

9:01



to touch  
the  
**Human  
Spirit**

BY KATHRYN JENSON WHITE

Looking for silver linings among the clouds may be a cliché, but the University of Oklahoma's hiring of architect Hans Butzer provides a sterling example of how, even in the darkest tragedy, human beings can find some light.

Butzer is the *wunderkind* who, with his equally *wunderkind* wife, Torrey, formed the architectural team chosen to design the Oklahoma City National Memorial. From the evil of the April 19, 1995, bombing that took the lives of 168 people has emerged a stunningly powerful monument to the indomitable nature of the human spirit. From that crucible, too, has come a man who passed through the experience of creating that monument to become an acclaimed architect and, of equal importance to OU, a dedicated teacher.

Being chosen to design the memorial from among a pool of 624 in the 1997 international competition was a pivotal event in a journey that led Butzer from Dusseldorf, Germany, where he and Torrey had practiced architecture for five years, to OU's College of Architecture, where he was named

■ Hans and Torrey Butzers' move to Oklahoma to design the stunningly powerful National Memorial has brought them international acclaim and allowed Hans to answer a second calling as a teacher.



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assistant professor in fall 2000. Along the way, he stopped at Harvard University for a master's degree in architecture. Butzer defines his roles as both practitioner and teacher in terms more often associated with preaching than with teaching.

"I would call architecture, for me, a passion as well as a mission," he says. "The mission aspect arises out of my background, as a Catholic coming from a traditional Catholic family, and being brought up with the idea that one uses one's talents for the benefit of the greater good.

"My father is a geographer, and his interests are passions. The way he has dealt with his profession is very much how I would like to handle my own. He has taught me to try to be the best at what I do and let everything else take care of itself.

"I've always wanted to teach as part of the mission. I've seen the way my father's students love him for what he has brought to their lives. This was the right time to focus on that."

Butzer's father, who was at the University of Chicago and is now at the University of Texas, Austin, taught his children well. On summer field trips, in fact, the elder Butzer taught as he drove; when he and his wife returned from trips to Europe or southern and East Africa, they treated their sometimes-reluctant children to educational slide shows.

*continued*

**“WE HAVE TO THINK ABOUT NOT JUST HOW WE PHYSICALLY BUILD OUR BUILDINGS, BUT ABOUT HOW WE CONCEIVE THEM INTELLECTUALLY, HOW THEY FIT WITH OUR SENSE OF IDENTITY IN THE PAST AND PRESENT, AND HOW THEY MIGHT AFFECT OUR FUTURE.”**

In addition, each summer from 1968 through 1977, the Butzer family spent three to four months in Germany with grandparents. One set really enjoyed taking trips and showing the children northwestern Germany, Belgium, Holland and northern France. These trips provided an intense submersion in the Old World way of building as well as impressions gained from his paternal grandfather—an engineer—about buildings as an integral part of human existence and as settings for lives rather than just backdrops.

“The trips with my grandfather taught us that buildings demand attention,” Butzer says. “They demand consideration in terms of how we deal with the built environment at both conscious and unconscious levels. We have to think about not just how we physically build our buildings, but about how we conceive them intellectually, how they fit with our sense of identity in the past and present, and how they might affect our future.”

From this living classroom came the seeds of ideas that would eventually flower into the Butzers’ design for a memorial that provides visitors with a journey through the landscape of loss toward that of healing and redemption.

“Part of my father’s passion about geography has always been landscape, how humans interact with the land, and how the landscape is changed through human interaction in farming, building cities, migrating, etc.,” Butzer says. “We never went to Disney World or to do the typical fun things. Rather, we would take these weekends and drive up to Wisconsin passing through this kettle moraine landscape, the old glacial landscapes with soft rolling hills. We learned a lot about the development of the Great Lakes. That’s when my fascination began with how what we see affects who we are.”

“At the time, there was still a longing for Disney World, but in my latter years when I was studying architecture, I realized how lucky I was and how happy my childhood had been.”

Butzer, who grew up in Chicago, promises that he and Torrey will take first-child Daisy, born in June 2000, on the same sorts of cultural field trips. After a short deliberation, however, he adds, “But Daisy is going to Disney World, too.” He has not yet decided whether he and Torrey will treat Daisy to a second generation of those educational slide shows.

Associate Professor of Architecture Mack Caldwell considers himself partially responsible for Butzer’s coming to OU. While attending a conference in Cambridge, he stopped in to visit the young architect at Harvard and to

invite him to apply for a teaching position. Butzer did, and Dean Robert Fillpot offered him a non-tenure-track adjunct’s position. While the faculty had considered him a most desirable candidate, Caldwell explains, the dean was concerned that Butzer might not choose to stay for any length of time, given the fame that came with the memorial and his strong ties to Austin. Both the Butzers had earned their bachelor’s degrees at UT, and both their families still live there. When Fillpot read Butzer’s glowing student evaluations and realized the strength of his commitment to staying in Oklahoma, he offered him a tenure-track faculty position. According to Caldwell, OU should consider itself fortunate that Butzer accepted.

“Hans and I taught together in Basic Design, and he is a wonderful teacher,” Caldwell says. “He is very quiet, very serious. He treats the students’ queries as those of serious architects rather than as students finding their way. He’s young and relates well to them, and they to him. He also has a deep, deep knowledge of architecture, and the students respect that.”

“His concept of teaching as a mission defines his work. I think that all architects who teach, or at least the ones I respect, see their role as a mission to bring a new generation forward with the best possible credentials available in their education. Here, we have to attract students to what some see as the hinterlands, where architecture isn’t the big deal it is in New York and San Francisco and Dallas. In Oklahoma, there is an incredible student interest in architecture.”

Caldwell says that during Butzer’s first year teaching, he walked as many students as he could through the Oklahoma City National Memorial, giving them insights no one else could.

■ Visitors approaching the east “Gate of Time” first see the dedicatory inscription. Inside, the east and west gates bear the times “9:01” and “9:03,” one minute before and after the 9:02 a.m., April 19, 1995, blast that claimed 168 lives.



"I went on one of those tours, and the depth of explanation and how he explained it to the students as a kind of adventure and search were astonishing," Caldwell remembers. "He showed them that there were no hard answers, that they had to go and dig out solutions to problems. He showed them his own attitude of 'I don't know the answer. I've got to go find it.' It was a model for them, and they responded well. Even I responded well. It was a wonderful experience for all of us."

Caldwell believes that Butzer can help nurture a growing program that now has 189 freshmen interested in architecture. Eight years ago, when Caldwell first taught Turbo Draw, the freshman drawing course, the program had 60-80 students. Within three years, that number was up to 200, where it has remained for the last five years.

"Hans is a very modest man, and that goes a long way to making him an exceptional teacher," Caldwell says. "Teaching Basic Design is what you get when you're a

beginning teacher, and many resent it. They want to get into architecture. Hans has had an immensely successful practice, but he immediately saw the value of teaching beginning students and said, 'That's what I want to do.'"

Fillpot is quite aware that marquee names mean a lot to a university program. He tempers that, however, with the knowledge that a program must be strong and multifaceted to flourish.

"Having one of the designers of the memorial on the faculty helps recruit students, or at least to get them interested in the school," he says. "However, students look for many different things when going into architecture, so you can't say it's an across-the-board appeal. But I do think that students will be drawn to us because Hans and Torrey's memorial is a noble and worthwhile work.

"Projects that touch the human spirit make up the essence of what architecture is all about. We've got an entire planet of buildings, but when you stop and think,



few of those lift the spirit of man. Those that do are truly architecture. The memorial will continue to speak to the spirit of humanity at various levels for years to come. I'm proud that Hans and Torrey have chosen to stay in Oklahoma."

**T**orrey, who was born and lived for a few months in Nowata, now focuses primarily on being Daisy's mother. Last year, however, she visited Butzer's classes for "desk crits," short critique sessions in which teachers and professionals evaluate student work, and talked about her specialties, sketching and watercolor drawing. While she enjoys interaction with stu-

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dents and intends to continue visiting, she has no plans to teach.

"Hans has wanted to teach for as long as I've known him," she says. "He's wonderful at it because he can so quickly relate to students wherever they are. He sees what they're seeing from their perspective and then gives them objective criticism and a direction to go that's relevant to their own ideas. He doesn't try to force his own ideas on them.

"However, it's important to him to practice *and* teach. He doesn't want to leave the realm of reality because he wants to bring that world to his students. The teachers we had at Texas who made the most important impressions were those who were practicing as well as teaching. Teaching also keeps you in the world of what's new and what's going on in young, creative minds. He feels both are necessary for balance."

For Butzer, practice has the slightest edge in the equation. He places it at 51 percent and teaching at 49 percent. He firmly believes that his students benefit directly from his experience in an aggressive, critical practice.

That practice began in 1990, the year he graduated from UT, when he and Torrey were commissioned to design an addition to her uncle's beach house on the Galveston coast. What started as a deck extension for a hot tub evolved into a full-scale redesign to open the home to the experience of the Gulf's beauty. The Cassell House was a major success.

"We took a lot of pride in calling the shots," Butzer says.



■ If possible, the Oklahoma City National Memorial is even more compelling at night with each of the 168 lighted, empty chairs giving mute testimony to a life sacrificed to senseless terrorism.

"It was an intense collaboration with the engineer because hurricane codes were involved. We did all the drawings and worked with the city planning commission. We lived on site during the construction and worked with the builders and contractors daily. It was so exciting to see it become, and even more exciting being taught by those building it to find how they think and what they're looking for."

The Butzers did another small house addition a year later, but the economy made the early '90s a tough time for architects. They moved to Germany where building was booming and worked with firms in Dusseldorf and Berlin, entering many competitions and winning or placing in a great number.

"I knew that the profession was different there," Butzer says. "Firms in Europe are so much more open to ideas of the young generation. They don't bog you down in this kind of hierarchy, work-up-the-ladder kind of attitude. In the



states, more than likely, you start drawing bathroom detail as if that's what leads to the making of a great architect. I would beg to differ. We knew that if we went to Europe and sold ourselves properly as designers, as conceptualizers, which we felt were the strengths of our degrees, it would give us the opportunity to have a significant role to play in important projects.

"The notion of apprenticeship has changed. The prime example is that of Frank Lloyd Wright working with Louis Sullivan in Chicago. That was an apprenticeship, but Wright had a direct relationship with Sullivan. He was directly involved throughout the entire process.

He had a voice, even as an apprentice. I advocate apprenticeship as a good system, but it isn't practiced well today."

When Butzer decided to work on a master's degree in the United States, he applied to graduate school as he and Torrey entered their design in the memorial competition. Two days after Harvard accepted him, the competition judges named Butzer Design Partnership one of five finalists. Hans delayed graduate school for a semester when they won the competition. They established their headquarters in Cambridge until memorial construction began in January 1999, when Torrey went to the bombing site. Working via fax, conference calls and lots of trips from the East Coast, the Butzers for many months lived the intensely participatory, on-site philosophy that they see as the key to good architecture. The result of their work is known around the world.

"It's been very humbling, the entire experience," Butzer says. "It's strange from a standpoint that here I am at 34, and we have just completed what may be the most significant work of our careers. We certainly hope that people will pay attention to the work we've done prior to the memorial and, more importantly, what we will be doing in the future, but we don't feel we need to try to top it."

Looking to the future, Butzer focuses now on the role he can play in developing young talent through the College of Architecture.

"There's a sense of mission that's been renewed at the University," he says. "I want people to understand that architects do have an important role to play in the community and deserve support. We are committed to the belief that our cities and landscapes have everything to do with how we interact as individuals and families and communities."

Maybe the difference between teaching and preaching is not as great as it might first appear. 🍷



■ *Top:* Hundreds of visitors dip their hands in the reflecting pool and leave imprints on the copper-clad gates, anticipated marks that disappear as the patina darkens. *Bottom:* The Butzer family now calls Oklahoma City home.