

Oklahoma City

# downtown

Monthly

## ARCHITECTURE AS ART THE OKASIAN HOUSE

ARTIST JOHN WOLFE  
EVOKING A RESPONSE

A SLICE OF AMERICANA  
RED BRICK RESTAURANT



# ARCHITECTURE AS ART

## The Okasian House

By Kent Anderson Photos by Joseph Mills



When architect Brian Fitzsimmons began to look for a place to design and build his own home, he and his wife Titi Nguyen knew they wanted to be near downtown, to be a part of Oklahoma City's new urban scene. They began scouting lots in the Midtown area, a few blocks west of St. Anthony Hospital.

They discovered an area where some friends were renovating a home. They found a lot they liked a few blocks away, and discovered other friends remodeling there. Brian and Titi had their eyes on a particular lot, but in thumbing through the classified section of the newspaper one day, they saw another lot advertised for sale — right across the street.

The lot was vacant, but had once contained three houses. A retaining wall facing the sidewalk, and a set of concrete steps, remained. On visiting the property, Brian noticed a curiosity about the steps, a set of initials carved into the concrete. The initials were "B.F."

"I think it was fate," Brian says.

Brian and Titi bought the property in 2004, and he set to work. A graduate of Oklahoma State

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University's School of Architecture, Brian practiced in Dallas for three years before returning to Oklahoma City to work for the prestigious firm of Elliott + Associates. But he yearned to design and build a home of his own.

"This is an up-and-coming area, a good place to make a statement as an architect," he says.

During the construction process, Brian decided the time was right to move out on his own, and along with his brother Kenneth, founded Fitzsimmons Architects. The house was finished in the summer of 2006, and it is a triumph of both architectural expertise and Brian's personal vision. The corner lot is large, and Brian knew he wanted to emphasize a view of the downtown skyline, so the home was built on the south side of the lot.

Named "The Okasian House," a nod toward Brian's Oklahoma upbringing and Titi's Vietnamese heritage, even the entry is unique. The entry from the sidewalk is through the original concrete steps, the same ones with those long-ago initials carved in them. The steps lead to a semi-protected gateway. A wall of tall bamboo shelters the home and gives a sense of privacy.

A gravel courtyard, common in Eastern architecture, fronts the house. A bridge spans the courtyard, a single steel beam running the entire length, surrounded by stained cedar wood. It leads to a classic front porch, which is Brian's recognition of the historical homes in the surrounding neighborhood. The entire front of the house itself is glass, with entry accessed through sliding doors.



Stepping into the home, one immediately notices the abundance of natural light – “We never have to turn on a light switch during the daytime,” Brian affirms – and the openness of the floor plan.

Brian refers to the house as essentially a four-room home. The main floor contains a living room, dining room and kitchen, all open to each other. A divider at the rear of the kitchen area separates a multi-purpose area, currently used as an exercise room, but which Brian says will eventually be a guest bedroom.

The living area is lean and sleek, with a pair of black sofas facing each other. Splashes of the color red also appear throughout the home, further evidence of the Asian influence – in Asian cultures, red is symbolic of good luck and good fortune. But the living room’s most remarkable feature is the view. Windows on the southeast side take in a breathtaking view of downtown Oklahoma City. The house’s positioning allows an unobstructed panoramic view of the skyline.

The kitchen sports a functional center island. A raised butcher-block section “hides” the stove when not in use. There is abundant storage in the home, though it’s not necessarily visible to the naked eye.





"Modern architecture has the reputation of not having any storage space," Brian says. "The trick is to put in plenty of storage, but find a place to hide that storage." A recessed wine rack and deep walk-in pantry bear out that philosophy.

The stairway is pecan wood, leading to the upper level. A touch of fancy awaits at the top of the stairs, an intriguing piece of furniture Brian created. It is a metal chair, the back of which is suspended in space above the open stairwell. Brian calls it "the double dare chair."

The upstairs is dedicated to the bedroom and Brian's office. Again, the design is very open, emphasizing space. Brian, with a strong interest in art and furniture as well as architecture, created the bed. High windows and skylights once again admit natural light. "Every room in this house has windows," Brian says.



Another fine feature is an upper-level deck that opens off the bedroom. Brian and Titi often relax after work with an appetizer or a glass of wine here. "We get a great view of downtown fireworks, or of the Christmas lights," he says.

There are other tantalizing features to the home. It is tilted at an angle of 13 degrees – the 13<sup>th</sup> happens to be Titi's birthday. A basement area features a two-car garage, which opens onto the alley behind the house, and Brian's woodworking shop.

One of the prevalent themes in the work of Fitzsimmons Architects is green design and construction. Positioning of windows allows for shade in summer and warmth in winter, cutting energy consumption. Flooring in the main room is made from bamboo, and much of the millwork is from recycled materials. Even the exterior landscaping reflects this orientation. The plants, bamboo and live oak, are hardy and drought-tolerant. The lawn is buffalo grass, requiring no irrigation and very little mowing.

Brian Fitzsimmons, in his Okasian House, looks at architecture as something more than just a building design. The home is filled with outstanding works of modern art, from paintings to sculpture to mixed media, and Brian's architectural philosophy is very much informed by an artistic bent.

"Modern architecture, in its truest sense, is expressive," Brian says. "It tries to become more of an art form rather than being just something functional."

Fate led him to this Midtown neighborhood, and then his own art took over. The home is a modern expression in a historic area, of what is new and fresh and on the cutting edge in a century-old state. It is a perfect sampling of the urbane life of Oklahoma City. ■