

## ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN

BICONTINENTAL  
BY DESIGN

*Lars Uwe Bleher keeps one foot  
in each of two worlds.*

**H**IS NATIVE GERMANY HAS THE HIGHEST density of architects in the world. But that's not what keeps Lars Uwe Bleher up at night. The architect, exhibition designer, and assistant professor of architectural design and digital design media at the University of Oregon shuns shut-eye to straddle two worlds. As managing director of design for Atelier Markgraph, an exhibition design firm based in Germany, he's got to keep a foot in two time zones. When it's midnight in Eugene, his colleagues in Frankfurt are just bidding each other *guten morgen*.

So, like some kind of superhero of design, Bleher, a mild-mannered U.S. professor by day, transforms into *über-cool* European designer by night. Hanging in there with Markgraph through the wee hours seems only to increase his energy. It's the buzz of the new: "As a designer you get to work on what's coming. You're at the threshold of the future."

And the future, it seems, has flung wide the door and invited Bleher in for a drink, or so it would seem, judging from invitations he's recently received to deliver keynote speeches at a number of top American design conferences. In November, he led a workshop in New York on how new media will shape cities, information, and education; in May, at Gravity Free 2007 in Chicago, one of the most edgy design conferences in the country, he was billed as a "change-agent of the world."

His work for Markgraph, with its high-profile clients and European cachet, no doubt helped launch his career into the design stratosphere. Take the Mercedes-Benz brand galleries (showrooms-cum-corporate museums) in Paris and London or the internal design plan for Deutsches Museum in Munich, for starters. Then there's "Futurezone," an interactive suite and showroom for T-Online, Germany's leading Internet provider.

Markgraph is one of Germany's best known, most awarded design firms, responsible for one-of-a-kind extravaganzas such as the 2006 World Cup celebration: a megascale installation that



Photos courtesy of Lars Uwe Bleher

LEFT: Designer Lars Uwe Bleher; TOP RIGHT: Bleher's Futurezone showroom design for Deutsche Telekom (T-Online); NEXT THREE BELOW: Bleher was head of concept and design for the 90,000 square foot Telekom presentation at CeBIT 2007 in Hanover, Germany.

projected great moments in world soccer history onto the Frankfurt skyline. Thanks to Bleher's popularity as a speaker and a new book published in the U.S. this year, Markgraph's influence has crossed the ocean. In *What Is Exhibition Design?* Markgraph projects are showcased along with a handful of stunning portfolios from major design studios around the world. Several of the featured designs are Bleher's own.

His Markgraph work keeps Bleher sharp, but it also profits Oregon. Each year since coming on board in 2002, the UO's very own "change-agent" has been granted unpaid leave to complete his European projects. The dean of the School of Architecture and Allied Arts, Frances Bronet, says: "Lars is an extraordinary faculty member. The value that his professional practice brings to his teaching and research raises both the creative and global perspectives of our students." Bleher contends that his "European semes-

ters" refresh him, and foster new ideas for the classroom.

In his introduction to exhibition design course, for example, Bleher uses his own design work with Markgraph to demonstrate principles of exhibition design. Whatever the project he assigns his students, Bleher encourages them to make "visually compelling, amazing spaces that people can relate to and remember."

So are design superheroes born or made? Raised in Germany, Bleher traveled with his family to see many of the architectural gems of Europe while he was still a boy. His first influence was his father, Manfred, a master builder and self-trained architect. Bleher admits that when he was sixteen or so he talked about doing other things. "But my father knew I would come back to architecture; it's in my bones." Later, they worked together on one of Bleher's favorite projects: the design and construction of Haus Presche,



David Loveall / lovedphoto.com

## PROFILE

### LEAH MIDDLEBROOK

THE STARTLING FACT IN THE REPORT LEFT Leah Middlebrook feeling disturbed and concerned. Less than fifty percent of Americans read literature, according to the National Endowment for the Arts 2004 “Reading at Risk” survey.

Middlebrook, an assistant professor of comparative literature and Romance languages at Oregon, is dedicated to helping improve this troubling statistic. Her best shot comes in her Comparative Literature 101 course, where students arrive on the first day of class with all levels of literary training—including some with virtually none at all. For them to succeed at understanding subtle and complex narratives, Middlebrook knows, she needs to train them in the fundamental skills of college-level reading.

She introduces students to tools of observation and analysis, starting with the notion that it is okay to write in books. Techniques such as underlining passages and making notes in their texts, identifying and defining unfamiliar words, and logging key points in the text are both simple and enormously powerful. To ensure that students have applied ample ink (and thinking) to the page, she has in-class “book checks” where she inspects their marked-up pages. “The most important thing to teach students about reading literature,” she says, “is to read it slowly.”

In addition to the 101 course, she also teaches lyric poetry, feminist theory, critical theory, and a number of Spanish literature courses—all with the same intense focus on students’ developing their capacity to read deeply and insightfully. To keep the courses lively, Middlebrook mixes things up with out-of-class activities, from field trips to the UO’s Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art to compare modern art with baroque poetry, to “walking lectures” in which she and her students crisscross campus, visiting trees mentioned in poems they are studying.

Middlebrook feels she has been given a gift—her love for reading—and she wishes to share this gift with her students.

Angie Williams ’07, one of Middlebrook’s former students, says, “Getting an A on one of Leah’s assignments takes hard work and creativity, but at the same time you are left with an incredible feeling of accomplishment.”

And, perhaps, the equipment for a lifetime of reading.

**Name:** Leah Middlebrook

**Education:** B.A. ’89 and M.A. ’91 in comparative literature, Columbia University; Ph.D. ’98 in comparative literature, U.C. Berkeley

**Teaching experience:** Lecturer for one year at Stanford University, and six years at Oregon teaching undergraduate and graduate courses.

**Awards:** Fulbright grant; Andrew W. Mellon Postdoctoral Fellowship in the Humanities; University of Oregon’s 2007 Thomas F. Herman Faculty Achievement Award for Distinguished Teaching.

**Off campus:** Middlebrook enjoys skiing, running, yoga, and of course reading!

**Last word:** “To frame our perceptions, our emotions, and our experience in language, and set that language into a format in which it can be accessed simply, across the generations, just by entering a library: that is a beautiful human activity.”

—TERESA STANONIK

a private residence that incorporates a lighted glass staircase within its starkly modern interior.

After receiving his degree at the University of Stuttgart, Bleher was awarded a Fulbright scholarship to study at the UO. In 1994, he completed the M.Arch. at Oregon, then bagged a plum internship with Morphosis Architects in California. “Fellow students thought I was crazy for applying to such a high-powered firm. Sometimes Europeans believe more strongly in the American Dream than those born here.”

Believing the dream paid off, and even now Bleher counts Morphosis cofounder Thom Mayne as one of his strongest influences. Winner of the Pritzker prize, architecture’s Academy Award, Mayne is known for innovative, unconventional design. In recent years he has become popular as a designer of government buildings, including Eugene’s federal courthouse. One of Mayne’s maxims that has stuck with Bleher, whether he’s designing or teaching: “In architecture, the experience comes first.”

Bleher thinks of design itself as “a glorious occupation, a dream job.” But he admits that it takes gristle and bone, hard work, and little sleep to become a success. He demands a lot of his students, and expects them to demand a lot of themselves. They’re not required to keep a bed on two continents. Then again, it couldn’t hurt.

—NANCY ALLISON

## HEALTH CENTER

### HEALING WORDS

*New public artwork adorns student health center.*

**S**TUDENTS CAN NOW RECEIVE SUBliminal messages along with their prescriptions and check-ups at the University Health, Counseling, and Testing Center.

At first glance, the new metal sculptures that now adorn the building might look like a tangle of cooked spaghetti, but the two and a half tons of steel that New York artist Suikang Zhao welded into thin ribbons actually spell out words related to health and healing in twenty-six different languages. For instance, the wall just inside the main entrance includes “harmony,” “sundhed” (“health” in Danish), and “kino” (“body” in Hawaiian). Zhao solicited mes-