

“RECLAIMING NATURE: Values Reflected in the Landscape” • Agoura Hills, CA

Purpose of Project

Program & Scope: This project completes the first part of a 25-year vision for a foundation’s new headquarters. Included in this 44-acre office campus are 23 acres of dedicated open space, with an additional 14 acres of preserved land. Steve, the foundation’s president, has deep commitment to carry on the Catholic-based philanthropic legacy of his grandfather, while also adding his own life-long passion for sustainability and love of native plants. Recognizing the impact of new construction on the environment, Steve committed to using the project to advance the understanding of sustainable design and construction practices, including maximizing water conservation and net-zero energy use.

Planning: Steve carefully selected a landscape architectural firm that he felt could fulfill his vision for sustainability and integration of native plants. He felt a close connection to the firm he selected, even having attended the same college as the principal. In a 1.5-year integrated design process for the first phase, he encouraged a “big room” approach to regularly bring the overall team of consultants together to plan the project. What emerged was a comprehensive set of sustainable, passive solutions that leveraged building and site resources to create an aesthetically and experientially pleasing, highly functional, and environmentally sensitive home for the foundation.

Design Philosophy & Intent: Environmental stewardship, preserving the integrity of the surrounding environment, and crafting a sustainable, peaceful workplace were primary goals of the project. Steve sees the protection of the environment as closely tied to the Foundation’s focus on serving the poorest of the poor and the Pope’s view that environmental impacts are felt first by those in the most need. By creating a model for sustainable building that can be used as an exemplar for others, this project is in alignment with the foundation’s corporate, environmental, and spiritual values.

Role of Landscape Architect

The landscape architect was selected by the client specifically for their extensive expertise in designing sustainable systems inspired by nature and culture. This includes watershed management and the re-establishment of appropriate natural habitats in beautiful ways based upon deep experience with California flora, and experience with the area’s Chumash Native American culture. The Landscape Architects lead design of all spaces outside the building, collaborating with building architects to enhance energy efficiency and water conservation. They also directed the vision for how outdoor spaces, like hiking trails, overlooks, and edible gardens, could maximize the quality of life for the people using them, considering the sights, smells, sounds, physical experiences, and even tastes that would bring pleasure.

Significance: With its driving goal to set higher industry precedents, this project has been extensively documented and published. Media exposure includes magazine articles featuring the Landscape Architect alone, or as part of the integrated team. Starkly contrasting with its highly urbanized surroundings, the foundation has a visitor center that provides tours that showcase landscape architectural accomplishments.

Special Factors: This project is unique in many aspects including its holistic, collaborative process, but most special is the ‘thought leadership’ that came out of the work. This is demonstrated in multiple ways:

- 1) Client Relationship:** More than just expressing his desire for limit-stretching design ideas that could at once enhance the quality of life for workers, capitalize on natural resources, and promote environmental stewardship, Steve provided full-fledged support for all the landscape innovations proposed that went beyond his expectations. Thus many elements that are uncommon for large office complexes were incorporated. Since the completion of this first phase, the landscape architect has been consistently involved in the site development, including upgrading existing landscapes and creating new public spaces.
- 2) Recreating Natural Setting:** A lifelong resident of nearby Malibu, Steve envisioned “being native to the land”. The landscape architectural firm took this to the next level by using regionally native plants as they grow together in nature and incorporating materials found on site in the construction of landscape elements. In many cases, such as the hummingbird garden near the solar trellis and the debris basin butterfly garden, elegant solutions met both human and wildlife needs.
- 3) Comprehensive Water Management:** One of the Foundation’s strategic initiatives is to “increase sustainable access to safe water for people in severe need in developing countries.” To honor this, a site-wide linked water system was included so that all water that falls on the site is captured, stored, treated, and used to nourish plants or support the building’s needs, saving an estimated 1 million gallons of water per year. This includes use of bioswales, stormwater storage, rainwater collection systems, cisterns, water features, passive irrigation, permeable paving, green roofs, and use of reclaimed water.

Steve has retired, yet Kathryn, the building manager, is avidly pursuing the dreams Steve put into play. Having already achieved LEED Platinum, she is advocating the celebration of the landscape by pursuing Sustainable Sites certification.