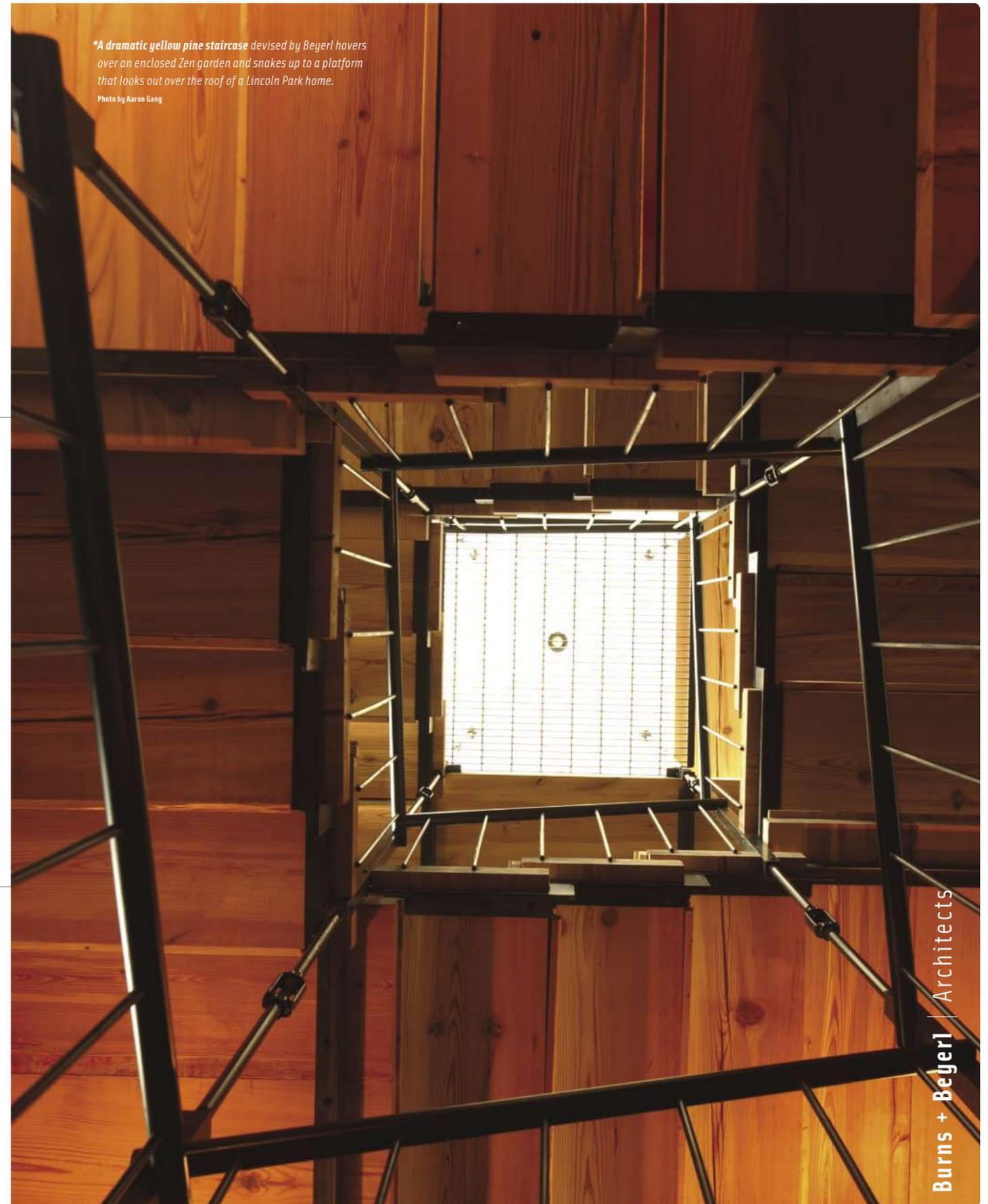


{ writer Lisa Skolnik }

# kindred takes...

The science of psychology tells us that when we mate, we subconsciously seek partners with significant similarities. Comparable backgrounds, educational experiences, philosophies, aesthetic senses. . . In other words, those with kindred 'takes' on the big things in life. In many ways, Steven Burns and Gary Beyerl, partners since 1993 in the Chicago firm Burns + Beyerl Architects, seem to comprise one of those couplings that defy this convention.



*\*A dramatic yellow pine staircase devised by Beyerl hovers over an enclosed Zen garden and snakes up to a platform that looks out over the roof of a Lincoln Park home.  
Photo by Aaron Gang*

Burns + Beyerl | Architects



*\*left: In Beyerl's Lincoln Park home, he and his wife installed the railing, loft, built-in cabinets, catwalk and fireplace themselves. The douglas fir used for the loft-style studio provides an attractive surface as both a ceiling below and floor above.*

*\*right: Burn's kitchen renovation of a Peoria home quickly transformed into a full-scale project, complete with a dramatic, 12-foot-wide addition extends over a ravine overlooking a lake.*

# kindred takes...

Burns, 46, has a master's degree in architecture from Harvard University's Graduate School of Design, and he practiced at a corporate giant—Skidmore Owings & Merrill (SOM)—before striking out on his own 11 years ago. His close-cropped glossy black curls and retro wireless specs give him an intel-

Beyerl, 43, has an architecture degree from Syracuse University, and he worked at a mid-sized firm, Booth Hansen, before Burns lured him away from it. Beyerl's thick shock of sandy hair, clear blue eyes, quick smile, and big frame are perfectly suited to the casual khakis and polo shirts he favors, more Brooks Brothers classic



Photo by Bruce Van Inwegen

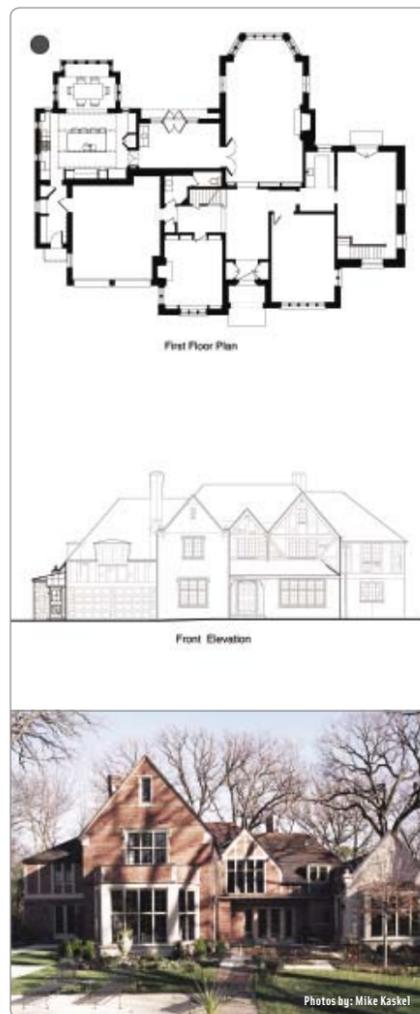
*“The place is filled with traditional furnishings that are slowly giving way to the more modern pieces”*

lectual demeanor, and his long, lanky frame looks equally elegant in jeans and a T-shirt or the dapper jackets and slacks he favors when he has to be more formal. He tends to spew forth witty and irreverent jokes, yet most cracks come at his own expense and reveal a self-effacing side. He and his wife, Victoria Espy, an art consultant, moved to the North Shore from Chicago after their second child was born in 1997. Today they live in their second home in the area, a classic 1920s English cottage Burns renovated recently in just three months. The place is filled with traditional furnishings that are slowly giving way to the more modern pieces Burns prefers, and the mix is punctuated with a growing collection of contemporary art.

than Ralph Lauren chic. Any attire more authoritative is superfluous because, as Burns says, “Gary is very unassuming. I have to twist his arm to get him to go to anything formal.” Beyerl also has mastered the art of the quip, but he tends to be ironic rather impertinent. Perhaps as Beyerl suggests, the gentler touch comes from all the “good endorphins” he generates by bicycling to work in the South Loop almost daily from his Lincoln Park home. Despite the tony location and its sleek, contemporary good looks, Beyerl's building is a pre-1900 frame two-flat that had been carved up into five small apartments when he and his wife, fellow architect Dawn Heid, bought it almost a decade ago. They have been reclaiming it piece by piece since that time, first living

in one of its tiny rear apartments when their daughter was a baby and now residing in most of the structure. But there's always more for Beyerl to do, right down to designing and building some of the clean-lined furniture in the place too.

a sole proprietor for just a month, Burns says, he was "way too lonely. I'm lousy on my own," to which Beyerl counters, "Well, definitely only half as good." Jokes aside, Burns quickly realized that "when you're in business on your own, there are so



\*above left: A new sitting room, and the kitchen and breakfast room beyond, are part of a seamless addition to this 1920's home, which was originally built for the head of Inland Steel.

\*above: The plans and the front elevation of the project shows how an unsightly greenhouse and porch were replaced with the addition, designed by BBA partner Cathy Osika.

*"described as: collaborative and need-driven with an emphasis on design"*

Bottom line: It isn't hard to wonder how these two guys hooked up as business partners.

They owe their friendship to Beyerl's wife, who worked with Burns at SOM. The couples socialized, but the relationship gelled when Burns and Espy invited Beyerl and Heid to spend a weekend with them in Michigan. In retrospect, Beyerl recalls, "We played some pretty ferocious games of Cathedral and still got along after that." For his part, Burns says he was left with two good omens: "We were never bored during that weekend, and I don't remember who won."

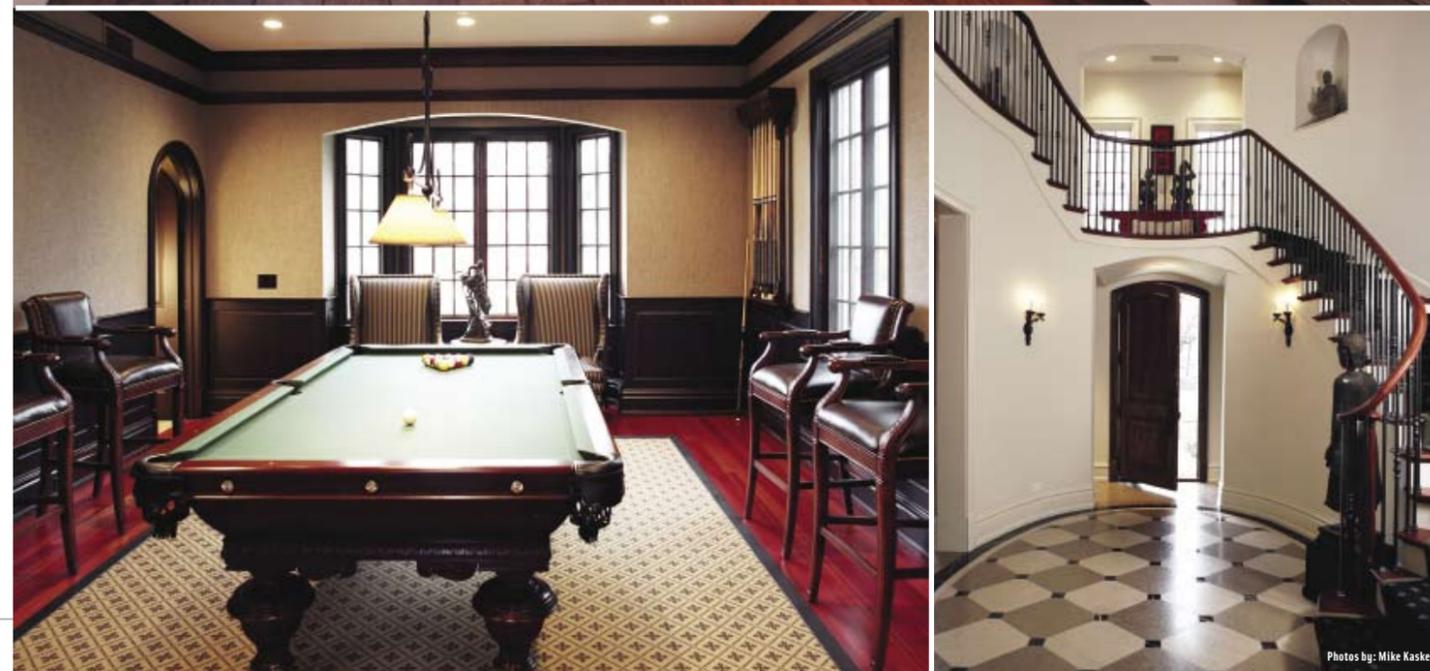
A few years later, Burns initiated their official pairing. After being in business as

many hats you have to wear, and most of my experience had been on major projects rather than houses." As a residential architect, Beyerl had significant experience in areas Burns didn't, from detailing residences to working with contractors. Getting Beyerl to jump ship "took one cheap lunch," Burns says.

Eleven years later, Beyerl notes, the firm is the same size as its age: It employs one person for every year in business. Last year, Burns and Beyerl moved their business to the current South Loop location, a loft where each man put his mark on the space. Burns gave the place a more polished appearance by having the oak plank floors ebonized, while Beyerl added



\*right, clockwise from top: Thoughtful design elements and touches prevail in a new home designed by BBA partner Ed Twohey. In the master bathroom, a windowed niche between the tub and vanity make the most of every square inch, while a front door crowned by a landing detailed with a bay window, an oval shape and a winding staircase, adds architectural significance to the foyer. Instead of a living room, the homeowners opted for a handsome billiard room, complete with a bar.



Photos by: Mike Kaskel



*\*above: Burns and Osika relocated a bedroom to create a new foyer that could accommodate choice selections from a client's art collection. The arched, curving staircase also conceals an unsightly staircase to the basement.*

*\*right: The kitchen and dining area is designed for function and comfort in a new shingle style cottage in Michigan designed by Twohey and Burns, yet is also elegant enough for more formal occasions.*

Photo Credit: Bruce Van Inwegen

a sophisticated yet artisanal touch with a conference room made of pivoting maple panels curved to resemble airplane wings and covered with dreamy translucent Mylar sheeting. He originally intended to sheath the panels in copper, but he and Burns loved the look of the plain wood once they were fabricated and came up with the new concept together, using double-stick tape to do the job. The ethereal structure embodies the same kind of creativity and ingenuity the partners bring to their jobs.

Today, their work consists mostly of creating single-family residences. About 70 percent of their projects are renovations that involve substantial additions with carefully detailed interiors, and the rest are new homes for individual clients or developers. "But we don't just do permit drawings," says Burns with characteristic aplomb. He characterizes their work for developers as "carefully considered spec homes" and their work for individuals as "collaborative and need-driven with an emphasis on design." But as usual, he can't resist a quip: "Gary has a niche. He convinces people that their homes need more than a façade job and then they want to change so much more."

The gibe is revealing because it sheds light on the differences in their domains; most of Beyerl's work is project-related, and he is in touch with every job that passes through the office, whereas most of Burns's is handling business affairs and marketing ArchiOffice, a software program he designed and developed for architects. "We released it in 2002 and have over 1,000 licensees now in every continent except Antarctica," he points out proudly.

Beyerl says he thinks the partners' "biggest strength is in our differences." But ironically, slightly deeper digging dissolves those differences. Despite their dissimilar demeanors, Burns hails from Short Hills, New Jersey, and Beyerl is from nearby Spring Valley, New York. Before attending Harvard for his graduate degree, Burns went to Syracuse University for an undergraduate degree in fine arts, and their stints at Syracuse

overlapped during one year, though they never crossed paths. And ultimately, both men relish new challenges, though each finds different ones stimulating. Beyerl perennially is stirred by the demands of architecture and design, but Burns always yearns to try new things, which explains his quest to create software.

the United States and Canada—Burns insisted their firm participate. It won, and subsequently created the schematics for a Western-style gated community of mini-mansions in Beijing. The neighborhood was never built, but the same developer hired them to do a second Beijing project, currently under construction,



Photo Credit: Ed Twohey

*"We want to grow, but keep our family style hierarchy and atmosphere in tact."*

It also explains several other aspects of the practice that have been instigated by Burns. In 1998, he founded BBA Build to provide clients with the same kind of service they get from design-build firms. But "rather than having a developer fuel the project, in this case the client and architect collaborate to drive the project, which I think is much better scenario for costs, quality and design resolution," he explains. And in 2001, when BBA was invited to participate in an international design competition for a job in China—along with 25 other firms from all over

for 180 homes that are all 12,000 square feet or larger. And now on the boards is yet another Beijing project, this time for a community of 50 homes ranging from 25,000 to 53,000 square feet, which Burns unveiled last month.

After shuttling back and forth between China and the United States for the past few years, Burns is glad to focus on the reality of running an office in Chicago. "We want to grow, but keep our family-style hierarchy and atmosphere in tact," he says. One more employee per year should do it. ✪