

# UC Berkeley

## Places

### Title

The Desert in the City [Landscape as Mentor]

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7vp193w2>

### Journal

Places, 13(3)

### ISSN

0731-0455

### Author

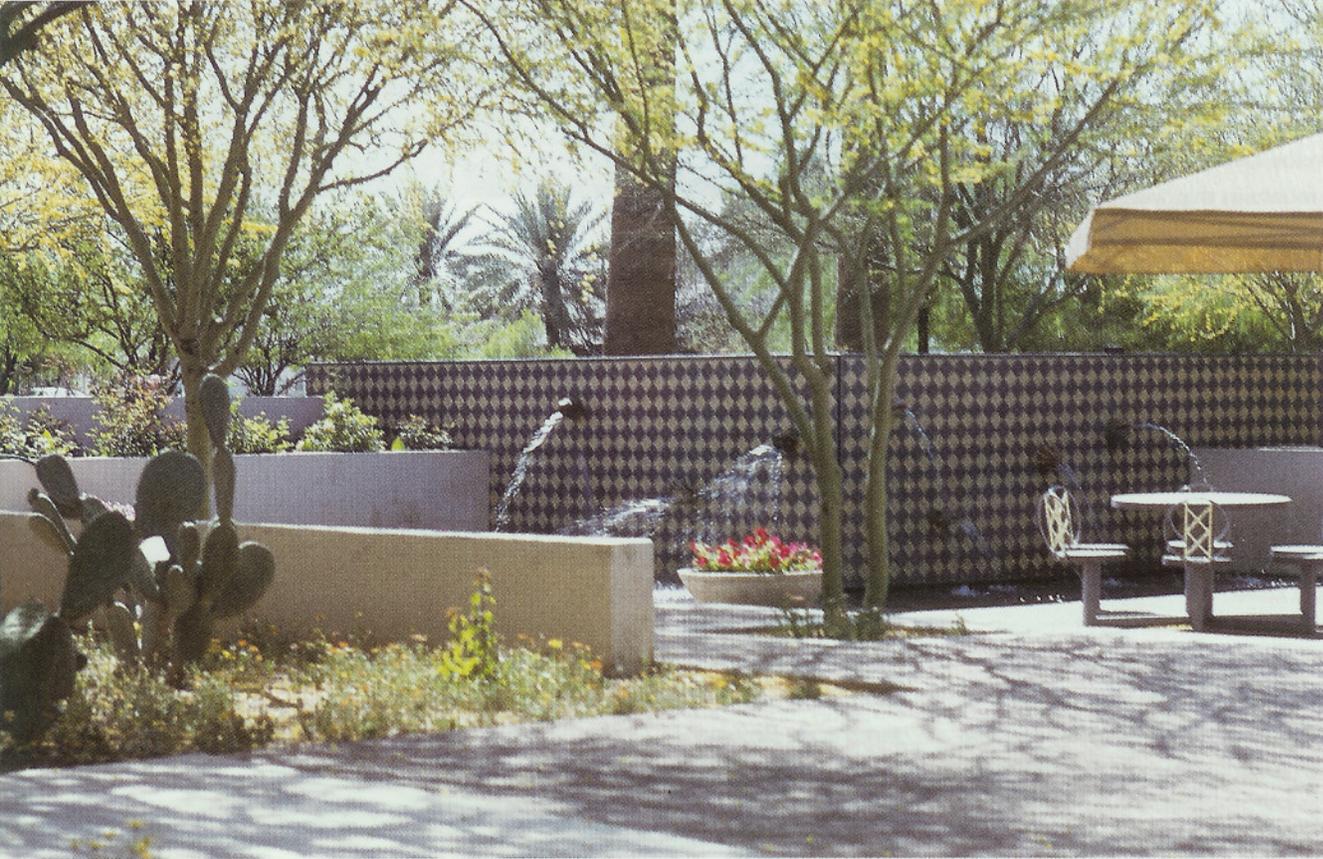
Douglas, John

### Publication Date

2000-12-01

Peer reviewed

## John Douglas The Desert in the City



### 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

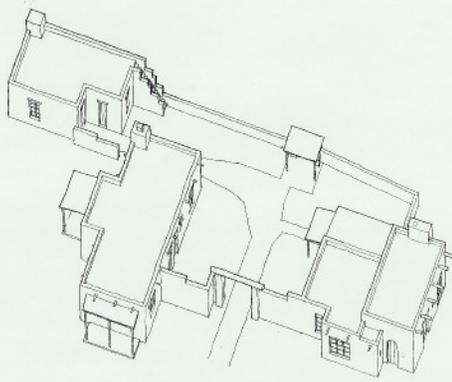
we brought in native plantings to soften the space, particularly through the shade they create.

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 fountainheads 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.

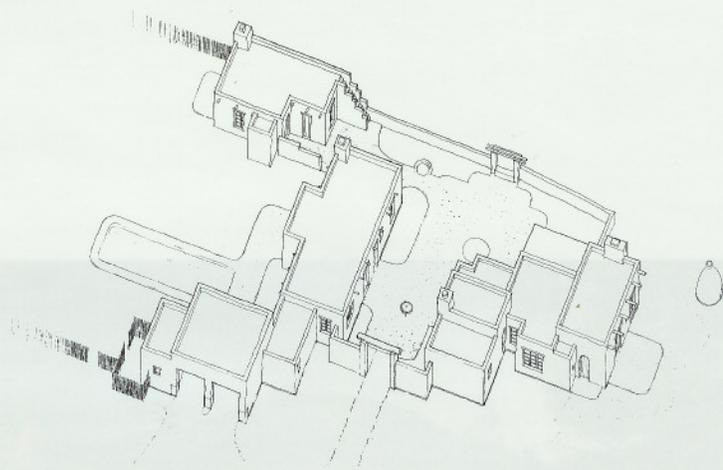
Client: New Times, Inc.  
Architecture, site plan, hardscape, fountains: John Douglas  
Plantings: Steve Martino  
Artist: Alan Weaver  
Phoenix, 1986



Courtyard after and before completion; fountain detail  
Photos: Richard Maack (top, bottom), John Douglas (center)



Before



After

**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 home, 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 dining-kitchen structure to a living structure. All the spaces are very small, but you live between the buildings.

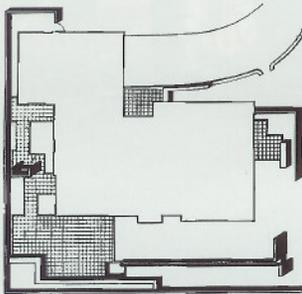
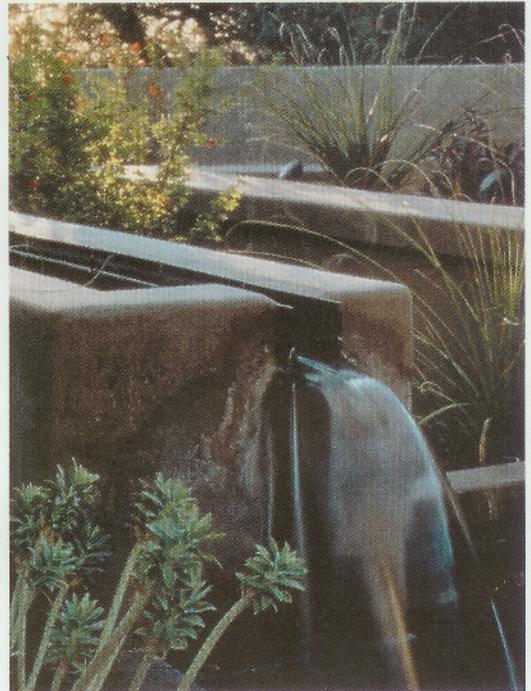
Buildings like this also can teach you about materials. This is color plaster that never needs to be painted. The poles that hold the roof up have raw copper shields that simply turned brown and protected the wood from decay.

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: Christy Ten 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-foot 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  
 Architecture, site plan,  
 hardscape: John Douglas  
 Planting: Christy Ten Eyck  
 Paradise Valley, 1994

View of Camelback mountain;  
 mouth of fountain; site plan

Photos: Richard Maack  
 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 it 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

to keep the vegetation going. Our master plan proposed that the washes should be reconnected, 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 downhill slope so that they would have less visual impact.

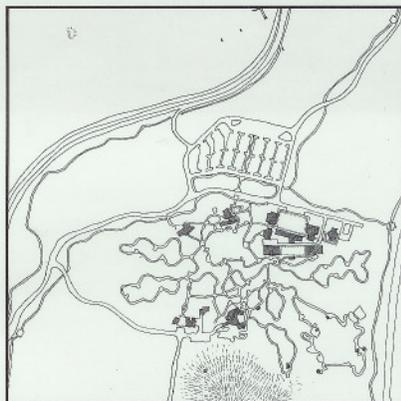
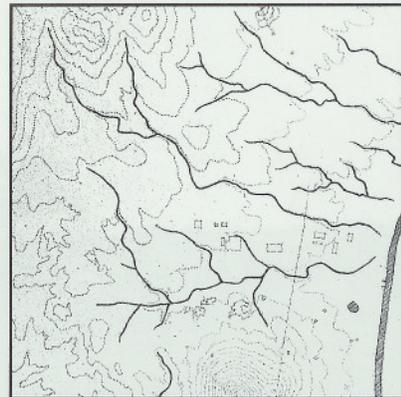
On the east side of the site is a canal. Like many of the canals in Phoenix, it follows the path of an ancient canal that was built along a single contour line for miles and miles. It seems to fit in the landscape wonderfully, as it comes around and emphasizes the terrain. But, in fact, the canal creates a dam that interrupts 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 further 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.

Client: Carolyn O'Malley, Executive Director, Desert Botanical Garden  
 Master plan: John Douglas, Christy Ten Eyck  
 Architecture: John Douglas  
 Landscape: Christy Ten Eyck  
 Phoenix, 1992–2000



Garden landscape; analysis of washes and terrain; site plan.

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