

Reimagining an Original

The beauty and magic of a decades-old landscape design inspires a restoration

Secluded behind a privacy hedge, a new courtyard garden includes a fountain flanked by jaunty birds of paradise and weeping jade. The door echoes the original front door to John and Audrey Custer's home, designed by architect Louis Gill in the 1920s.

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Above: Planter beds contrast tall slipper plants (*Petalanthus bracteatus*) and low-growing aeoniums and silver-dollar plants with dramatic rosettes of red-flushed *Aloe cameronii* and 'Boutin Blue' and 'Kara's Stripes' agaves.

Below: A plaque tells the storied history of the Bankers Hill property, known as *La Barranca Encantada* or the Enchanted Canyon. The home had been in Audrey's family for decades before the couple purchased it in 2002.

Facing page: A gate at the edge of a patio outside the kitchen announces the entry to the expansive canyon garden below.



The Enchanted Canyon (*La Barranca Encantada*) lived up to its name when young Audrey Custer romped there during summer visits with her grandparents. “It was like exploring a jungle,” she says of her expeditions across wildlife trails and blackberry thickets. “Amazing to think you could almost walk to the airport from here.”

Perched at the edge of the deep canyon, her grandparents’ home dated back to the 1920s when this “country” corner of Bankers Hill caught the eye of two early developers who envisioned a bucolic community there. They commissioned architects Irving and Louis Gill to design six homes and famed local horticulturalist Kate Sessions to connect them with paths, walled terraces and lush garden rooms. Over the decades, the Enchanted Canyon drew a who’s who of San Diego, including a former mayor who hosted topical debates in the sylvan setting.

The historic tri-level home stayed in Audrey’s family as she and her husband John traveled the world during his rise in the U. S. Army to the rank of Major General with service in Korea, Iraq and Afghanistan. In 2002, with retirement looming, the couple bought the home from Audrey’s parents, knowing it needed renovation, indoors and out. “We started collecting research and ideas, stored in two binders,” John recalls. When home and garden updates began in earnest eight years ago, he says, “Our goal was to integrate what we liked—and honor what we had.”



Today, the home's spare street-level façade remains unchanged. Inside a warren of rooms was gutted to the studs to create a spacious new kitchen and open dining and living rooms that showcase family antiques and collectibles, including a framed set of Louis Gill's blueprints. A new elevator eases access to lower-level bedrooms, including the master suite with a canyon-view balcony.

Though begun at the same time, exterior updates took years longer. Time, floods and sprawling plants had eroded terraces, hidden walls and crumbled stairs leaving a steep slope dangerous to traverse. "It was like an architectural dig when we started," John says. "Safety and stabilization were top priorities."

To help, the couple turned to landscape designer and contractor Randy Laurie of Laurie's Landscaping after admiring his restoration of another Enchanted Canyon garden.

"He knew the history and the canyon," says Audrey, who envisioned updated garden rooms ideal for entertaining her large family and for savoring quiet moments outdoors. "He brought our ideas together."

Working from floor to rim over six years, Randy tamed the canyon, creating a nearly vertical terraced garden that embraces the home and nature. Deft elements echo and contrast the Gills' linear architecture and Sessions' organic landscape in a mix that is timely and timeless. "We wanted to breathe new life into it as we brought it back to its original glory," Randy explains.

Today sturdy *Baja Red* cobble walls rappel down slope, often following Sessions' original plans, to shape terraces, built-in benches and planting beds open to the sky. Handrail-lined stairs descend from an intimate nook outside the kitchen to three curved patios below designed for alfresco gatherings in the glow of fire features, including a majestic stone fireplace with a "La Barranca Encantada" emblazoned in its surround.

Three stone-clad pillars that define the outdoor kitchen and living room are cleverly disguised flying buttresses that secure the home to the canyon wall. Each is crowned with an identical flowering succulent container garden. Below them are similar plant-

Above: A balcony view down canyon captures the "garden for all" originally envisioned by Kate Sessions, and now shared by the Custers and their neighbors. The tipu tree (left), a favorite of Sessions, is one of two planted by Audrey and John in her honor.

Facing page, clockwise from top: A stone circular sculpture is surrounded by greenery including a back row of variegated ginger growing in the canyon when the garden makeover began. The plants were moved to pots and then replanted after the striking artwork was assembled and placed. A small patio nearby is a "little hideaway we use for reading," John says. • Stairs and walls were rebuilt in the same place as original hardscape designed by Kate Sessions. A long-limbed *Aloe cameronii* reaches around a ruffled 'Mauna Loa' echeveria to lounge across a stone wall. • A circular black-stone sculpture frames John in the couple's canyon-side living room. Centered in the surround of the towering fireplace is a tile with the property's name, *La Barranca Encantada*.



“Container Recipes”

Sophisticated container designs, like those created by landscape designer Randy Laurie for John and Audrey’s canyon garden, accent hardscape with limited planting options.

All are Randy’s artful blends of “thrillers” or centerpiece plants, “fillers” clustered around them, and “spillers” that tumble over container edges. His plant picks also add seasonal color and flowers.

“Something is always catching my eye,” Audrey says.

BLUE POTS (12 in. wide, 24 in tall)

Here are “recipes” similar to those for the tall blue pots that edge the patio.

CENTERPIECE is easy-to-grow medicinal aloe (*Aloe vera*) with narrow upright blades and yellow flowers in late spring, early summer.

CIRCLE THE ALOE with striking chartreuse ‘Angelina’ sedum (*Sedum rupestre*). Enjoy added color in winter when tips of its needle-like leaves glow orange.

FINISH THIS CONTAINER with this “spillers” combo:

COPPERTONE STONECROP (*Sedum nussbaumerianum*) yellow-green rosettes edged with dusty orange and fragrant blooms in winter

OPAL GREY (*Graptopetalum paraguayense*) rosettes in shimmering shades of pink, gray and lavender

SMALL RED CARPET STONECROP (*Crassula radicans*), named for ruby flush on thumb-size green leaves in winter

SILVERLY GREEN donkey tail (*Sedum morganianum*)

THICK-LEAVED TRAILING JADE (*Senecio jacobsonii*)



Above: A curved retaining wall backs built-in seating with a fire pit and “ice pit” used to chill drinks. Daylilies, ‘Meyers’ foxtail fern, ‘Ray of Light’ agaves and dyomdia soften the stone. Top: Outdoor rooms and comfy seating offer places to relax and enjoy the verdant view. Facing page, clockwise from top: John (left) and Audrey sit with landscape designer Randy. • Randy’s container “recipe” surrounds an Aloe vera with cascading pink-flowered weeping jade and silvery graptopetalums. • Blue—Audrey’s favorite color—is repeated throughout.



Randy expertly blends color and texture in these tiered beds filled with 'Boutin Blue' agave, 'Scarlet Ribbon' pincushion, 'Winter Red' conebush, Cartwheels' aeonium and yellow-flowered iceplant.

Facing page: Bronze containers have similar but not identical easy-care, colorful plant combos, including tall-stemmed slipper plant, string of buttons, coppertone stonecrop and golden-flowered spreading stonecrop. "Mixing it up a bit makes them more interesting," Randy says.



BRONZE POTS (20 in. tall, 30 in. wide) Here are "recipes" similar to those for the bronze pots above and to the right.

IN THE CENTER, place a desert pencil bush (*Pedilanthus macrocarpus*) with 3-foot tall lime-green stems tipped with orange slipper flowers.

RING THE CENTERPIECE with this mix of succulent rosettes that bloom winter into spring:

BLUE-GRAY GLAUCA hen and chicks (*Echeveria secunda*) blushes lavender-pink in winter

RED-EDGED 'LIPSTICK' echeveria (*Echeveria agavoides*)

DUSKY 'BLACK PRINCE' hen and chicks (*Echeveria*)

LITTLE JEWEL (*Pachyveria 'Glaucal'*) in powder blue with hints of lavender and mint green

THEN TUCK IN these "spillers" at the pot's edge:

STACKED STRING OF BUTTONS (*Crassula perforata*) and lanky string of pearls (*Senecio rowleyanus*)

TRAILING JADE (*Senecio jacobsenii*) tinged deep purple in winter

COPPERTONE STONECROP (*Sedum nussbaumerianum*) with orange-edged yellow-green rosettes and fragrant white flowers in winter



ings in sapphire blue pots—Audrey's favorite color repeated on umbrellas, cushions and other accents around the garden.

More easy-care greenery overflows wedge-shaped beds along the north property line punctuated by towering cypress. Exotic protea, frothy purple statice, mirror plants and other Mediterranean favorites mix with succulents Audrey and John grew to love when stationed in Tucson. Favorites like cheery aeoniums, *Aloe vanbalenii*, and yellow-flowered Rocky Point ice plant spill nonchalantly over stone walls as if planted decades ago.

Stopping traffic at the base of the stairs is a circular sculpture of smooth black stones that hangs in the air, seeming to defy gravity. "We saw one like it pictured in the garden of Pippa Middleton [sister of Prince William's wife Kate]," says John. "I asked Randy, 'Can you make this?'"

"I said 'sure ... but it won't be easy,'" Randy says, laughing as he recalled the strug-

gles of five guys needed to thread and hoist the heavy rocks.

Nearby is a sand and rust-hued fountain that adds its music to the chorus of canyon birds drawn to two new tipu trees, favorites of Sessions planted in her honor. A second fountain, flanked by Audrey's much-loved birds of paradise, stands in a new streetside entry garden secluded behind an Indian laurel fig (*Ficus nitida*) privacy hedge and perfumed by stately michelia trees.

Thanks to new landscape lights, for the first time in almost a hundred years the Enchanted Canyon comes to life after sundown. As he tested the lighting system one moonlit night, Randy marveled at beauty heretofore unobserved there. Now Audrey and John echo his appreciation, especially on evenings when families of skunks or foxes slip from the shadows into view.

"Sometimes," John says, "it's almost prettier here at night." ❖