



# Design for Living

BY KATHRYN JENSON WHITE

PHOTOS PROVIDED

An OU architecture student scores a first by bringing home an award normally reserved for the veterans.

Some architects design their buildings to make grand statements; others design them to say something truly meaningful. David Wanzer, who earned his 2004 master of architecture degree from the University of Oklahoma College of Architecture, falls into the latter group.

The Oklahoma chapter of the American Institute of Architects liked what it heard as well as what it saw when evaluating the two 1,000-square-foot bungalows Wanzer designed for Oklahoma City's Neighborhood Services Organization as his master's thesis project. NSO, an advocate for the low-income and homeless populations of Oklahoma City, provides transitional housing, nutritional assistance and educational opportunities.

Judges for the AIA Oklahoma competition responded to the way Wanzer's project spoke to them by naming him one of only six Honor Award winners in its 2005 AIA Oklahoma Awards of Excellence. Five recipients were established Oklahoma architectural firms—Matrix AEP of Tulsa, Studio Architecture, Randy Floyd Architects and Elliott+Associates (twice). The sixth on the list read: David Wanzer, University of Oklahoma *student* designer in conjunction with faculty sponsors.

"It was truly a labor of love on so many levels for me," the

honoree says. "It was pretty much a full-time job in itself to see it go from paper to getting built. I am proud of NSO's use of the houses, and my goal all along was to affect in a positive way the people who were going to be temporarily living in them, to provide an uplifting space for them and a beautiful space for the neighborhood. I think what I am probably most proud of is, truthfully, the impact the bungalows have on the neighborhood in general as well as the people who stay in them."

AIA Oklahoma, which founded its awards program to promote excellence in the built environment and to contribute to the professional growth of the architect, heard Wanzer's sentiments loud and clear in the finished project, Executive Director Jan Loftis says.

"This is a unique award winner, in that I cannot recall an individual student project ever receiving an award this prestigious," she says. "The judging process hides the names of project

■ ABOVE: Wanzer not only designed these two bungalows as low-income housing, but also secured Oklahoma City's Neighborhood Services Organization as a client and oversaw every detail of their construction.



creators, so those who selected Wanzer's project did not know he was a student."

Mack Caldwell, associate professor of architecture, coordinates the College of Architecture's graduate program and served as chair of Wanzer's professional project committee.

"It is quite remarkable really because he was competing against seasoned professionals, about 50 entries from architectural firms that are the *crème de la crème* of the profession in Oklahoma," Caldwell says. "Of the 50, only six were awarded Honor Awards and four the lesser Merit Awards. Of the Honor Awards, David's was the only freestanding, new construction; everybody else's was either a remodeling or an addition or an interior. And, of course, he was the only student."

In 1996, a group of OU students won an Honor Award for a project that was, Caldwell says, a planning document for a project never built. Wanzer, on his own, secured NSO as a client, designed the project based on its needs and then built his \$165,000 design with the client's funding. Wanzer's two 1,000-square-foot bungalows cluster around a central private courtyard. He designed them to fit within and respect the existing neighborhood fabric with traditional elements such as gabled roofs, porches, columns and clapboard siding. However, he says, he reinterpreted those elements to create a more modern feel and avoid merely duplicating what had already been done.

"I wanted to do something that was a real project, that had some social value and made a social impact on the community, so I found a non-profit that had a need that was willing to let me do the design work and general contract the project for them," Wanzer says. "It ended up being about a two-and-a-half-year endeavor. I started the project at the beginning of my third year and worked on it for a year and a half after I graduated."

Now a partner in J3 Architecture of Oklahoma City with Brett Johnson, who earned his master of architecture degree in May 2006, Wanzer says he often drives by the completed bungalows.

"It was such a huge part of my life for so long that I very much feel a huge sense of ownership in it," he says. "I designed every little detail and oversaw everything in its construction. I was doing everything for the first time; I was on site every day general contracting the project and overseeing everything, hiring the subcontractors. I wore a lot of hats."

Wanzer credits many sponsors responsible for everything from donated cork flooring to discounted metal roofing for allowing him to realize his vision. A big component of the project was that it is highly energy efficient and uses materials that minimize the impact on the environment, Wanzer says. His

project description focused on the "green building goals and strategies" behind the design and in its materials. The duplexes feature geothermal heating and cooling and contain soybean-based, spray-in-place foam insulation. Passive solar orientation is one strategy among many green construction elements.

If green building is at the heart of the project, its soul becomes apparent in an excerpt from Wanzer's project description.

"What is needed in affordable housing and community design is a shift in perspective of what these can become," he wrote. "Symbolically, the diagonal is used in this project to represent movement, action and dynamism. With a simple skewing of the ridge beam, the ripple effect of the diagonal can be perceived, experienced and understood. The skewed ridge is thus a metaphor for the shift in perspective necessary to put in motion change in the design of affordable housing and community design."

Caldwell says the judges indicated they chose the design originally just by looking at the architectural quality of it. When they read the text and understood that the project's deeply felt and fully realized sustainable focus, they were even more impressed.

Inner beauty aside, Caldwell says, the buildings also have their physical good looks going for them.

"They're quite beautiful," he says. "They truly are architecture. They push the envelope of how can you take something as traditional as a bungalow that we all recognize and then push our level of understanding of what's possible. That's what David did."

"That he did this for a non-profit group, I think, matters greatly. This was not a wealthy client wanting some statement, some iconoclastic thing. This is a dwelling for people in need, and not many architects have responded to that need with the sensitivity and commitment that David has. He's a very compassionate architect and that sets him apart."

Wanzer cites Caldwell as his mentor and credits him with helping make the dream project a reality.

"He knew what I was interested in doing, and he encouraged me to go out and do it," Wanzer says. "It was a big undertaking, a one-man show basically. Mack's encouragement, support and mentorship really are what led me to do this."

When compassionate architect meets caring mentor, clearly the rewards—and awards—are many. And together they create a blueprint for education at its most meaningful.

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■ David Wanzer put his master's thesis project up against entries from professional architects and became the first individual student to take home a coveted award from AIA Oklahoma. Wanzer, who earned his master's from OU in 2004, is married to OU business marketing and law graduate, Dara Wasilik.