Desert Deconstruction

Orderly to the extreme, perhaps spare to a fault? Whatever these landscapes are, they're far from natural.

Los Angeles Times, Mar 27, 2008
by Ann Japenga

TO THE NORTH AND SOUTH OF MY PLEBEIAN RANCH-STYLE home here, my neighbors are transforming their pads into midcentury modern showplaces. At one time all you needed to accomplish this was some orange paint and concrete blocks; nowadays the makeover involves a lot of chopping.

One neighbor ripped out the fig and lemon trees planted there 40 years before by the original owner. To the north, modernistas tore out a jungle of honeysuckle vines and asparagus ferns weaving in and out of an old fence.

All around my neighborhood, new owners are hacking off the blond skirts of the Washingtonia filifera palms and amputating tendrils of black dates. In the latest development, they are even shaving the rough bark of the palms, leaving a shiny blood-like surface.

The skinned palm look is very sleek, very atomic — it goes back to the early days of modernism in the '40s. But it leaves nowhere for a collared lizard, roadrunner, orange oriole or barn owl to hide. It's not even good for the tree.

As I walk around the neighborhood, it's beginning to look like some modernists are intent on annihilating habitat and banishing nature. More yards — some had resembled gardens in Pasadena with a loose, shady ambience and alcoves of privacy — sport a minimalist look, with soldierly rows of tufted grasses, or lone agave spikes in seas of gravel or lawn.

But it wasn't supposed to be this way. The giants of modernism wanted their open floor plans and walls of glass to bring the outdoors in. One of the pioneering modernist landscape architects, John Ormsbee Simonds, aimed to work with the "want to be" of the land, just as Alexander Pope — an 18th century English poet who protested an earlier wave of sterile landscaping — urged consultation with "the genius of the place."

A man who understood the genius of the desert was Albert Frey, one of this region's most famous of modernist architects. When I moved here — before the rediscovery of modernism — he was a somewhat obscure eccentric who lived in a house on the hill with a boulder in his bedroom. He stood on his head daily, and studied the position of the sun for a year before deciding where to put his house.

When asked his guiding design principle, Frey once answered: "The respect for nature."

But now new midcentury moderns are extending the spare aesthetic of their interiors into the garden, rather then letting nature work its way in. Vickki Schlappi's yard has a lawn and two geometric rows of desert plants, topped off with a single skinny shaved palm. "I like clean, straight lines and I just wanted everything to pop," says Schlappi, a real estate agent. "I feel like I'm trying to set an example on the street."

She was inspired by a home, designed by Dan Palmer and William Krisel, in the Las Palmas neighborhood. Krisel, a landscape architect as well as an architect, designed yards with colorful gravel-filled geometric circles and squares. Because Krisel designed 2,500 modernist tract homes and condos in the Valley (he was associated with the Alexander Construction company) his board-game look has influenced the current hyper- orderly trend.

Krisel homes proliferated on the flats where the yards were often a blank slate. The architect calls his landscaping "appropriate and regional" rather than minimalist. "It's minimalist because it's the desert. You're supposed to be minimalist," Krisel says. "I consider the landscaping like a painting and since I'm a modernist I believe in abstract patterns and geometries that are sympathetic to the design of the building and the surroundings."

In defense of the new minimalists, you could say that, like Krisel, they are just doing the green thing by planting sparsely and ripping out lush old growth. (Disclosure: My water bill reflects the original moisture-sucking landscape that came with my 1963 home.)

But water conservation is not the only force behind the new look. The austerity vogue is not always driven by a liking for native plants. The look is catching on — as trends do — without much reasoning. Several homeowners say they saw yards with shaved trees and grid-like plantings and, thinking it looked cutting-edge, simply

copied the design. As father of the graphic gardens, Krisel is not always happy with the result. “Sometimes a good thing can be ruined by people doing it badly,” he says.

I wish I could discuss my concerns with nature boy Albert Frey himself, but he died in 1998. Instead I went for a drive with Les Starks, a local environmental activist who was buddies with Frey. We drove past yards that seemed comically denuded, with only a sprig of vegetation here and there.

“This trend toward funky grasses and castrated landscaping is a ‘Let’s try to be even more modern!’ thing,” Starks concludes. You can have a tangled, wildlife-hospitable yard and still be responsible with water, he says, because plenty of shade-and-cover-producing plants, including eucalyptus and the native Washingtonia palms, will grow in the desert with little water.

Despite his dismay at the sterile yards, Starks is a fan of modernism, and he showed me why. We drove up the hill to the Little Tuscany neighborhood and idled in front of the Edris House, a mid-’50s creation of architect E. Stewart Williams. It is snugged into the landscape and seems to grow right out of the boulders and creosote. No banishment of nature here.

Current owners J.R. Roberts and John Boccardo consulted with Williams and left the landscaping just as he planned it. When the site was originally prepared, Williams, who died in 2005, told the grader operators to move as few boulders as possible.

“Stew’s idea was: Every time you touch the earth, you’re hurting it,” Roberts says. “He believed in nature as landscaper.” Looking around at this year’s bumper crop of Crayola-yellow encelia surrounding the house, he adds: “This landscaping was handled by a higher power.”

Next we parked along Tahquitz Canyon Way and craned our necks to look up at Frey’s little cliff dwelling on the hill above the Palm Springs Art Museum. Starks says whenever he visited the architect the routine was the same: Frey would take chunks of fruit from his refrigerator and go outside to feed a pair of chuckwalla lizards that lived in the rocks.

Starks pointed out Frey’s lone palm tree. Looking closer, we realized someone had shaved the trunk for that space-age look. “Albert told me about everything that lived in that tree,” Starks says morosely. “He never would have wanted it stripped.”

Some have suggested the atomic garden craze stems from nature deficit. “I don’t see this as a problem just limited to midcentury modern. I see it creeping in elsewhere and I associate it with people who have too little connection to nature,” says Fran Adams, a Palo Alto landscape designer who specializes in midcentury modern Eichler homes.

If Adams is right, a little exposure to nature might be the cure. For instance, Richard Neutra’s Kaufmann house here is considered one of the world’s best examples of modernist cool. Yet when the original owner, Pittsburgh businessman Edgar J. Kaufmann Sr., met a local botanist, Chester “Cactus Slim” Moorten, he fell in love with the desert and supplemented the minimalist landscape with a more unfettered cactus garden. Like Kaufmann before him, my tree-stripping neighbor, Dan Bunker, has his main residence in the city — San Francisco — and was not aware of all the things that live in and around the palm trees.

“Being in real estate, I see a lot of newly landscaped yards . . . so I just went with what I saw as being fashionable,” he said in an e-mail. “That said . . . I wouldn’t have shaved the palm trees if I’d known they were bird habitats.”

This gives me hope. Maybe we don’t have to wait generations for another shift from minimalism to something more hospitable. Maybe one day soon I’ll look over the fence and see orange orioles again weaving nests in the unruly, unshaven, palm trees.