Superbloom

Taking Inspiration from the Desert Landscapes of Palm Springs

Session FRI-A02

Friday November 19, 2021
1:30 PM – 2:45 PM

Overview

For millennia, Palm Springs and the Coachella Valley have been a magnetic destination for visitors. From rare plants and roadside geology to hot springs and canyon oases, the desert rewards careful observation. Our panel will explore how the desert's sublime qualities have inspired distinctive works of landscape architecture and art.

Learning Outcomes

1. Appreciate the unique geologic and ecological history of Palm Springs and the Colorado Desert.
2. Learn why indigenous Cahuilla people and early settlers were drawn to this landscape for its health bringing qualities.
3. Learn how the work of artists and landscape designers have been influenced by the sublime desert landscape.
4. Understand how contemporary artists and designers have helped establish a cultural destination in the desert.

Nate Cormier ASLA

Managing Studio Director, RIOS

Nate's interest in landscape design as a form of storytelling drew him to Los Angeles after two decades of practice in Seattle and an MLA from Harvard. Nate's projects, including downtown parks in Denver, Houston, Seattle, Los Angeles, and Palm Springs, unearth stories of place as catalysts for authentic urban life. Nate teaches and lectures on landscape design at universities and conferences around the country. He has been active on the boards of the national Landscape Architecture Foundation and numerous urban environmental and civic groups. Nate's current research interest centers around health and wellness in urban environments.

Millicent Harvey

Millicent Harvey Photography

Millicent Harvey photographs nationally for landscape architects, magazines, designers and landscape related companies. In the field of Landscape Architecture her photography has won her recognition through publications, exhibitions and awards. Millicent's images are published in Visible/Invisible: Landscape Works of Reed Hilderbrand, featuring a photographic essay of their landscape designs and her photographs are featured extensively in the recently published monograph Hocker: 2005 - 2020 Landscapes. Millicent continues to pursue personal projects and she draws inspiration from the desert landscape of the American southwest. She currently lives in Palm Springs, California.

Phillip K. Smith, III

PKS3 Studio

From his Palm Desert, CA studio, Phillip K. Smith, III creates light-based work that draws upon ideas of space, form, color, light + shadow, environment, and change. Smith continually distills his concepts to create intensely physical, seemingly ephemeral, and highly meditative works that affect perception, breath, and pace of experience. Incorporating a sense of change in his work through shifting color or the movement of the sun, Smith challenges us to slow down and align ourselves with his work so that we can better see and hear the beauty that is in front of us.

An Urban Oasis

Nate Cormier

A Legacy of Discovery

Ecoregional Context. Palm Springs sits near the geologically dynamic intersection of several tectonic plates. Bounded by the San Andreas and the San Jacinto Faults, the region offers breathtaking views of surrounding mountains. Desert hot springs bubble to the surface offering tangible evidence of the activity beneath the earth's crust. Unique species of plants and animals have adapted to the extreme conditions of this desert.

Native history. The earliest inhabitants of the Coachella Valley are known ethnohistorically as the Cahuilla Indians. Cahuilla people have lived in this area for over 5000 years and their oral tradition tells of a powerful leader who created the original hot spring of Palm Springs as a perpetually enduring place to heal. They called the spring Sec-he (boiling water) which Spanish explorers later translated to Agua Caliente, giving the local Cahuilla band its name. Native people were also drawn in summers to the cool water and air of nearby palm-filled canyons.

Emergence of a Hospitality Industry. In 1887, the first hotel in Palm Springs was constructed next to an Agua Caliente hot spring. Nellie Coffman, the "mother of Palm Springs," is credited with transforming the tiny desert village into a world-famous tourist destination. Arriving in 1909, she opened a small sanitorium for visitors to find healing respite from respiratory diseases. In time, she transformed The Desert Inn into a luxury resort and became the region's foremost evangelist for the what she called The Four S's: space, stillness, solitude, and simplicity.

Other Seekers. The region also attracted less conventional visitors. Perhaps the most intriguing was Bill Pester, a German immigrant who came to California in 1916 to "study himself with untrammeled nature as his classroom." He lived alone in a thatch hut in Tahquitz Canyon. His proto-hippie wanderings inspired many others to forsake the developed world for a day or a lifetime of immersion in the desert's wonders.

Contemporary Culture. The region continues to a be special destination for a diverse community of visitors, residents, and "snowbirds" who nearly double the population each winter. Some come for memories of where Golden Age Hollywood and the Rat Pack let their hair down. Many come for world-class cultural events such as Modernism Week and Coachella. In Palm Springs, a spirit of tolerance prevails, and this perhaps contributes to its reputation as an inviting place for the LGBTQ community.

Case Study: A New Central Park for Palm Springs

Overview. Since 2017, RIOS has been helping the City of Palm Springs, the Palm Springs Art Museum, and community stakeholders imagine a new 2-acre central park where residents and visitors can come together. In October 2021, construction was completed, and the park was opened to the public. Rather than riff off the abundant and compelling mid-century modern cues in the surrounding architecture, the design team sought to capture the deeper identity of Palm Springs and provide a glimpse into the timeless appeal of this destination in the Colorado Desert.

The Palm Grove. An important objective of the park was to make it a year-round destination. With temperatures exceeding 120 degrees in the summer, an obvious challenge was mitigating the extreme heat. Our team spent research field trips hiking in the surrounding landscapes to understand this challenge and appreciate the unique native palm ecosystem in the foothill canyons. The team translated field measurements of the palms' tight spacing and irregular trunk forms into the park's native palm grove.

Outcrops and Canyon Falls. Team hikes in the surrounding mountains also offered up close experience of the colorful banded rock formations which had offered such striking views from the valley floor. The team abstracted this geology into a custom "sedimentary" finish for vertical walls and modular seat blocks that retain planted outcrops and form gathering spaces in the park. Working with Fluidity, the team invented a powerful cascade and misting water feature for the heart of the park that brings the magic of the surrounding mountains to the urban core.

The Community Amphitheater. The park has also been shaped to host to an array of cultural events with live performances, film nights, and festivals taking place on an outcrop stage. The stage is framed by a palm frond-inspired shade canopy and has a dramatic backdrop of the Palm Springs Art Museum and the San Jacinto Mountains.

Desert Photography

Millicent Harvey

Appreciating Desert Phenomena Requires Patience

Smoke Tree Project. Discovering the magic of the Desert through a personal project on the iconic desert Smoke Tree (Psorothamnus spinosus). Eight years of photographing this seemingly invisible subject, deepened an appreciation for the stark qualities and ephemeral beauty of the desert.

- Araby Wash – advantages of staying close to home, a learning ground, patience and perseverance
- Inspiration – Desert light and other phenomena reveal the beauty of the Smoke Tree.
- Honing a photographer's craft - paying attention to the subtle, muted and tonal dimensions of the desert.
- How the Smoke Tree project informs my client work.

Millicent's Observations Photographing Desert Designs

Photographing Desert Gardens. Photographs for landscape architects and publications of residential projects in Palm Springs. Discussion will be focused on photographic considerations that showcase the experience of place.

- Residence landscape by Surface Design Inc.
- Residential landscape Steve Martino Landscape Architect
- Residential landscape at Mojave Rock Ranch

Hidden Gems. Inspiring residents have created their own backyard oases inspired by stories of growing up and their love of the desert.

- Residential landscape concept to recapture childhood memories of Tahquitz Canyon
- Residential landscape of founding member of the Desert Horticultural Society creates a wild west garden in the desert

Providers of Beauty from Nature to Nurseries

Unusual Nurseries. Inspiring stories from the growers who care, cultivate and provide beauty for homeowners, gardeners and landscape architects.

Cacti. Synonymous with the desert - inspire all with their beauty, function, architecture and simplicity. A visit to Moorten's Botanical Garden home to the thousands of specimens.

Desert Weather Phenomena. The allure of the mountains, superblooms, and droughts.

Desert Land Art

Phillip K. Smith, III

ASLA 2021 Conference on Landscape Architecture

Land Art Traditions

The desert as pure creative space. "The desert, by virtue of disassociating us from a familiar environment, allows us the cognitive room to fantasize more freely." - William Fox, author of *Playa Works: The Myth of the Empty*.

Early precedents. From the late 1950's to the 1970's, the desert of the West was viewed by many artists as a pure frontier in which grand artistic visions could be implemented. The desert offered a clean break from the social scene of the New York art world which artists like Judd and others had grown suspect of. It was a time when an artist like Michael Heizer could dig a trench across a canyon (*Double Negative*) with a bulldozer and no one questioned him. Dry lake beds became stages for cutting edge performances like Jean Tinguely's Study for the End of the World 2. Institutions like the Dia Art Foundation began to work with artists like Walter de Maria to implement and maintain large projects like *The Lightning Field*.

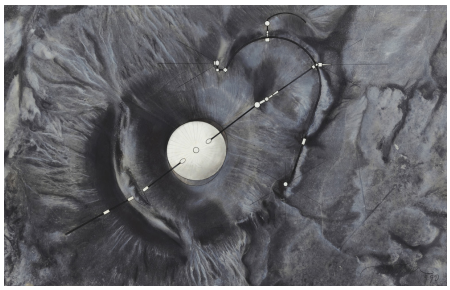
Scale. To this day, several artists continue their pursuits, first visualized in the 60's and 70's, but at a scale and financial reality so large, they've necessitated 50+ years of development, funding, and phased implementation. James Turrell first purchased the land for his *Roden Crater* project in 1977 and it has been under construction ever since. Only in the last couple years have visitors been allowed in. It is Turrell's magnum opus. It is built for centuries to come, functioning not only as a naked eye observatory, but as a transformative sensory experience. Similar in scale and focused vision, Michael Heizer's *City,* begun in 1972 and still under construction, is said to be the largest sculpture ever created once it is complete.

PKS3 Case Studies

Light + change. Lightworks series - Every day in the desert, there are incredible natural light phenomena. All that is required to experience them is to stop and look. As simple as that task is, it has become increasingly difficult to carve out dedicated space for calm, quiet, and meditative viewing (what Turrell speaks of as "the wordless thought that comes from looking into fire."). As the perfect gradient of the sky presents itself daily and the fiery hues of a sunset are part of my daily experience living and working in the desert, it was inevitable that the qualities of those moments would find their way into my work.

Collaboration with site and architecture. Lucid Stead - The scale of the desert is immense. The infinite horizon, the stark ground surface, and the solitude combined with a sense of danger and survival, create the open space for simple, big questions: Who am I? Why am I here on Earth? What is important to me? This human core litmus test is part of the desert experience and it has inspired generations to head out into the desert to carve out land and to build structures on their chunk of this clean slate environment from which to shack that used the beauty of the desert as material through reflection and shifting colored light as methodology for creating a beacon on the desert plain.

Universal beauty. Line of Land and Sky - Through the distillation of the desert environment to land and sky, the simple presentation and manipulation of these elements can allow them to be, perhaps, truly seen for the first time. In my work, I seek beauty. It is said that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. But I would argue that there is a universal beauty that bonds all of us together as humans. Usually, nature and light are at the core of this beauty - the perfect sunset, the shifting clouds, the light passing across the face of a mountain. These are elements that we as human beings desire to experience and share with one another.



Notes

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