

PROJECT IDENTITY AND LOCATION: Private Residence, Trabuco Canyon, California

This residential design project is located in the foothills of South Orange County, California. The back yard joins up with Whiting Ranch Wilderness Park. Because the property is long and narrow, tapering towards the end, one of the primary design goals in this project was to open up the view to the park, making the property “borrow” the view and create a seamless transition from residential property to park. The completion of this project has greatly improved the owners’ quality of life and the owners find themselves outside more often, doing all their own garden maintenance, hosting family and friends of all ages, and being on the local Native Plant Society garden tour last year.

The clients wanted a pool of suitable size for daily lap swimming. A spa was combined with the pool to provide after-hours comfort and relaxation, and an opportunity to enjoy the view. A gas fireplace anchors the dining area off the kitchen and dining room. A redwood patio cover provides afternoon shade for dining and the rooms at the back of the house. Broken concrete, recycled from this project and others close by, form raised planters for vegetable gardening. Within the enlarged central entertaining space, graded out to be one level, are several intimate seating and dining areas, centered around the pool and spa. The property is divided in two by a change in grade and a glass fence for pool safety. This division, through a set of staggered concrete steps, marks the transition from public and more human dominated space to private and more nature dominated space. The “lower 48” is intended to be a quiet area for reading, working, and viewing the larger landscape. A swath of meadow draws your eye out from the upper UC Verde lawn through the property to the transition to true chaparral.

In analyzing the site before the design process began, the following issues were apparent: There was an overabundance of lawn. In fact, an estimated 75% of the landscaped area was cool season turf, requiring lots of water to irrigate. The entertaining spaces were small and didn’t take advantage of the potential views from the upper part of the property. The site felt closed down to the important elements (i.e. view, open feeling) and open to the wrong elements (close neighbors and property line block walls; and above all, the property didn’t reflect the owner’s artistic personalities and the unique location.

The materials and colors used in this project are simple and natural. Bel Air rubble on the fireplace and raised bond beam of the pool evokes the powerful feeling of stone. The stucco is integral color, which will weather unevenly. This uneven weathering is intentional, avoiding a harsh contrast between the hardscape and the landscape. ‘Dakota’ random ashlar stone is used for the patios. Colored, washed, concrete is used for the pool and spa coping, stepping pads, and steps, adding a simple, modern touch to the landscape design. An ozone filtration system for the pool and spa makes daily swimming healthier for hair and skin. The ‘Bella Blue’ Pebble Fina plaster finish is a mirror of the sky and an inviting place to swim. A corner fireplace invites people to appreciate the warmth from two sides. A separate firepit seating area with redwood seat is close to the spa to make it easier to warm up after a swim or soak in the spa

Many elements of sustainability are incorporated into this project. They include aspects of: irrigation, planting, drainage, soil preparation, and building materials. Water runoff from the roof and hardscape areas is disseminated throughout the site, allowing for infiltration back into the groundwater. Fine grading encourages water re-direction towards low spots. Irrigation is drip, bubblers at trees, and MP-Rotators for the lawn area. Almost all plants are California Natives. The other types of low water use plants are Mediterranean climate and succulents. The few thirsty plants used are roses at special locations for scent, and fruit trees. All the fallen leaves are being allowed to decompose onsite, providing food for living soil.

The soil has been tested multiple times by Soil-Foodweb (info@oregonfoodweb.com Tel. 541-752-5066) for biological analysis, and compost tea has been applied multiple times to build healthy, living soil. No inorganic fertilizers or pesticides are being used on the garden. A Smart controller (Hunter with Solar Sync) efficiently monitors water use relative to the evapotranspiration (ET) rate of the plants and adjusts accordingly. The owners have a large vegetable garden area where they can grow fresh produce. Fruit trees are grown and maintained without chemical pesticides or fertilizers.

The landscape architect’s role in this project was from initial conception through onsite construction oversight. The project had relatively few issues or delays, unusual for a project of this size. The credit for this can come from the close and respectful working relationships between the owners, the landscape architect, and the contractors.