

Designing Your Desert Paradise

By Dick Langham & Nick Tsontakis AIA Photos by Scott Sandler Photography



Rear covered patio off great room and looking over the negative edge pool to another beautiful Valley sunset.



North elevation clad with stone excavated from site and cut ancient stone above

If you want to know how to build a 4,724 square foot dream home on a 2,000 square foot mountainside lot, ask architect Nick Tsontakis. Because this is exactly what he did for Miles & Julie Burke of Phoenix, Arizona. Their dream home is nestled into Piestewa Peak and features beautiful views from every room in the house, which was a Julie Burke requirement. It was “out of the box” thinking and designing by Tsontakis that led to the creation of the Burke’s new home.

The Burkes had considered remodeling the existing 2,000 square foot home, which occupied the entire lot, but after talking to several construction companies, they felt that it just did not make good economic sense to pursue the remodeling route. They decided that it was better to talk to an architect first and started interviewing several architects.

They met Nick Tsontakis and they knew he was the one!

“The biggest challenge was to create enough pad space to fit this house,” Tsontakis said. He convinced them to remove the original home, fill

the pool in with dirt and extend the pad for the new home over the pool.

Adjacent to the lot, but below the existing pad, a three-car garage was carved into the mountainside, held in place with steel anchored to the rock and thick concrete walls. The new home would be more than double the size of the original house! This addition allowed Tsontakis to create a 4,724-square-foot home by building up from the new garage, then over onto the old pad. By anchoring into the rock of the hillside, it was possible to construct a long, narrow pool shell 20 feet up from the slope. Concrete slabs were cantilevered to connect the foundations of the house and edge-hugging pool. Space that could be backfilled to build up a patio area was created between the house and pool. A vertical facing of natural stone hides the huge supports from view.



Main entrance that looks through the great room to spectacular Valley view



Inner entry hall looking towards the great room and Valley lights

“That’s how we were able to create this seemingly flat area, which did not exist before,” Tsontakis said, pointing to the patio beneath his feet.

The stone cladding on the house came from existing rock that they accumulated during excavation. The builder hired a stonemason to apply the rock. They even took excess rock that a neighbor donated to complete the job.

It seems that the neighbor had been removing rock from his lot for years trying to create more space and paying someone to haul it away for him.

“He got more backyard space, and we got more cladding for the house,” Tsontakis said.

The double-dome great room ceiling features indirectly lit concentric circular elevations in white. The Burkes first decided to paint the ceiling different colors, but returned to white to take advantage of the various levels of mood lighting created by the unique ceiling. The architecture of the house is a combination of natural stone and contemporary classic design with a feeling of luxurious warmth that is very pleasing to the eye.

Two decorative columns made from four smaller steel members support a very dramatic large round copper roof, which allows huge butt-glazed panels of glass to be fitted together in an arc enclosing the great room. The panoramic views of the Valley from this room are breathtaking. The columns were designed with smaller steel members for less obstructed views over the negative edge pool and in the evening the columns serve as light fixtures.

“You’re not looking through trees or telephone poles or other buildings. You can see right through to the horizon,” Miles exclaims.

Julie wanted great views from every room in the house and the master bath was no exception. Situated on the north end of the home, there’s a corner sitting room and dressing area with views and a private balcony. Tsontakis even situated each toilet with private windows offering



Great room with double-domed circular ceiling looking toward front entrance



Architect, Nick Tsonakis leaning against one of the columns that supports the front edge of the circular-domed great room copper roof and patio cover.



Master bath with curved steam shower, corner fireplace, TV & embedded light fixtures on mirrors

mountain views. Large windows over the spa tub capture close-up views of the desert preserve directly to the north and reflect them in the mirrors over the vanity. Miles and Julie feel that Nick Tsonakis has created their desert paradise.

Nick Tsonakis has designed and realized more than 300 varied projects in Canada, Europe and the USA. His unique approach to architecture and interiors has earned him many architectural awards for prestigious local, national and international competitions. His work has been published in GQ, The Canadian Architect, The Arizona Republic, Builder/Architect and Montreal Business Magazine to name a few. He is featured on Arizona Home Show, Channel 12 News and KKNT AM 960 House Talk radio.

Nick can be reached at 480-874-2288 or visit www.tsonakisarchitecture.com.

See Nick Tsonakis AIA Architecture & Interiors on the inside back cover. ■