

*Special Collector's Issue*

# PHOENIX HOME & GARDEN

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## Masters of the Southwest

*Get Inside Nine Innovative Minds*

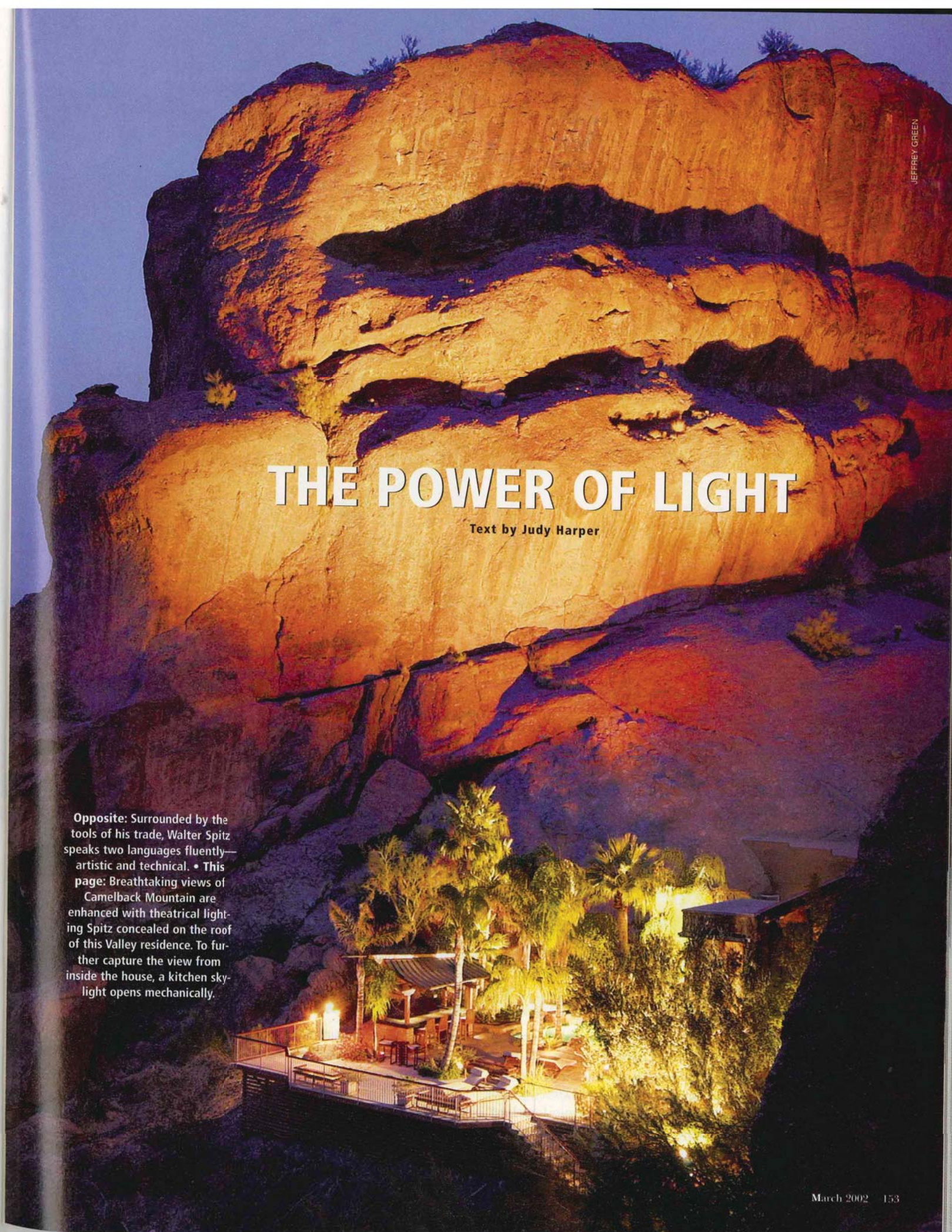
**Meet 14 Emerging Artists**  
**Discover Historic Grand Canyon**



MASTER  
of the  
SOUTHWEST  
WALTER  
SPITZ



ELLIOT LINDIS



JEFFREY GREEN

## THE POWER OF LIGHT

Text by Judy Harper

Opposite: Surrounded by the tools of his trade, Walter Spitz speaks two languages fluently—artistic and technical. • This page: Breathtaking views of Camelback Mountain are enhanced with theatrical lighting Spitz concealed on the roof of this Valley residence. To further capture the view from inside the house, a kitchen skylight opens mechanically.

Walter Spitz was in eighth grade when he got his first “professional” break in the theater, thanks to some nudging from his big sister. She was performing in *Hello, Dolly* at Phoenix Little Theatre, and the crew needed someone to pull the curtain.

“It sounded fun,” says Spitz, “so I rode my bike to the theater and swept the stage, filled the rosin boxes for the dancers—all manual things.” There, behind the scenes, Spitz discovered a passion that would lay the foundation for an award-winning career blending the power of light with architectural detail.

“It really is a passion,” Spitz says, his smile broadening. “This is a new industry because architects didn’t think about incorporating lighting into their designs until recently. Rock bands and theater groups have used lighting forever, but no one really considered it for residential. We aren’t about putting up a chandelier or lighting a shelf, but creating an environment—sharing the technology and drama that create the magic.”

Born in the Bronx, N.Y., Spitz moved to the Valley with his family when he was 5. “Talk about a change,” he recalls. “My father had a grocery store/deli by Yankee Stadium, and we moved to 75th Avenue and Thomas, with nothing but pecan trees and strawberry fields. I attended public school until third grade, when my parents decided I was destined for failure and enrolled me in private school.

“When I started high school, I immediately discovered girls. I knew I needed money and a car, so I got a job in a light store. I worked five days a week from 3 to 6, then went to the theater until 10 or 11, sometimes 1 or 2 a.m. After four years of high school and working in a lighting showroom, and my work with the theater, enough people knew me, and suggested I attend Banff School of Performing Arts in Canada. So off I went and honed in on the artistic eye of creating illusion. If you want to make a person look older, or look better, or props look richer, they teach that in theater.”

After attending Banff, this master in the making embarked on a career in lighting design. He began his business from his parents’ home, setting up an office in their garage, and opened Creative Designs in Lighting at its present Indian School Road location in 1986. His first commercial project was installing twinkling lights on olive trees at Biltmore Fashion Park in the ’70s, followed by a string of contracts to add his magical touch to nightclubs and dance floors.

“It was the heyday of the disco business, and I had an inside edge because I was able to take what I learned in the theater and apply that to restaurants, and later to shopping centers and homes. I never had a business plan. I just wanted to do what I love. It all boils down to the people who saw a vision for me early on and gave me an opportunity.”

This mild-mannered 45-year-old is highly regarded in the design community for his ability to enhance the efforts of architects and interior designers, making their projects look extraordinary with elegant yet functional lighting designs.

“I wouldn’t use anyone else,” says architectural designer Bob Bacon, of R.J. Bacon Co., a 2001 Master of the Southwest. “He does all my custom homes and makes me look good. He’s creative, he knows his stuff, and he’s a lot of fun to work with. He’s certainly been doing an outstanding job in the design community for a long, long time. I don’t think anyone locally even comes close.”

“He’s an artist, a technician and a delight to work with,” offers



A starlit ceiling and glowing Miami cityscape enliven the home theater of a Paradise Valley residence.

architect Vern Swaback of Swaback Partners, a 1997 Master of the Southwest. “We involve him in everything that we do. In our work, client satisfaction—no matter what it takes—is a necessary ingredient for success. Walter extends that helping hand not only from what happens on drawings, but ultimately walking through the structure, replacing light bulbs, aiming and focusing—anything that’s necessary. We’ve had an ongoing relationship, and it’s one

“We aren’t about putting up a chandelier or lighting a shelf, but creating an environment—sharing the technology and drama that create the magic.”

that we’ve enjoyed.”

The soft-spoken Spitz is personable, friendly, accommodating and, with tousled blond hair and an ever-present smile, he’s boyishly charming. When asked about his business, he gently steers attention away from himself to acknowledge the skills of his team. Creative Designs in Lighting boasts a staff of 11 with backgrounds in architecture, interior design and theater arts,

enabling the firm to approach projects with the eye of an artist and the discipline of an engineer. Driven equally by the people part of the business and its artistic challenges, Spitz seeks employees who share his personal and professional vision.

“My company is a success because of the people who surround me,” he says. “It’s a very fast-paced, high-energy business, mentally and physically exhausting, but if the excitement is gone

**"It all boils down to the people  
who saw a vision for me early on  
and gave me an opportunity."**

and the tension isn't there, I don't think we'd enjoy life as much. We always push the envelope, and a lot of our creativity happens in the field, not on the drawing board. It's a whirlwind—we call it Wally's World—but there's a passion and energy here that everyone shares."

Spitz notes that quality lighting design requires an understanding and appreciation of myriad elements, including homeowners' expectations and lifestyles, the photosensitivity of artwork, making certain that control systems are easy to use, and ensuring that lighting is a good blend with the architecture and style of the space. The process begins with extensive interviews.

"I need to know what's important to people when they walk up to their home. We can play up the front door with light or downplay it with sconces," he explains with a can-do attitude. "I want to know if they read in bed or in the tub, if they shave in the shower, sitting or standing up. Do they entertain on the patio? Do they want to come home and push a button that turns on all the lights and the fireplace? I want to know if they will iron in the master closet, if they want a ceiling fan in the exercise room, and if they are right- or left-handed, so we can place plugs in their vanity drawers so the hair dryer is right there—so I can give them the magic."

With projects as diverse as retail, commercial, architectural, residential, exhibition and exterior, Spitz says his firm does approximately 50 homes per year, with 60 percent of its work residential and 40 percent commercial.

"Most of the homes range from 4,000 to 42,000 square feet," he says. "When you go from 4,000 square feet into 10,000 square feet or more, it's really a machine. You don't want to walk around and turn off all the lights. This is about pushing one button that says good night, the lights are off, the drapes closed, and the fireplace out."

Spitz says that approximately 10 percent of the construction budget of a house goes to electrical, lighting design and installation. And the nicer the appointments, the more important lighting becomes. "If you have gold-plated hardware and sterling silver bowls, they'll look flat with fluorescent lighting," he explains. "If you have an 11-car garage or 2,000-square-foot closet, how important is it to show your friends this area?"

Particular attention is given to artwork and collections, with proper lighting crucial because of the potential for fading. "People who've made their billions doing something have artifacts that relate to it, whether it's boots or tractors. We did a collection for a baseball player who had hundreds of balls, some signed by Willie Mays and Babe Ruth. It's a tough challenge, because you need enough light so people can see through the glass, you don't want any glare, and you can't have too much light or it will ruin the collection."



**Opposite:** Dramatic indirect lighting adds a warm, incandescent glow to the groin-vaulted ceiling and marble floor of this 60-foot hallway in a Phoenix residence. • **Above:** A decorative chandelier and incandescent lighting set an inviting scene in a foyer.

**"It's all about the 'wow factor,' and making the client happy."**



Spitz says that while his industry is constantly changing because of technology, it really is quite simple. "There are so many different ways to change lighting. You can take the exact same fixture, and by changing the shape or size of the bulb, alter the shape of the light dramatically, changing the focus and attention. So it doesn't matter if you want me to relight a dining room or a \$1 million shopping center. It's all about understanding the industry and what tools are available, then match that with time and budget constraints. My job is to marry clients' tastes and needs with technology."

Drawing from a rich palette of lighting resources, Spitz says his job mainly involves fulfilling wish lists. "We might do a shower with frosted glass that glows white or amber, then changes to blue at night, and then purple. We do a lot of landscape lighting, in and around pools, perhaps creating an illusion at the bottom of the pool. People also love to see their zodiac on the ceiling. We'll ask their birth date and year, find a map of how the stars looked on the night they were born, then blow that up. When it lights up at night, only you and your special person know it's there."

"We just finished building our home, and Walter is a true mas-



Soft ambient light by Creative Designs in Lighting washes over interiors by David Michael Miller. **From left to right:** Light grazes a wall, revealing the texture of the stone. Indirect and accent lighting create a dramatic effect. • A marriage of artwork and architecture is evident in the gallery hall and living room, where lighting illuminates the two in a canvas of color.

ter," says homeowner Debi Bisgrove. "He has no ego, so he lets you do what you want, but with careful guidance. I can't say enough good things about him. We walk in every evening, and when the lights come on, it's 'Wow!' He's made our home magical. We can set all kinds of scenes, whether it's just the two of us, or a party for 200. There's a fine line between enough lighting and turning into Disney World. Walter knows exactly where to draw that fine line."

"Walter is doing our home now," adds Joan Colangelo. "He's very bright, very talented, totally efficient and responsible. I

would recommend him all day long."

Spitz cares immensely what a client thinks after his job is complete. "My heart is racing, and I want them to love it," he says. "Clients can be very challenging. They take my soul, and I'm willing to give it to them. I'm very thankful, humble and appreciative. If a client calls on a Sunday night and needs me, I'm there. As long as they're willing to give me the football and tell me the goal, I'll run with it. It's all about the 'wow factor,' and making the client happy." 🌟

See Resource Guide.