Title
The Desert in the City     [Landscape as Mentor]

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New Times Building

In downtown Phoenix, we converted an old school into an office building for a newspaper. Early blueprints for the building showed that a carved stone owl had originally been placed atop the entry. We found the owl in a museum and returned it to its original spot. This was a nice restoration touch, but it also made us think about how we might bring the landscape back to the site.

Behind the building, we created a public courtyard in a space that had been occupied by a typical imported landscape with grass and palm trees. In our area, living outdoors was once an important tradition. We wanted to create a place in this hot, arid environment where people could work outdoors, have lunch or just enjoy the weather. So we brought in native plantings to soften the space, particularly through the shade they create.

The owl also suggested the importance of bringing wildlife back into the city. We hoped that birds would find this spot and use it as a stopping off place, but didn’t expect that animals would, so we hired an artist to create kokopelli heads that illustrate the type of wildlife that might be here if we continued to restore the landscape on a larger scale. Thus we were delighted to learn recently that a skunk had decided to move onto the grounds.

Client: New Times, Inc.
Architecture: site plan, landscape, fountains: John Douglas Plantings: Steve Martinez
Artist: Alan Weaver
Phoenix, 1986

Courtyard after and before completion; fountain detail
Photos: Richard Monck (top, bottom), John Douglas (center)
La Casita de Maria

When people came to Phoenix in the 1920s, they came predominantly because they loved the place. It was a fantastic experience to come to the desert and live with it. The surroundings were so vibrant and exciting that there was less emphasis on the structure; they tended to build very simple buildings, almost Greek-like. You only needed a simple structure—just concrete floors and building walls, pole ceilings—because you wanted to be outside all the time.

Buildings that are designed and constructed correctly become a part of the landscape; they are artifacts from which we can learn. This house, which dates to the 1920s, offered a number of lessons.

We learned about the process of living outdoors in a series of courtyards, where you walk from the bedroom structure to the dining-kitchen structure to a living structure. All the spaces are very small, but you live between the buildings.

Buildings like this also can teach you about materials. This is color plaster that never needs to be painted. The poles that hold the roof up have raw cooper sheaths that simply turned brown and protected the wood from decay.

In structures like these, you will almost always find that the outdoor spaces are oriented toward good views because that is typically where you would be. At this home, the courtyard between the buildings faces one of our most famous landmarks, Camelback Mountain, with the Praying Monk formation clearly visible.

Client: Jan and Bill Frieder
Architecture: John Douglas
Landscape: Chris Ty Eyck
Paradise Valley, 1993

Site axonometric before and after project; interior courtyard; exterior patio and landscape
Photos: Richard Maack
Graphics: John Douglas and Jon Funari
Kitchell Fountain

One of our projects involved the redesign of the backyard of a small house in the middle of Phoenix. It was very typical—the lot was 100-feet square. The yard was planted with grass and olive trees. Our challenge was to connect it with the surrounding environment.

First we persuaded the owners to cut their fence down. In Phoenix, neighborhoods and yards tend to be fenced in; you cannot see anything from anybody’s yard. Now there is a view of Camelback Mountain from this backyard space.

Then we developed a sixty-foot-long trough of water with a four-inch-wide channel. Water is what gives life to the desert environment, and our thirst for it has resulted in remarkable engineering structures as well as symbolic architecture. The source of the water is marked strongly; sources are important.

The same ethic about durable materials is also embraced here. The trough is made of cast concrete (colored brown so you don’t have to paint it) and lined with black slate so it will last forever.

Client: Sam and Betty Kitchell
Architect: Kitchell
Landscape: John Douglas
Planting: Christy Tim Eyrick
Paradise Valley, 1994

View of Camelback Mountain; mouth of fountain; site plan
Photos: Richard Mack
Graphic: John Douglas
and Jon Funari
Desert Botanical Garden

The Desert Botanical Garden is a 160-acre park that is surrounded by the developed core of the Phoenix metropolitan area. It is a beautiful patch of Sonoran desert landscape, yet it has a number of urban forces acting on it, including a canal along one edge and a parkway along another.

As many times as I have been there in my lifetime, it is difficult to get a complete sense of what is happening with the terrain because there is just too complex. It rolls and undulates in ways that are hard to get a fix on.

We made a number of studies to familiarize ourselves with how water flows across the site. We found that the parkway, which was built twenty years ago, cuts off the main washes that run through the heart of the garden, not surprisingly, the garden is watered quite heavily.

We tried to keep the vegetation going. Our master plan proposed that the washes should be reconstructed, but that has not happened yet.

We did sections to study the terrain, and found that it gradually slopes to the east. Understanding that, we were able to position new buildings on the downslope so that they would have less visual impact.

On the east side of the site is a canal. Like many of the canals in Phoenix, it follows the path of an ancient canal that was built along a single contour line for miles and miles. It seems to fit in the landscape wonderfully, as it comes around and emphasizes the terrain. But, in fact, the canal creates a drain that redirects the natural flow of stormwater and cuts off wildlife corridors.

The Desert Botanical Garden is a garden destination, not a building destination. The new entry facility is conceived as a serpentine wall that houses restrooms, first aid and other services people might need. It was conceived to be viewed as a garden wall, not so much as a building, and we pulled the structures apart so there would be trees around it and farther break it down.

The visitor experience was planned as a seamless journey, beginning with the long entry road that leads from the desert to the tree-shaded parking areas. Then there is a short walk on a nature trail that bridges a desert wash and carries you to the new entry pavilion. The pavilion is a large shade structure under which you can purchase your ticket and enter the garden uninterrupted.


Garden landscape: analysis of washes and terrains, site plan.

Photo: Todd W. Bessell Graphics: John Douglas and Jon Funari