

College of Architecture
and Landscape Architecture

Enjoying the Nitty-Gritty

UA alumna Robin Shambach demonstrates good citizenship through architecture

by Margaret Regan | Jacob Chinn photo

When Robin and David Shambach graduated from the UA School of Architecture back in 1985, the young couple at first thought "we might move to the big city," Robin Shambach reminisces. "Maybe San Francisco."

But the two of them got architecture jobs in Tucson and have been here ever since.

"Before you know it, you're part of a community," Shambach smiles. "It's been a great experience for me to practice here."

In her 25 years in the profession, Shambach has worked with some architectural stars, including the world-renowned Antoine Predock, with whom she worked on Ventana Vista Elementary School in Tucson and the new Green Valley Performing Arts and Adult Learning Center. And she did a feasibility study for James Turrell, the famed earthworks artist who has riveted the art world with his project to reshape the cavernous Roden Crater in northern Arizona.

"Who would have thought a girl from Cornville, Ariz., could go the UA and have these opportunities?" she asks, only half-joking.

But Shambach also has devoted herself to worthy public projects that don't get as much press. She's been with the respected Tucson firm, Burns Wald-Hopkins Shambach, for 20 years; she became a principal 10 years ago. (David Shambach has his own practice.)

"Education is a big backbone of the firm's work," she says.

Burns Wald-Hopkins Shambach creates public schools, libraries, and community-college and university buildings, all of them applauded for their environmental sensitivity.

"We were the architects for the Pima Community College Desert Vista campus," she notes. Located on Tucson's low-income Southwest side, it's in an "underserved area. We created something from whole cloth. That was very rewarding."

Constructed in 1992, it was the first "LEED-certified project in Arizona," she proudly notes. LEED — or Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design — is a designation given to "green" buildings that are sustainable and efficient.

A 2007 building, Northern Arizona University's Applied Research and Development Building, got the highest LEED rating possible, the coveted platinum designation. "It's a model for the campus and the state," she says.

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"They should be beautiful, too," she adds. "A well-loved building is a sustainable building — you want to keep it. The buildings we do for the public are intended to last for a long time."

Another UA lesson, taught by the late Kirby Lockard and other professors, is that "part of architectural practice is being a citizen of your community. It's why I'm interested in being involved in community things."

For seven years, she's served on the board of Community Home Projects of Arizona, three times as chair. The nonprofit does "emergency home repairs for the needy. It's efficient and effective. We get a lot of work done. For those with few resources, we provide immediate help."

And she's energized the UA's architectural internship program, teaching as an adjunct and helping line up sponsors for students.

The mother of two sons, Glenn, 23, a recent NAU grad, and Ross, 21, deployed with the U.S. Army in Afghanistan, Shambach is originally from Arizona's Verde Valley. She's descended from pioneer stock on both sides. It was her mother, she says, who first suggested she go into architecture, a profession that at that time had few women.

"She noticed my interest in buildings, and took me on home and building tours. She said to me, 'Have you ever considered architecture?'"

Shambach has no interest in moving into management, away from the nitty-gritty of architecture.

"I love staying project-based. I love the kind of imprint you can make on a community and make it better. I feel very lucky that I love architecture so much."