

Modernism Meets Desertscaping

The Landscape Design Revolution of Palm Springs

by Clayton Tschudy

If formalism in horticulture is defined as the imposition on a natural landscape of linear axes and geometric forms, then mid-century modernism challenged conventions by drawing inspiration from graphic design, utilizing circles, curvilinear forms, and abstract compositions to break up the regularity of designed landscapes. This take on modernism in the landscape was clearly on display this year at the 2016 Palm Springs Modernism Week, a 10-day event that celebrates the history of mid-century design in architecture. But what may be most striking about contemporary landscape design in Palm Springs is the blend of modern aesthetics and a homegrown movement towards the use of native and climate-adapted species, and other sustainable practices, known regionally as desertscaping. The confluence of these two trends yields strikingly original spaces, and points to a future where design treats sustainability challenges as opportunities for creative solutions.

Modern and naturalistic landscape design have co-existed in Palm Springs since the post-war era, either as separate trends, or with modern designers borrowing the natural “landscape” surrounding their developments merely by practicing minimal horticultural intervention. What is now understood as sustainable design was once simple necessity, especially in the water-starved desert. The exclusive Smoke Tree Ranch, for instance, home to *pre-*



Smoke Tree Ranch

modern and historically maintained vacation casitas owned by prominent families like Disney and Sears, is a veritable desert botanic garden. On display is a wonderful assortment of desert species, naturalistically composed and mostly un-watered. This development looks quite current, and with the exception of the older architecture, could be a contemporary suburb of Tucson with water wise landscaping.



Edris House

Similarly, the iconic modern Edris House, built in 1954 into the natural hills overlooking Palm Springs, has minimally designed spaces, a simple kidney shaped pool and a few cacti seamlessly transitioning into the adjacent natural washes and rocky outcrops. The elegant glass and stone block house, surrounded by an unselfconscious natural landscape, appears to float above the hillside like a glowing machine in a primeval garden. In fact, early modernism had a progressively environmental ethos, perhaps best exemplified by the Thomas Church designed 1948

Donnell garden in Sonoma, California that invented occidental indoor/outdoor living, a concept inspired by Asian architecture, and which now has spread throughout the western world.

However, the “green revolution” and newly abundant water resources of the mid-century period ushered in new suburban developments that were less progressive in their treatment of landscapes. A microcosm of this nationwide impact can be seen in Palm Springs. While modernism continued to influence compositional forms and embraced indoor/outdoor living, suburban landscape design was constrained by smaller spaces and a mandate to make “gardens for people,” a concept interpreted to transform every front yard into a lawn and foundation shrubs,



Twin Palms Home

hardly the environmental ideal possible in wealthier neighborhoods. With a fine design touch, modern suburban yards could be works of abstract art. The Twin Palms home, designed by William Krisel, demonstrates a Kadinsky-like front yard design dominated by circular patches of turf and rock. But the impulse to make homes and gardens for the masses was seldom so inspired outside of the design capital of Palm Springs. And of course, we are now aware of the disastrous environmental consequences of widespread, unsustainable practices such as growing turf in the desert. Water in the Coachella Valley surrounding Palm Springs comes primarily from the Colorado River and local underground aquifers, neither of which are sustainable resources in an era of growing population and climate change.

Once again necessity is changing landscaping trends in the California desert, but this time the new environmental ethos is a grassroots movement with widespread appeal. Desertscaping could be simplistically defined as the use of low water and climate-adapted plants, a diversity of which are only recently available from the nursery industry, itself adapting to the times and public demand. But replacing water hungry species with drought tolerant plants while keeping the mid-century design is not the extent of innovation possible in sustainable modern landscapes. Contemporary modernism in Palm Springs expresses itself as a sophisticated blend of naturalism and formal compositions, and utilizes the new diversity of climate-adapted plant species to accentuate this eclectic aesthetic. This movement is happening in local suburban home designs, where bright modern colors, specimen cacti, and loose perennial compositions that mimic natural desert topography, maintain some formal elements, but soften or omit the abstractions common in earlier mid-century landscape design.

But certainly, the most innovative sustainable modern landscape in Palm Springs is the extraordinary Gardens at Sunnylands at the Annenberg Foundation Retreat, the product of a large collaborative design effort. This contemporary garden opened in 2012 and set a new



Sunnylands Overview

bar for landscape design in the region. Curvilinear modern compositions are made subtle by exploding out to large scale, massing of an array of climate adapted species fills the formal beds putting the emphasis on the plant life and habitat, and the widespread use of natural materials such as decomposed granite paths softens stonework and pavement. The result is a very modern space with, with obvious references to mid-century modern design, that feels as if it could have appeared spontaneously in the desert. This is truly inspired desertscaping.



Sunnylands

Palm Springs is a living museum of mid-century architecture and landscape design. But it is also a growing city, struggling with environmental challenges. The combination of environmental drivers such as water scarcity, the historical frame of modernism, and a pool of innovative designers is giving birth to an inspired new landscape design movement that sees sustainability as a design opportunity, that embraces the natural beauty of the local desert as an inspirational design palette. In few other cities does both the passion for design and the value for sustainability have such widespread community support. This unique mandate inspires innovation that will make Palm Springs a city to watch in landscape design for many years to come.