

THE JOURNAL RECORD

Monday, Nov. 10, 2008

www.journalrecord.com

\$1.00 • Vol. 113, No. 221 • Two Sections

www.journalrecord.com ■ The Journal Record ■ Nov. 10, 2008 **3A**

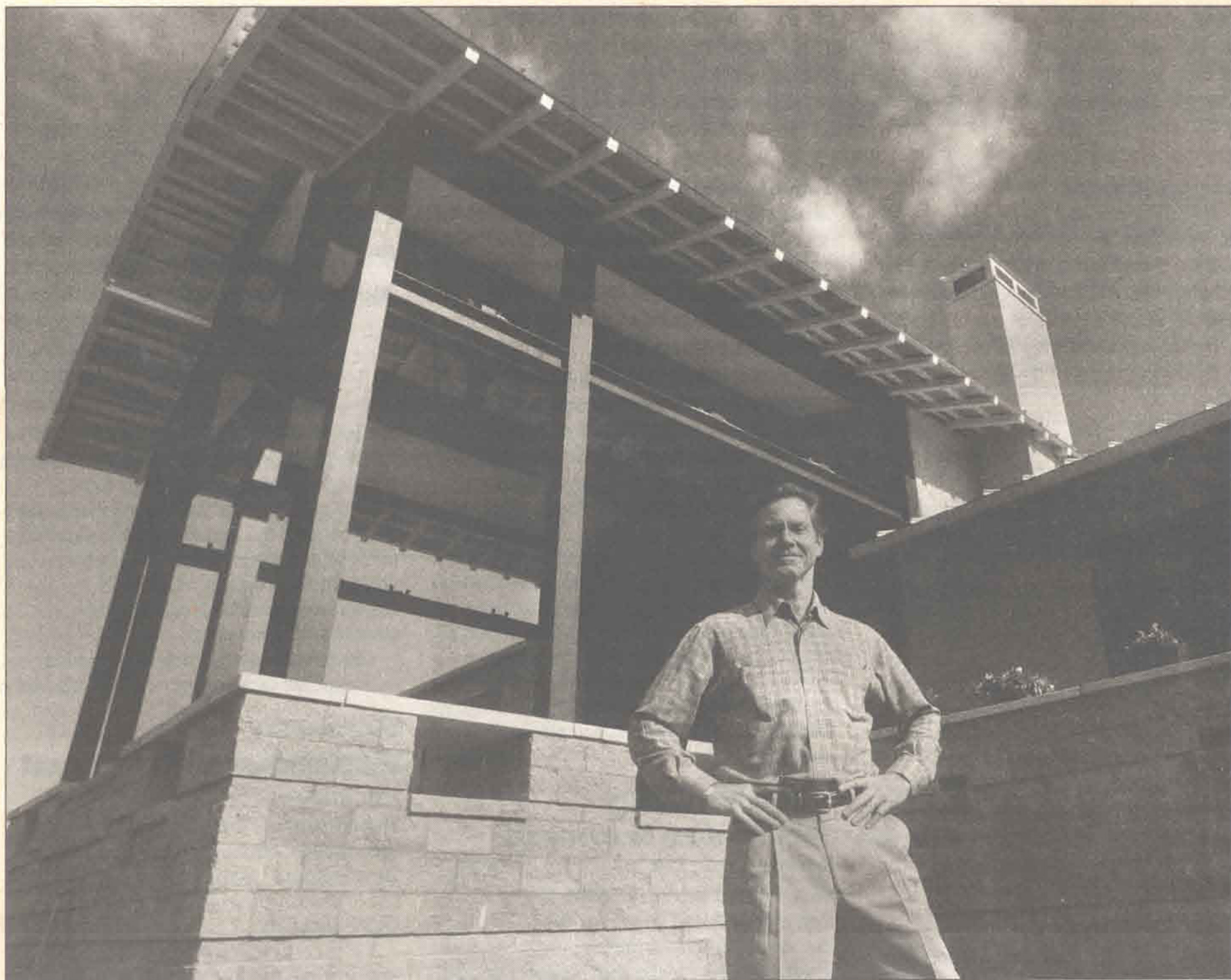


PHOTO BY RIP STELL

Architect Brian Freese outside a home he designed in Sapulpa.

Architectural optimism

Diversification, economic strength uphold many architectural firms

BY KIRBY LEE DAVIS
THE JOURNAL RECORD

TULSA — For many years prospective homebuilders came to Tulsa architect Brian Freese seeking custom designs of clean, expansive interiors blended with lush, landscaped window gardens and courtyards.

Even through the 2001 recession, clients in that steady business sought his visions of ornate mansions 4,500 square feet or more, mixing both classical and contemporary ideals.

But as gasoline prices started racing construction inflation over the last two years, Freese fielded more requests for smaller efforts, from 2,100 to 3,500 square

feet, while maintaining the same liberal use of open lighting and spaces.

Now comprising a third to half of his custom designs, Freese foresees that trend growing under the nation's financial malaise. But because of his diversified base, and Oklahoma's foundational strengths, Freese does not expect national recession talk to waylay his business.

His optimism reflects many in the Oklahoma architectural community. Rees Associates' Curtis Moore has heard tales of a slowdown, but the president of the American Institute of Architects Central Oklahoma Chapter has seen none in his correctional architecture field. James D. Boswell recognized signs of reduced business, but experienced little at his small

Tulsa office.

"We don't have a negative downturn at all," said Andy Kinslow, a partner with Kinslow Keith and Todd Architects of Tulsa. "We're looking at this as a chance to hiring good people from firms that are downsizing. We've hired six people — and we're looking at a couple more."

Miles Associates also beefed up its Tulsa staff to keep up with business, said Studio Director Rachel Zabrowski, while TAParchitecture has enjoyed increased multifamily and commercial activity in Oklahoma City.

"We are actually a little bit above what our projections were," said Kenneth

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Dennis, a TAP associate and vice president of the AIA Central Oklahoma Chapter. "2008 has been a good year."

That's not to deny the ripple effects of the nation's credit crunch. Several architects told of project delays or cancellations across many specialties. But like Freese and others, Gene Starr Architects Project Manager Jason Starr pinned his small firm's thriving history on diversifying its residential, institutional and commercial clientele. Dennis credited such balance for the Oklahoma architectural sector's relative strength, along with its oil economy and community reinvestment efforts.

"I'm probably going to experience the best three months since I've had since running the Miles studio here in Tulsa," said Zabrowski. "It's just a really unusual position in the face of everything that we're hearing."

With the American Institute of Architects warning of a downturn in 2009, and oil prices slumping, Dennis anticipates the national recession will catch up with the Sooner State – but inflict far less damage than the 10- to 15-percent revenue plunges anticipated in California or Florida.

"I think we will have a bit of delay here in Oklahoma City," he said. "We're a little bit insulated from the outside economy because we've kind of generated our own economy with the MAPS projects here in Oklahoma City. We've invested in our community. The developers, the businesses around here for the last six to eight years have been willing to pump money into buildings because it has been a self-generating economy. And they're still renovating buildings, schools. As long as we keep doing that, as long as we keep having successful MAPS projects as a community, I think we will be fine."

While Freese experienced a reduction in business, like Boswell, he attributed



The entrance of a Brian Freese-designed home in Sapulpa.

PHOTO BY RIP STELL

that to traditional year-end slowdowns.

"I foresee it's going to push up at the first of the year," said Freese. "We're seeing a slight blip and I think it's more emotional than a local downturn. I'm still getting new phone calls – not a flurry of phone calls, but enough to tell me I see business going forward at a reasonable pace."

Attributing the downturn to election-year cycles, Kinslow foresees a positive turnaround by mid-2009.

"Oh, boy, I sure hope so," said Zabrowski, echoing Starr. "I think it's going to take a little longer to recuperate. It took so long for us to dispel the aura of 9-11. Some people were not making capital improvements for 18 to 24 months after that."

She expects many architectural firms to take a more conservative tack going forward. So does Dennis.

"I've just begun to receive phone calls from architects who have been laid off

recently," said Zabrowski. "I haven't seen this for a while. I've seen some cutback from other firms. Ours is thankfully not experiencing that."

Of all the architects polled, Zabrowski expressed the most concern, admitting September's surprise failure of the large Tulsa architectural firm BSW still echoed in her thoughts.

"But you know, I don't think any of those people are still on the street today," she said. "They were absorbed into other firms rather quickly."

Like Freese and Kinslow, Jason Starr has seen some client projects getting smaller, but he attributed that to simple desires for less space as much as needs to cut back costs or to economic uncertainty.

"People are a little more economy and ecology conscious," said Starr. "They're not wanting to look like they're being too extravagant. Sometimes driving the big car and having the big space is not always that popular with everyone else."

"Most of ours lately have still been big," he said of Gene Starr's custom home designs, "but it seems like during discussions and conferences we always talk about how we can make it a little bit more efficient and reasonable. It seems like it does get cut by a small amount. But people still want more and more garage space. They don't cut that."

Kinslow expects no general sector slowdowns outside retail construction. But he does anticipate more changes developing, such as movement from residential homes to upscale lofts, and traditional retail space embracing office and residential uses.

Such changes promise opportunity, said Zabrowski, who has witnessed only one construction deterrent – institutional needs for bond funding.

"I'm not trying to forecast that we will be helping people downsize their firms, but change is really where architecture comes in," she said.

Downsized efforts can put additional challenges on architectural firms, said Freese, since they often require as much or more work than larger projects, but carry the expectation of lower costs. Smaller projects also may be more constrained by the choice of finishes – using concrete floors, for example, and less expensive woods, rather than marble, granite or imported woods – and using different heating and air systems.

But even if downsized, the continued demand for custom homes points to an underlying economic stability, he said. The trend also comes as both fuel costs and construction inflation appear to be leveling off or falling, removing another economic stumbling block.

"Even if people are downsizing, they're still moving, which is good for us," said Kinslow, whose firm is busy on two big Tulsa renovation projects: the Mayo Building lofts and the Eastgate Metroplex.

"Our current workload keeps us in business through the first of next year," he said.