



# BUILDING A LEGACY

**MICHAEL BENNETT**  
CONTRIBUTES  
TO HIS  
ALMA MATER  
THROUGH  
ARCHITECTURE

CAROLYN CRUZ

BY MARK WRIGHT '07 MS (MLA '11)

Spend an afternoon with a saltwater crocodile and other scaly critters at the Fort Worth Zoo. Swing over to Rogers Road Pavilion — now known as the Woodshed Smokehouse — or West Seventh Street after dark to dine or sip wine. Or stroll across the TCU campus and take in its unique blend of classic and modern elements.

In fact, set foot almost anywhere notable in Fort Worth and you're likely to come across — or go inside — a project planned or designed by architect Michael J. Bennett '78. He might be sitting within earshot sipping a latte. But try not to let his possible presence dissuade you from gabbing with your friends about the quality of Bennett's creations.

"It's very interesting to go into a project that you've worked on or see people observing it and listen to people's comments without them knowing you're the architect," Bennett says. "It's one of the great things about the world: Everybody has an opinion on everything. And differences of opinion are not bad."

Bennett knows firsthand that opinions, like architectural styles, can vary widely from person to person and place to place. A successful career of 30 years and counting has seen him design stylish hotels in the former Communist sector of Berlin, upscale resorts in Spain and Hawaii, shopping centers in Poland and Florida and corporate campuses in Kiev and Budapest.

But in Bennett's viewpoint, there's no better place to live and work than Fort Worth. Since 2008, he has served as prin-

icipal and chief executive officer of Bennett Benner Pettit. His firm has played an active role in designing some of the city's most notable landmarks.



Bennett's recent handiwork can be seen at mixed use developments like Watters Creek in Allen and WestBend, just up University Drive from TCU; One and Two City Place; the Omni Condominiums and the Fort Worth Zoo's Museum of Living Art (MOLA). He's also worked on Westlake Academy, Acme Brick's new headquarters, TCC Trinity River East Campus and a portion of the burgeoning West Seventh development.

Recently, Bennett led design teams on several adaptive reuse projects like Foch Street Warehouses, Magnolia | May Building, and The Starr Conspiracy's Headquarters, a unique opportunity to convert a former hip-hop night club into a creative urban hub for the ad agency.

"I have worked on projects I haven't seen since they opened," says Bennett, a Cleburne native who relocated to Germany from 1992 to 2000 then later lived in Amsterdam and New York before returning to his Texas roots. "You fly into town. You do the work and you leave. In Fort Worth, it's different. That's why we came back — so we could have more involvement in the community, where there's a closer connection to the community than you have as an expatriate."

Monica Napier '00, director of marketing and communications at Bennett Benner Pettit, recalls the opening retreat of her Leadership Fort Worth Leading Edge class. Retreat

participants broke into groups and gave presentations on Fort Worth's heritage in culture, transportation, women and other categories. Her firm's projects kept popping up in the presentations, she says.

"Buildings designed by our firm were in nearly every presentation," Napier says. "That speaks volumes about the caliber of projects the firm is entrusted with, and the staying power of the design."



A hallmark of Chancellor Victor J. Boschini's tenure has been renovating and enhancing the TCU campus. And Bennett has played a significant role in helping create the university's upgraded look and feel. To date, his firm has worked on the renovations to Erma Lowe Hall (formerly called the Ballet Building), Jarvis Hall, Ray Memorial Gates, Veterans Plaza and the new Class of 2012 Gate at the corner of Berry and Bellaire Steets.

"Michael Bennett's work on our campus has been nothing short of inspirational to me personally and to many others," Boschini says. "He has the unique perspective of being a graduate of Texas Christian. He knows not only the culture of the place, but also all the physical aspects of the place. In my opinion, the two become synonymous after a period of time. Michael definitely understands that, too. Everything he has done on campus speaks to his love of the history of TCU and his excitement for the future of our school."

Bennett, in turn, admires Boschini's vision for a unified architectural style at TCU. "One of the things I give Victor

Boschini tremendous credit for is establishing a style of architecture on the campus," Bennett says. "You look at some college campuses and it seems like every architect came in and did his own specific thing, which makes it hard to create a "campus" atmosphere.

Bennett's work at TCU has fulfilled his desire to give back to the school where he earned a bachelor's in music theory and composition, minored in trombone and played bass guitar in the jazz band.

"I'm a better architect than I would've been a musician," says Bennett, who went on to earn a master's in architecture from the University of Texas at Arlington in 1983.

About 20 years ago, Bennett met with the Will Stallworth, TCU's recently retired associate vice chancellor for facilities. Bennett expressed his desire to work on architecture projects at his alma mater, and Stallworth liked the idea. But Bennett's firm at the time soon transferred him to its Berlin office. Back in Fort Worth more than a decade later, Bennett sought out Stallworth, who still remembered him. Bennett's connection to the campus was quickly rekindled.

"It's very exciting to do something that will be a continuing part of the university," Bennett says. "That's a great part of being an architect. Your projects interact with a lot of people for a long time."

Even when he's not actively involved in a campus project, Bennett's still a fixture at TCU. He and his family are regulars at TCU sporting events and cultural performances and the family, which includes his wife and their three teenage children, live in a house just north of campus on Rogers Avenue. Built in 1938, his residence was the final home of the late Ninnie L. Baird, founder of the famous bread company that bears her name. Bennett's home is actually on the opposite end of the same street where a favorite aunt lived in his youth.

"I like living in old houses," he says. "There's something about it that I really enjoy."

Plus, the short commute from his neighborhood to his downtown office meshes with his firm's emphasis on energy efficiency and environmental stewardship. "It's real luxury to be able to live so close to work," Bennett says. "If you look at your carbon footprint, if I'm getting on a plane and I'm flying to Florida, that's not very efficient. Here, I'm about eight minutes from my office."



Bennett has no shortage of new projects in the works. He's busy designing new brownstones and condos for Southlake Town Square, new buildings at a charter school in Westlake and new facilities at Texas Wesleyan University.

These current projects might not be luxury resorts in the far reaches of the globe, but Bennett's done all that. His projects these days take on a more personal touch — and TCU and north Texas benefit directly from his labors of love.

"It's nice to be community focused in Fort Worth," Bennett says. "We do the majority of our work here and get to know the people. And to be able to give back to the community is important and very, very satisfying." 🌿

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