

Brick, Exposed

STORY BY *John K. Grande*

An ordinary building material, with deep roots in history, makes for extraordinary landscape forms.

HUMAN BEINGS HAVE USED bricks for thousands of years. In 4000 BC, the ancient city of Ur (part of Mesopotamia, in what is now Iraq) was built almost entirely of brick. In the 1960s, on the other end of the utility spectrum, Carl Andre made minimalist brick-art installations. Michael Morgan's sculptural works are ingenious integrations that call on this history – brick as building material, brick as art. All of Morgan's creations – whether singular columnar forms like *Tide Clock* (1999) or the seven shoreline sculptures that make up *Haverstraw Trophy* (2005) – walk the line between man-made and natural, and between construction and deconstruction, drawing on the origins of clay in the earth.

The 54-year-old Morgan earned a degree in ceramics at

Wolverhampton Polytechnic in England, but found the medium a little limiting. "It did bother me that ceramic sculpture was normally small-scale," he says. "The sheer abundance of brick in the West Midlands [where he went to school], the act of constantly walking through that 19th-century industrial landscape, got me thinking that I could use brick to make sculpture large enough to have a real impact in an exterior setting." Add to that inspiration Morgan's years as a serious gardener, and it's easy to see why he now works on such a grand scale.

Morgan came to Philadelphia on a visit after graduation and met his wife there while working at The Clay Studio. He completed his MFA at the University of Nebraska in 1993 and has recently returned to Philadelphia.

Crumbling factories, the familiar shape of the brick, and its earthy clay character inspired Morgan, leading to commissions such as *Keraunos Wall* (1994-98), made for David and Kara Lynn Klarner. For all of its chaotic, undulating texture, the wall is carefully composed: The bricks are kiln-fired in sections, then sealed with mortar at the joints. It includes a brick bench for visitors to experience what Morgan calls the "natural-looking chaos."

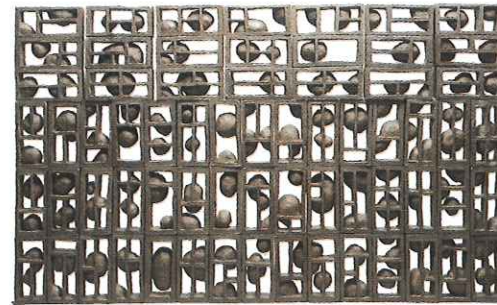
Sited on a Nebraska hill-top and echoing the state's farm heritage, *Silo* (2005) was commissioned by the Roskens family of Omaha. Like an instantaneous ruin, the silo structure has a vertical crack that follows the form upward. In 2009, when the Roskenses decided to integrate a diagonal window that would span the

full height of their house, they asked Morgan to create a textured brick setting for that window. Morgan wetted down thousands of unfired bricks over several days, softening them up so he could beat them by hand, stomp on them, and whack them with tree branches. When the battered material was almost dry, Morgan used a knife to cut away parts that didn't look right, preparing for kiln firing, before transportation to the site. The resulting surfaces, with their small, scattered eruptions, appeared, in a sense, even more bricklike than in the beginning; all of Morgan's manipulations produced a sheen that catches the light and exaggerates the surface.

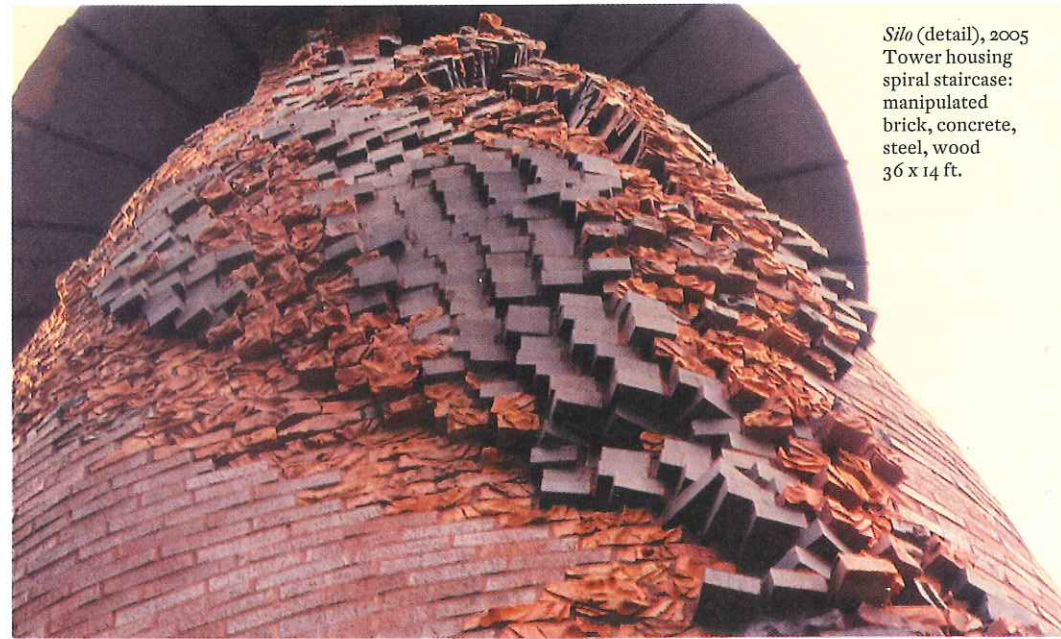
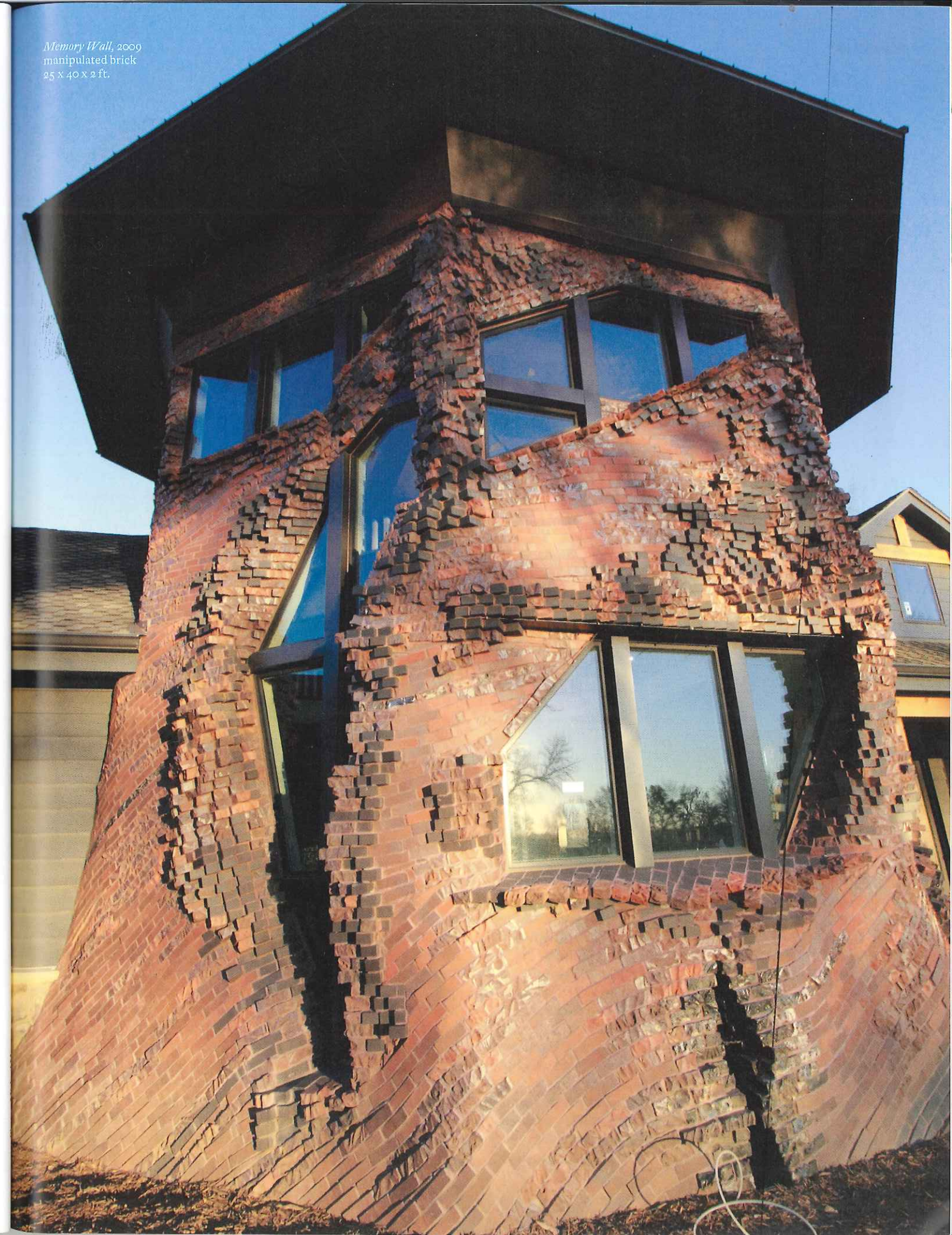
"While I was [working on the window wall], it occurred to me my brick actions were like our memory – chaotic, mundane, random – with certain parts erased to make sense of things, so I decided to call this *Memory Wall*," says Morgan. "My ideas come from the physical activity of working with the brick. I like natural form – and the grime and vitality of the city." Michael Morgan's brickwork echoes our industrial heritage and brings a gritty, sustainability aesthetic to the human-built landscape.

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John K. Grande is the author of Art Nature Dialogues: Interviews with Environmental Artists and Dialogues in Diversity: Art from Marginal to Mainstream. He is co-author of Natura Humana: Outdoor Installations.

Right: Hearth Series, 2010 modular hollowed bricks for multiple uses 32 x 60 x 2 in.



Memory Wall, 2009 manipulated brick 25 x 40 x 2 ft.



Silo (detail), 2005 Tower housing spiral staircase: manipulated brick, concrete, steel, wood 36 x 14 ft.