

An Historic Garden Unearthed

A Bankers' Hill canyon is home to a newly discovered and restored Kate Sessions' design

By Ann Jarmusch

Allergies and tangled vines kept Sandra B. Phelps out of her steep, shady canyon garden for 20 some years, even though she'd always felt drawn to it. "The canyon was mysterious and overgrown," Phelps recalled. "I knew when I bought my home that the canyon was shared by the handful of homes surrounding it. I lived in the house and the canyon lived separately."

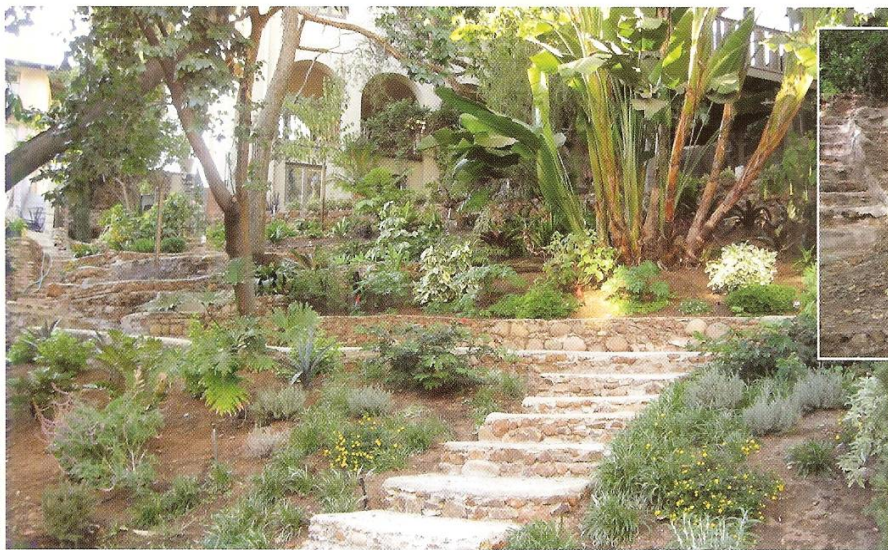
The 1912 house, which soars above the quiet canyon in San Diego's Bankers' Hill neighborhood, is a historic landmark designed by architect Irving J. Gill. It's one of a small group of houses commissioned by Katherine Teats, one of Gill's forward-thinking female patrons. A photo of the house shot around 1933 from the lower canyon recently sparked Phelps's curiosity. It shows a very different canyon; sun-drenched and barren except for pathways, terraces, stone walls, and a small bench.

Envisioning "a minor landscaping task," Phelps asked Randy Laurie of Laurie's Landscaping to investigate.



Kate Sessions was an originator of canyon landscaping in San Diego.

Useable space outside the home is extended with canyon landscaping, a bench and pathways.



Photos: Ann Jarmusch



Curvilinear paths and steps of local stone flow comfortably down into the canyon.

Garden Sleuth and Archeologist

Laurie, who grew up on an historic property in Ohio, went to the San Diego History Center archives and was instantly hooked. He found photographs, files, and books on Teats and her partner, developer Alice Lee, and on Gill and Kate O. Sessions, the leading nursery woman and landscaper who worked with Gill on many of his projects.

Laurie also found a plot plan prepared by Gill's office for eight houses to line both sides of Phelps's canyon. The drawing shows a network of landscaped, descending paths--some curved, some straight--between the houses and separated at the canyon floor by a wide "boulevard." Several experts, including architectural historian Esther McCoy, attribute this drawing to a young draftsman who worked for Gill at the time, Frank Lloyd Wright's son John Lloyd Wright.

The notion of sharing the canyon comes out of the then-popular Arts and Crafts movement and the Progressive Era's social reforms favored by San Diego's civic leaders at the time. Teats and Lee themselves lived in a big house (designed by Hebbard & Gill) on Seventh Avenue. The home was connected to their two rental cottages by a large yard and a U-shaped pergola.

Laurie was so excited by his findings that he called Phelps often with updates. When he plunged into the overgrown canyon, he found stone walls where he expected them to be, based on the historic photo. He promptly got Phelps's permission to clear away the thick nasturtium vines and other invasive plants. Most of the nearly 100-year-old terraces, retaining walls, and stairs had disappeared under decades of dead leaves and debris.

"He suddenly changed from a landscaper into an archeologist," Phelps said with pleasure. "He'd find a little evidence, then extrapolate and find more parts."

Layered Legacy

Phelps conferred with Nancy Carol Carter, an expert on Sessions and past president of the San Diego Floral Association, and learned that Sessions was known for using stone retaining walls and stone-lined, earthen, garden paths in the Arts & Crafts tradition.

It seems Gill, or perhaps Teats, hired Sessions to refine the plot plan and select plants for gardens at Phelps's end of the canyon. Sessions probably oversaw the construction of a large bench that was recently discovered on Phelps property when a wasp nest was removed. The distinctive bench has a stone slab for the seat, a river rock back, and molded concrete arms.

Some of the plants Sessions selected still grow here including eucalyptus, Italian cypress, bougainvillea, and banana. The stately Chinese elm, another Sessions favorite, adds to the thick canopy, while cape honeysuckle perfumes the air. As these choices show, Sessions was an early and persistent advocate of drought-tolerant plantings for San Diego's coastal desert environment.

Laurie repaired parts of the walls and rebuilt a small section. At the base of the canyon, he built new steps on top of the old ones. They fan out "like a flowing gown," Phelps said, "opening up to the rest of the canyon."

Standing on one of the restored paths, Phelps looked up at her house, with its Romeo and Juliet balcony bedecked with wisteria. "This is the vision Irving Gill had of this land and this house when he married the two," she said. "They're meant to be integral parts of each other.... I am passionate about the legacy left by both Gill and Sessions."

Having completed Phelps's canyon garden restoration, Laurie is now rehabilitating the newly exposed stone retaining walls for a house across the canyon. He said two other neighbors recently cleared their canyon sections of "truckloads of nasturtium and other vines." The walls they uncovered are in various states of repair and Laurie is not sure they'll undertake faithful restorations. Laurie said of Phelps's garden, "This was like finding old buried treasure and dusting it off. It has been an adventure and an honor."

— Ann Jarmusch is a San Diego-based writer on architecture, design and historic preservation.

Canyon views offer a new perspective on architectural features of the home.



Photo: Ann Jarmusch