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Home Base

Functional floor plans and an extraordinary sense of scale are keys to the winning architecture of Mike Higgins



If he had achieved his boyhood dream, Mike Higgins would be a major league baseball player, winning games and acclaim. Instead, this husband and father of two is a highly successful Phoenix architect, designing innovative homes and garnering praise from clients and professionals alike.

"He is a real master at creating a family home," says interior designer Barb Foley. "His floor plans are people-oriented, meant for how you use a house." In addition, she says, "Mike is known for his fine sense of scale. A lot of architects make a beautiful home, but they're big and cavernous—more like a cathedral than a home, and not comfortable for people. His houses are still grand, but their volumes feel good when you use the rooms."

Homeowners Julie and Wayne Anderson, whose residence was recently completed, appreciate the extra touches Higgins added to their original "wish list," such as "cupolas for natural lighting, a fireplace in the main entry, wide hallways and beautiful beamed ceiling treatments."

Along with creature comforts and fine details, homes must be as individual as their owners, Higgins states. "As architects, we need to understand how families function, and every family is different." That means asking clients lots of questions. "Everybody's ideas are important, even the kids' ideas," he says.

His own family life has trained him to consider clients' practical needs. He and his graphic artist/designer wife, Tina, and their two children live in a 1964 Arcadia neighborhood Ranch-style house that they bought in the mid-1990s. They have renovated it many times to suit their own requirements. "It had been added on to awkwardly, so we keep upgrading it," explains the architect with a smile.

Born in Missouri, Higgins grew up in Tempe, Arizona, where his father taught at Arizona State University (ASU). It was his father who recognized Higgins' potential for architecture and encouraged him early on, he says. Where Higgins lived sparked his imagination and his sense of wonder over how buildings were put together. In the 1960s, Tempe was undergoing development, the architect notes, "and I grew up playing in the houses that were under construction."

One could say that he enjoyed his first design success at a very early age. "I broke my arm when I was 6," recalls Higgins. "I received my first Lego set and constructed a high rise next to my bed in the hospital. I remember getting a lot of praise from the nurses and doctors, and it made me feel good."

Baseball, too, made him feel good as a youngster, and Higgins had hopes of becoming a professional player up until college, when he didn't make the team at ASU. He transitioned easily into architecture, however, as he already was enrolled in design-related courses—"in case I threw out my arm," he states. "Drawing, constructing, designing things and the math involved appealed to me and were things I had done a lot when I was a child."

Higgins went on to earn a bachelor's degree in architecture from ASU in 1986. While in college, he had a two-year internship with the late George Christensen, a much-respected Arizona architect. "I learned a lot from him about how to make a process fun and engaging for clients," Higgins states. "He was a true man of genius."

Higgins worked for Christensen for about a year after graduating and then moved to San Francisco, where he was employed by a major design firm. During the eight years he was there, he managed and designed more than 70 residential and commercial projects. In 1994, he and Tina decided to return to Phoenix. After a brief stint in a corporate setting, he went out on his own, setting up his practice, Higgins Architects, in the garage of their home. He built his business and fine reputation during 10 years in that small space. Three years ago, he moved the firm into a larger Modern-themed suite of offices, where he has a staff of three architects.

Looking back, this Master of the Southwest sometimes remembers Christensen's advice when he observed his young student feeling stressed by a project. "He grabbed my shoulders and said, 'Just have fun.'" Higgins says he has had lots of fun scoring home runs in the game of architecture in designs ranging from Spanish Colonial to French Country to Contemporary to geodesic dome homes to "Tuscan before Tuscan was considered a style. You name it, and chances are that I have done it." □

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Steppingstones lead to the courtyard of the Getz home in Paradise Valley, Arizona. Newly built, the Spanish Colonial residence was designed by architect Mike Higgins to look as if it "evolved" over time. In addition, because the front courtyard is recessed, it affords privacy from the street, he says. "The humble arched Dutch door here provides an intimate statement at the front entry." Shutters, awnings, wrought iron and a perforated exterior wall are the "jewelry" of the home.



A ramada-like overhang one day will have vines trailing across it. The total effect will be to soften the architecture, says Mike Higgins. "We often use trellis structures to transition the home to the garden," and also to subdue the bright Arizona sunlight, he adds.





The stairwell railing in the foyer of the Getz home casts pretty shadows. "Stairways are important architectural features, and there is nothing more beautiful than a staircase flooded with natural light," Mike Higgins remarks. "I like to detail a railing's metalwork to blend with the home's architectural style."

With its beamed ceiling, white paneled fireplace, and built-in bookcases, the living room has the "cozy, family-friendly" feel homeowner Dyan Getz desired. "This room has a great intimate scale—perfect for family gatherings," Mike Higgins points out.





Above: "We spend a lot of time going back and forth between the floor plan and elevation to make the massing of a home as interesting as we can," says architect Mike Higgins. The non-utilitarian-looking garages that flank the Getz home's front courtyard

are an example. With prettily shuttered windows, they provide fine backdrops and serve to extend the outdoor living space, he says. **Below:** Indoor/outdoor living is facilitated at the rear of the house by a covered arcade that transitions to a paved patio.





Above: Remodeling of the Solem home in Scottsdale enhanced its Contemporary style and linked the inside with the outdoors. An example is the living room's window wall of glass. "It blurs the distinction between indoors and out," says Mike Higgins. The 5-foot

pivot door provides a "dramatic climax to the procession toward the entry." Below left: Garage doors gained visual interest with columns and perforated steel canopies. Below right: Sandblasting the wood ceiling in the living room lent warmth to the space.





Above: Newly constructed, the Anderson residence in Phoenix is a Contemporary Ranch design. The ramada, which architect Mike Higgins says echoes elements of the home's interior, provides a shaded spot for entertaining or just hanging out. **Below:**

"A home has to tie into the fabric, or context, of a neighborhood," Higgins says. These garages draw on elements seen on adjacent homes, such as wood garage doors, brick wainscoting, metal shed roofs, dormers and knee braces.



This two-sided fireplace, located in the foyer of the Anderson residence, provides separation from the living room beyond. When lit, "a fire greets guests," Mike Higgins says. A pitched ceiling and hickory flooring complete the welcoming setting.

See Sources.

