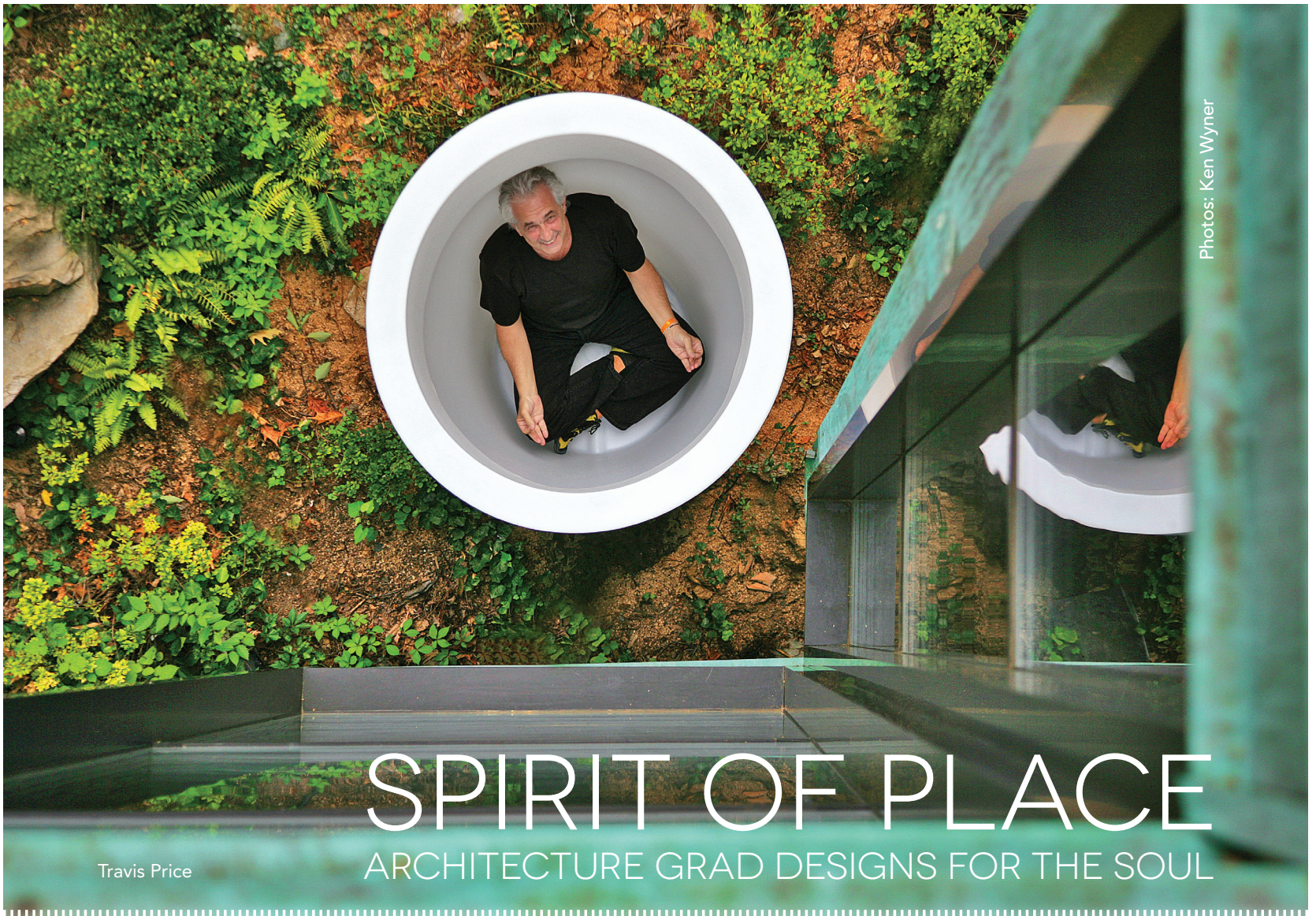

Photos: Ken Wyner

SPIRIT OF PLACE

ARCHITECTURE GRAD DESIGNS FOR THE SOUL

Travis Price

- By Leslie Linthicum -

Architect Travis Price can talk for hours about myth, creation stories and the role of cultural touchstones in where and how we live.

When he looks at his own life and career, he finds an important creation story in the high desert of New Mexico.

It is the early 1970s and Price, a Georgia native, has come west to study philosophy at St. John's College in Santa Fe. He is drawn into the master's program in UNM's architecture school, which is buzzing with new ideas about alternative energy and experimental design.

Price finds peace in Chaco Canyon, where he goes to camp and hike and think about Jung, Plato and the other philosophers who are deepening his understanding of design.

He is hiking near Pueblo Bonito one cold day and sits to watch as the sun moves across the adobe walls of the Anasazi ruin.

He notices that the snow melts much faster on the curved south face than it does on the north side or on any southern surface that isn't curved.

For a class at UNM he surveys 31 prehistoric pueblos. All but two are built in C-shaped formations oriented to the south.

Hmmm.

"A curved surface is reflective," Price says today. "If you take a sheet of metal and curve it, it will focus higher temperatures inside the curve."

Price, who was working with a group of alternative energy radicals in Albuquerque while attending UNM, began to think about focusing and collecting that energy in buildings to keep heating costs down.

"At Chaco," he says, "everything came together."

His master's thesis in 1975, which he simply called "Barranca," envisioned a village of 200 adobe homes designed much like the ruins at Chaco Canyon, except with expanses of glass to collect and focus all that sunlight into heat and adobe mass to store it.

He called the design "passive solar."

Another UNM architecture graduate —Edward Mazria ('77 ARCH)—would go on to write the book on what would become a household term for living spaces that work with the sun and the seasons to capture the sun's energy. "The Passive Solar Energy Handbook," published in 1979, is still considered a classic.

But Price didn't think too much of the term at the time. "It's just descriptive of what happens," he explains. "The word 'passive' just came out of my mouth."

Price, now 66, lives and works in Washington, D.C., far from the natural landscape of Chaco Canyon. But he finds himself closer than ever to the belief that architects and designers have a lot to learn from ancient cultures and the natural world.

In addition to running his own architecture firm, Travis Price Architects since 1980, Price is also 20 years into a groundbreaking design-build program at The Catholic University's School of Architecture and Planning, where he is an adjunct professor.

"Spirit of Place/Spirit of Design" matches Price's students with a client somewhere in the world. Each project begins with a proposed function and a deep look into the natural landscape and the cultural traditions of the place.

After the students work out the design, Price travels with them to the site and, with an audacious nine-day deadline, they build the structure.

Students have constructed a sweat lodge on South Trail Island in Vancouver, British Columbia; a floating house on the Amazon in Peru; a meditation temple outside of Kathmandu, Nepal; a stargazing temple at Machu Picchu and a number of shrines and chapels in remote parts of Ireland.

Many of the installations have won American Institute of Architects design awards.

While every new building that is constructed need not be as integrated into the landscape and deeply meaningful as "The Sea of Souls," a rock and water shrine to Magar ancestors in Nepal—the students' 2011 project—Price believes every house, office or retail outlet can shoot for that ideal.

If clients and designers don't, Price believes they are contributing to a deadening of the spirit.

One of the chapters in an anthology of Price's work—"The Archaeology of Tomorrow"—is titled "Sprawl, Mall and Tall: Assault on the Spirit."

Inquire of Price what he means by sprawl, mall and tall and he is off and running on a critique of the soul-sucking nature of modern life in America:

Travis Price

The unassuming front of Price's own home in the District of Columbia hides a four-floor glass tree house. Photos courtesy Travis Price Architects

"Today, people get up and they look into glass to see what the weather and the news is. They drive to work behind glass and then they go into work behind glass and they drive home behind glass and wrap up the evening by looking into glass and watching reruns of 'Friends'—and that's their only friend."

He continues.

"The pursuit of loneliness is perfected. And there's an isolationism in industrial consumption and in sprawl. There's no 'there' when you get there. It's all feeding into dehumanization and the numbing factor. That's the poison."

Price's antidote?

That is a design philosophy he calls sunshine, temples and highways.

Sunshine equates to nature, of being in an environment that incorporates night turning to day and the seasons changing.

Temples represent timelessness, or as Price says, "digging back into deep stories that outlast time."

And highways? Going, moving and adapting to changes.

"All this philosophy permeates every single project we do in the office," he says.

His firm's portfolio includes a number of modern homes tucked into natural settings within historic districts in the District of Columbia. Many of them, like Price's own four-story glass "tree house" that cantilevers over Rock Creek, are only minutes from a Metro station.

All those years ago at UNM, Price was one of the founders of the New Mexico Solar Energy Association. Shortly after he received his architecture degree, he moved to New York and was instrumental in getting the first solar water heaters and an energy-producing windmill installed on the roof of a residential co-op in Lower Manhattan. And he designed what is still the world's largest solar building, the one-million-square-foot Tennessee Valley Authority nuclear division office space in Chattanooga, Tenn.

With his alternative energy bona fides, Price doesn't have to wear his green credentials on his sleeve. He decries what he calls the "green bling trend" where everything from cars to clothing to bottled water is stamped with a green label.

While every building he designs today is attuned to energy savings, Price likes to think of that as a fundamental aspect of his designs, often invisible, not as a showy centerpiece.

"Yes, it's green. That's just embedded in it. Hopefully you won't even notice it," Price says. "The goal now is to shape space around our deep culture values with modern material and modern building technologies. We've moved into a deeper, richer storyboard." ✪