Cool Style in the Desert

AWESOME 200,000-GALLON POOL
Modern MiX
Symmetrical Plants, Linear Raised Beds and a Striking Pool House Capture the Essence of Cool Contemporary

BY CATHY CROMELL | PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID B. MOORE

The remodel of this home evokes Mexican architect Luis Barragán’s minimalist style and enthusiasm for color-saturated walls. “This vivid mustard shade works perfectly to set off the blue-green coloration of desert plants,” says landscape architect Russell Greer.
WHEN MARGO AND FRANK WALTER purchased their 1990s Spanish ranch residence in Paradise Valley, Ariz., they chose to redo the home in the Modernist style made famous by Mexican architect Luis Barragán, whose aesthetic featured simple geometric planes accented by bold, regionally appropriate colors.

"In New Jersey, we live in a traditional brick Federal-style home filled with family antiques. Our days are hectic, so it was exciting to create a different type of living space, where we could get away and chill out in a relaxed outdoor environment," says Margo. To create the family-friendly, low-maintenance setting that the homeowners envisioned, Margo credits landscape architect Russell Greer for his ability to transform problems into positive features.

"While staying with friends in the area, I had loved their front enclosed patio and wanted something similar, but our zoning ordinances restricted the height of hardscape privacy walls," he says. In lieu of a wall, Greer planted a dense hedge of sour orange trees that snuggly encloses the courtyard in a comforting green cocoon. In addition to screening traffic, the living wall’s lush foliage maintains cooler temperatures than would be possible with heat radiating from hardscape. "This secret garden is my favorite place," Margo says.

Greer also tackled significant drainage problems. "The Walter’s lot is the lowest point in the subdivision, so all water from the street pooled here, making it difficult to access the house when it rained," he explains. His solution was to grade the landscape and dig retention basins to channel rainwater, allowing it to soak into the ground and deep-water trees along the perimeter. "We also repurposed the soil that was dug out, building up the patio platform in the back and creating undulation around the yard for varied planting areas," he explains.

To complement the home’s architecture, Greer designed linear planting beds. Along the entry...
The pool offers incredible reflections, and refreshing breezes blow across the water into the seating area, remarks Greer. "Margo requested a square pool, which we anchored to the flat gantry-style cabana that is sunk below the zero-edge pool," he notes. Barragán's signature style of punched-out wall openings play with light and shadow while blurring the line between indoor and outdoor environments. The turf and metal panel protecting the TV employs a similar grid-like motif of punched openings. Ground concrete pavers laid in a rowlock pattern enhance the contemporary theme.

The landscape architect borrowed cues from the home's minimalist style in designing the pool house.
walk, rows of gopher plants, King Ferdinand agaves, shrub in agaves and ocotillos provide arresting mass and symmetry. His goal was to highlight the simplicity of plant forms, in keeping with Bartag’s less-is-more style.

The landscape architect also borrowed cues from the home’s minimalist style in designing the pool house. Bartag used slots and punched openings in walls to play with light and shadow. Greely incorporated a similar motif, using a grid pattern of unobtrusive square openings in the pool house walls. Water from the zero-edge pool drops into the sunken pool house, filling a narrow trough. “It can be heated separately to sit and soak in the shade, like a spa,” he remarks.

With their home and landscape remodel complete, the Walters have numerous opportunities to chill out, especially around the pool. Its unusual square design, measuring 25 feet by 25 feet, features an extended shallow wading area for water aerobics, pool basketball and teaching little flippers to swim. Its opposite end is 12 feet deep, which helps maintain cool water in the midst of summer. The depth also provides for a daring activity—climbing up on the pool house roof to take a refreshing plunge into the water below.

Although unintended for this purpose, Margo discovered that the square openings in the walls serve as handholds to scramble up to the roof. “It’s fun to jump off things,” she enthuses, “My kids are adults, but they love it madly.”

The homeowners collect the work of East Coast artist Terri Nussbaum, who created this metal wall mural titled “All is Connected” for their Arizona home. “We love how this piece evokes a marriage between the desert’s starry sky and beautiful cactus blossoms,” says Margo Walter.
RIGHT: Water spills over the zero-edge pool into a narrow soaking trough inside the pool house. Embedded pebbles lend a natural appearance to the gentle waterfall.

BELOW: The sunken pool house offers a stylish, spa-like entertainment space. "We played off the hues of the water feature and pool by adding a splash of color with the hearth seating and accent pillows," remarks interior designer Claire Rollnick, who helped the homeowners select outdoor furnishings.

This colorful plant composition features a multi-armed senita cactus. "I garden in New Jersey, and I quickly realized the variety of plants that thrive in the desert," says Marga. "We gave Russ a "yes" policy to bring in lots of different and interesting plants."

Since the initial installation, she has added other cacti and succulents that catch her eye.

See Sources.

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