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Bercy Chen Studio crosses language and cultural barriers from its base in Texas

By Ingrid Spencer

Firm: Bercy Chen Studio

Location: Austin, Texas

Founded: 2001

Design staff: 7

Principals: Thomas Bercy and Calvin Powei Chen

Education: Bercy: University of Texas at Austin, B.Arch., 1999, U.T. Austin, B.Arch. Engineering, 2000; Chen: University of Texas at Austin, B.Arch. 1998

Work history: Bercy: MJ Neal Architects, Austin, Tex., 1999–2001; Samyn & Partners, Brussels, Belgium, 1998; Chen: MJ Neal Architects, Austin, 2000–01; STG, Austin, 1998–99; Max Levy Architect, Dallas, 1997

Key completed projects: Tortuga Residence, Austin, Phase 1 completed spring 2006; Beverly Skyline Residence, Austin, 2004; Lago Vista Lake House, Austin, 2003; Annie House, Austin, 2002; Factory People, retail space, Austin, 2002

Key current projects: Tortuga Residence, Austin, Phase 2 to be completed fall 2006; Asian-American Resource Center master plan, Austin, 2006; Riverview Garden Residences, Austin, 2007; E. 11th multiuse development, Austin, 2007; Volente Residence, Austin, 2007; Skybridge Condominiums, Austin, 2007; Self-sustaining House, 2007; Outdoor amphitheater, Las Vegas, 2007; Florence Oregon Resort Development, Oregon Coast, 2008

Web site: www.bcarc.com

Contributing editor Ingrid Spencer writes about architecture and design from Austin, Texas.

Thomas Bercy and Calvin Chen have found Texas the perfect venue for architects from far-flung places to come together and create a powerful design identity. Since 2001, Bercy (from Brussels) and Chen (from Taipei) have used Austin, Texas, as their home base and muse for a growing body of work that combines a sensitivity to local context with an innovative use of materials. Though rooted in a respect for the Texas Hill Country and what they call “borrowed landscapes,” their innovative residential designs and one completed retail project have spread the architects’ reputation beyond central Texas. (New York’s Architectural League featured Bercy Chen in its Emerging Voices program this year.)

The two principals aren’t the only foreign-born designers at work in their design-build firm. “It’s like the U.N. around here,” says Bercy. Indeed, the six-person firm boasts a 50:50 ratio of international-to-U.S.-born members. “You walk in the office and hear me on the phone in French, Calvin chatting away in Chinese, Tom in Danish, Gunter in German—it’s pretty interesting.” With all of the firm’s global contacts, they’ve begun to hear from clients in their home countries. While they are excited by these opportunities, they also hate to let go of the hands-on approach they have taken with their local jobs. “We create buildings that will last,” says Bercy. “They’re not ephemeral, so it helps to control the construction process.” Chen adds, “Because we’ve done all the contracting management as well as the design for our Texas projects, we’ve been able to experiment, and push contractors to break from the norm. We know we can’t be so closely involved with the construction on projects farther away. So, we’re working on improving our document-making abilities to retain as much control as we can.”

And while they learn to let go just a little, and continue entering competitions for projects around the world (the latest is for a library in Stockholm), commissions outside their local time zone have started to come through. The firm is now working on the master plan for an eco-resort on 150 acres outside of Portland, Oregon—a sustainable, mixed-use retreat complete with spa, hotel, and retail components.

The firm is staying busy in Austin, too. Riverview Residences, three 2,800-square-foot, single-family homes in an urban neighborhood near Lake Austin, started construction this year, just as the firm began the master plan for an Asian-American Resource Center on 17 acres in northeast Austin. With a mix of public and private spaces—including restaurants, retail, classrooms, a library, and a 2,000-seat performance hall—the 90,000-square-foot project will be the team’s largest to date. Right now, they’re only involved in the master plan, but they hope to design the actual spaces. “We’re getting a crash course in politics with this one,” says Bercy. Steering the project away from a “Disneyland influence,” Bercy and Chen plan to use elements such as ponds and water features, which are hallmarks of their design aesthetic and help temper the hot climate of Austin. Applying ideas inspired by roof gardens in Marrakesh and Casablanca and other designs from around the world keeps the firm’s perspective “200 percent global,” says Bercy. “Texas has a lot of space,” says Chen, “and when you compare the natural landscape—the limestone formations, the exfoliating, the erosion patterns—to Taiwan, for example, with its miniaturization of landscape, then you gain a fresh perspective of place.” ■



**Tortuga Residence,
Austin, Texas**

Like a folded plane, massaranduba-wood cladding wraps a dormer-turned-reading-room niche (above and left) in this 5,000-square-foot remodel of and addition to a 1980s tract home on Lake Austin. Reflective red acrylic sheets add to the warmth of the space. Above the garage, a recreation room seems larger than it really is due to its translucent white, acrylic-paneled walls, which are lit from behind with kinetic colored lights, revealing a room of pure color at night.





Beverly Skyline Residence, Austin

Inspired by the 7th-century Kiyomizu Temple in Kyoto, Japan, this 3-story, 3,500-square-foot remodel of a 1970s home has panoramic Hill-Country views. The project took recycling seriously, using 600 glass blocks taken from a demolished hospital to form a translucent, streetside wall, and featuring an extensive rain-collection system that includes cascading pools and reservoirs all around the house. Glass balustrades on the upstairs decks were used to seemingly dissolve corners on the upper level. The downstairs deck clad in massaranduba wood has no barriers separating it from the untamed landscape beyond.



**Annie Residence,
Austin**

The architects divided one 2,000-square-foot volume into two distinct pavilions for a pair of related households in an urban neighborhood (opposite, left). Connected by a glass corridor (opposite, right) and a reflecting pool, the pavilions feature service cores clad in colored acrylic panels—red on one and blue on the other (left). The house's street facade displays a glowing garage of white acrylic sheeting and a second floor deck covered in stretched canvas (below).



**Lago Vista Residence,
Lago Vista, Texas**

Basically an open-plan box clad in ipe wood, this 900-square-foot vacation home also has 600 square feet of outdoor porch under its extended shed roof. The roof cantilevers 13 feet over the concrete-slab patio. The patio cantilevers over a concrete foundation, seeming to hover above the site.