional Architecture, Contextual** New houses on Meyer Avenue respect the 19th-century Sonoran-style row houses that distinguish Barrio Santa Rosa. Tom Wuelpert (Rammed Earth Development) used adobe and rammed and pressed earth for the wall systems, incorporating traditional features such as zero setbacks, deep windows with wood trim, interior courtyards, and porches.

**Urban Redevelopment/Infill, Residential** Terra Alta Court consists of three single-family homes clustered on one vacant lot in an established neighborhood. Dante Archangeli and Eric Freedberg (Milestone Homes) worked with the neighbors

to achieve a design that fit nicely into the existing environment.

**Urban Redevelopment/Infill, Public** The old Drachman School in Barrio Viejo became the site for a housing-for-the-elderly project named after a famous resident of the neighborhood. The Lalo Guerrero backyards face the old school playground, now gardens, while the cheerful color-coded units have private entrances facing the street.

**Adaptive Reuse & Rehabilitation** The office of Burns and Wald-Hopkins, Architects, preserves the integrity of the original structure at 261 N. Court Ave. in El Presidio Historic Neighborhood while providing updated facilities in the back.

**Green Building, Residential** Barbara and Michael Mullaney built their home with straw bale and rastra walls, then incorporated solar water and heating and rainwater harvesting to make it highly energy efficient.

**Green Building, Public** The largest public watering system in Tucson was built into the addition at St. Michael's Parish Day School. The building was cited for its natural lighting and open clerestory and stack ventilation.

**Mixed Use** Warren Michaels renovated a historic downtown building for Congress Street Lofts, which includes commercial and office space with residential units. He removed 1950s-era tiles to reveal the original ornate brickwork at the top of the building's exterior and redesigned the storefront with a sleek but compatible Kore-10 steel facade.







PGR Construction's 15th Street Studios incorporate modern materials while reflecting Tucson's architectural traditions such as overhangs and courtyards.

feeling affected by change. Propst was hired away from the World Wildlife Fund in 1990 to work with residents and environmentalists in the Rincon Valley as the rural area came under development. With credentials as a lawyer and regional planner, he created the Rincon Institute, dedicated to making it possible for population growth to occur without destroying the natural environment.

Funding for the institute came from a precedent-setting source—deed restrictions that assess fees to builders, homeowners, and visitors at the Rocking K Ranch, a major development adjacent to Saguaro National Park. It got equal support from outside sources, such as the National Park Foundation and the Arizona Game & Fish Department Heritage Fund.



Newly constructed houses along Meyer Avenue resemble nearby 19th-century Sonoran-style row houses.

The Rincon Institute served as the prototype in the founding of Sonoran Institute, which focuses on similar issues across the West. Since then, Propst has guided more than two dozen place-based conservation organizations across a wide range of landscapes and communities throughout western North America. He chairs the Arizona League of Conservation Voters Education Fund and also serves on the board of the Murie Center in Moose, Wyoming. The institute has other offices in Phoenix and in Bozeman, Montana. Three distinct geographic areas have come under the institute's wing: the Sonoran Desert, including northern Sonora, Mexico, where an ecotourism industry has been established; the northern portion of the Rocky Mountains; and southeastern Arizona range lands.

As outdoorsy as this sounds, the Sonoran Institute has a mission of keeping urban and rural environments in balance. Its staff of planners, conservation biologists, and social scientists responds to requests from agencies and communities working to conserve and restore natural landscapes, including both wildlife and human culture. Its mission supports the values of “vibrant economies and livable communities that embrace conservation as

an integral element of their economies and quality of life.”

In Pima County, for example, some institute staff work directly with ranchers who are trying to hold on to their lifestyle—a very expensive proposition these days. The conservation-oriented ranchers are called “stewards” of the land, and their success will provide Tucson with open spaces. Other staff members are working on the suburban Houghton Area Master Plan with Tucson planning officials to ensure that development will not result in “a sea of pink houses.” And in the city, the institute supports infill development, as in Rio Nuevo, where several parcels of unoccupied land have been identified for mixed use, with plans evolving for housing, shops, offices, and major cultural attractions.

### New urbanism

One of the terms current in planners' conversations is “new urbanism,” which is a way of designing denser neighborhoods based on the belief that many people prefer to live close to other people and want to be able to walk to stores, recreational activities, and even work. This serves to reduce traffic and transportation

MANY PEOPLE PREFER TO LIVE CLOSE TO OTHER PEOPLE AND WANT TO



The three single-family homes of Terra Alta Court exemplify successful residential infill.



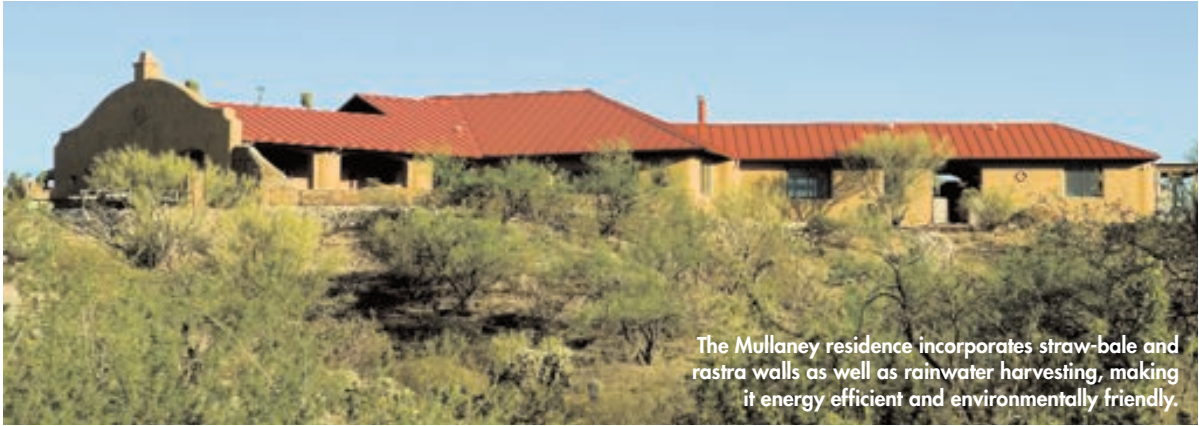


The former Drachman school in Barrio Historico has been converted into award-winning housing for the elderly.

BE ABLE TO WALK TO STORES, RECREATIONAL ACTIVITIES, AND EVEN WORK.



The office of Burns and Wald-Hopkins, Architects, preserves the original integrity of the historic Court Avenue structure.



The Mullaney residence incorporates straw-bale and rastra walls as well as rainwater harvesting, making it energy efficient and environmentally friendly.

BUILDING FROM THE BEST OF TUCSON IS NOT ABOUT WHAT'S WRONG,



The mixed-use Congress Street Lofts combine commercial and office space with residential units.



problems and, by providing the opportunity for regular exercise, addresses the national concern of obesity.

Bott and Ann Vargas, City of Tucson downtown housing planner, talk about the “malaise” occurring in neighborhood environments that do not support the values and needs of residents. Depression and anger grow where people feel unable to satisfy their instincts to socialize. Walls around individual residences can isolate people. Untended yards can irritate neighbors.

Rio Nuevo, the infill development intended to draw thousands of Tucson

## BUT WHAT'S RIGHT.

nans and tourists to the city center for shopping and recreation, will impact 15 neighborhoods. “Longtime residents were asking, ‘What’s going to happen to us? There will be too much traffic! We won’t be able to afford our homes!’” Vargas recalls. With dollars from the city and several major donors, Dr. Bott and others on the institute staff were called in to teach a crash course in environmental design.

“We’re all part of the same system,” says Bott. “Our role is to bring all the interested parties to the same table, to help them make enlightened and long-lasting decisions about land use. An important element—perhaps the most important—is to respect everyone’s experience of the environment and their hopes for the future.”

The resulting master plan for 12 acres attracted complex proposals from outstanding developers and architects. They had forged new partnerships specifically to respond to the challenge—to creatively provide breathing space for current residents yet invigorate the neighborhood with new life. The team selected by the city was Rio Development, headed by Arizonans Justin and Jerry Dixon. The winners are the residents who influenced the design—and the desert. 🏠

Visit the **Sonoran Institute’s** website at [www.sonoran.org](http://www.sonoran.org) to learn more.

*Karen Dahood was selected to be in Tucson Community Design Academy’s first class of “design ambassadors.”*

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