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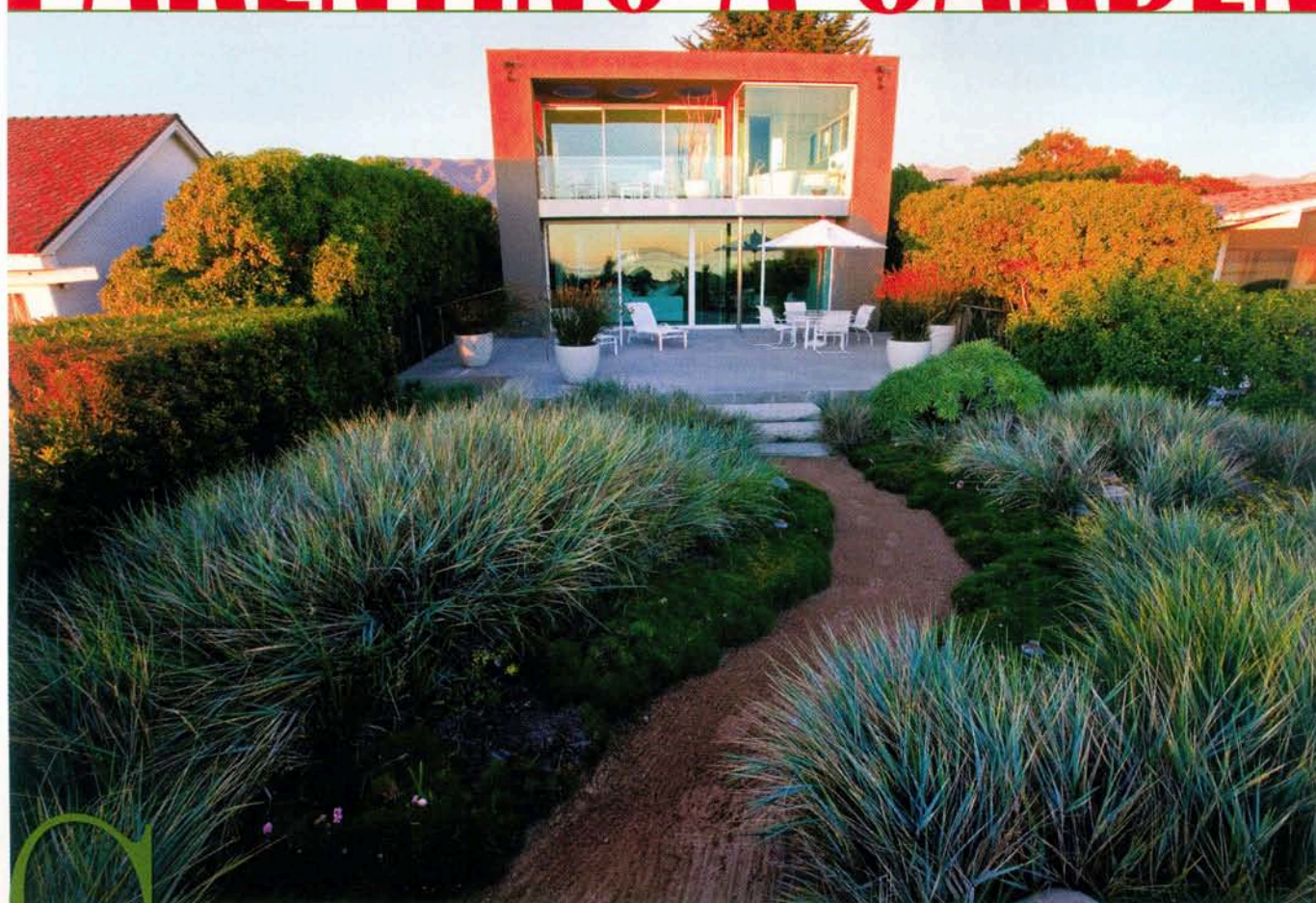
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PARENTING A GARDEN



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USAN SULLIVAN AND CONNELL COWAN have been together for more than 20 years. They never did have any children. Instead, their relationship produced a garden. "For the two of us, this was our offspring," Sullivan says. "[The project] was an interesting adventure into what he wants and what I want. It was a bonding experience that we both enjoyed immensely."

Sullivan is an actress, best known for her roles on *Falcon Crest* and *Dharma & Greg*. Cowan is a psychologist, author, and artist. They live in Los Angeles, but during the 1990s, they purchased a beach house near Santa Barbara, California. The house is located on a private road that is built out with houses on only one side. The front yards of these houses look out on the Carpinteria Salt Marsh Reserve and the mountains in the distance, and their backyards offer spectacular views of the Pacific Ocean and the Channel Islands. The area has long functioned as a weekend retreat with

modest cottages; however, some of these homes have recently been replaced by large mansions.

The couple's house, a modernist design from the 1960s, was originally a mere 900 square feet—a bit too small for them—but rather than knocking it down and starting from scratch, they worked with locally based Neumann Mendro Andrulaitis Architects to remodel and expand it. In 1999, while the house was still under construction, Van Atta Associates, a firm in nearby Santa Barbara, was hired to work on the surrounding landscape—a set of gardens that it calls Two Pacific Rooms.

Van Atta Associates strives to create projects that are both beautiful and sustainable. For many years, the firm has worked on habitat restoration projects throughout the area. It did restoration work at the adjacent Carpinteria Salt Marsh Reserve, and its design for Lagoon Park, another wetland restoration project that integrates social spaces, won an ASLA Honor Award in 2008. Before pursuing a career in landscape architecture, the firm's founder,

Susan Sullivan and Connell Cowan relax in their garden, opposite, which looks out on the Pacific Ocean. The rear garden, above, called Dune Room, uses plants native to California's coastline.

STEVE GUNTHER, THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE

A seaside garden in Southern California has gone through a number of changes as the owners make it their own.

BY DANIEL JOST, ASSOCIATE ASLA

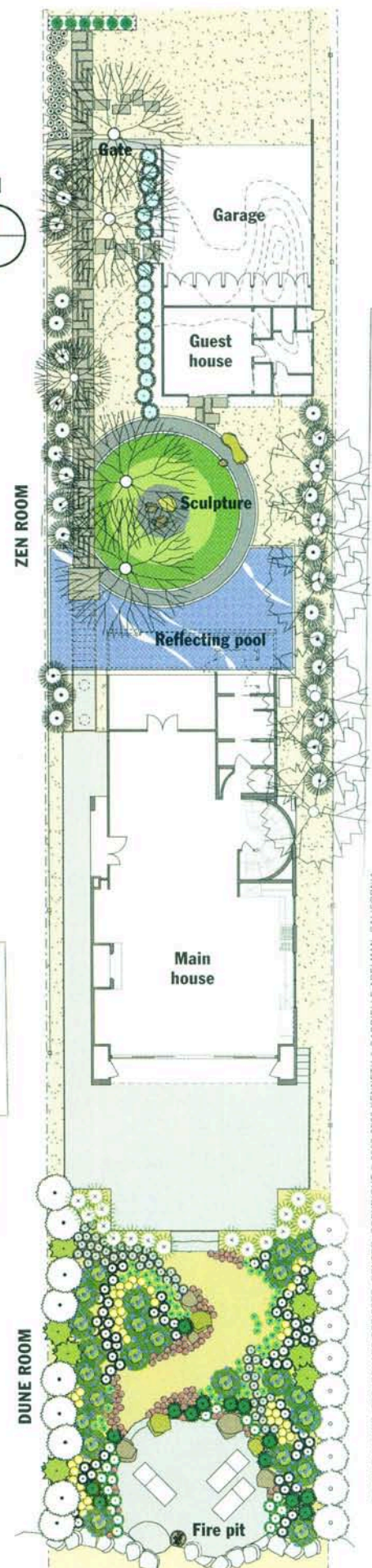


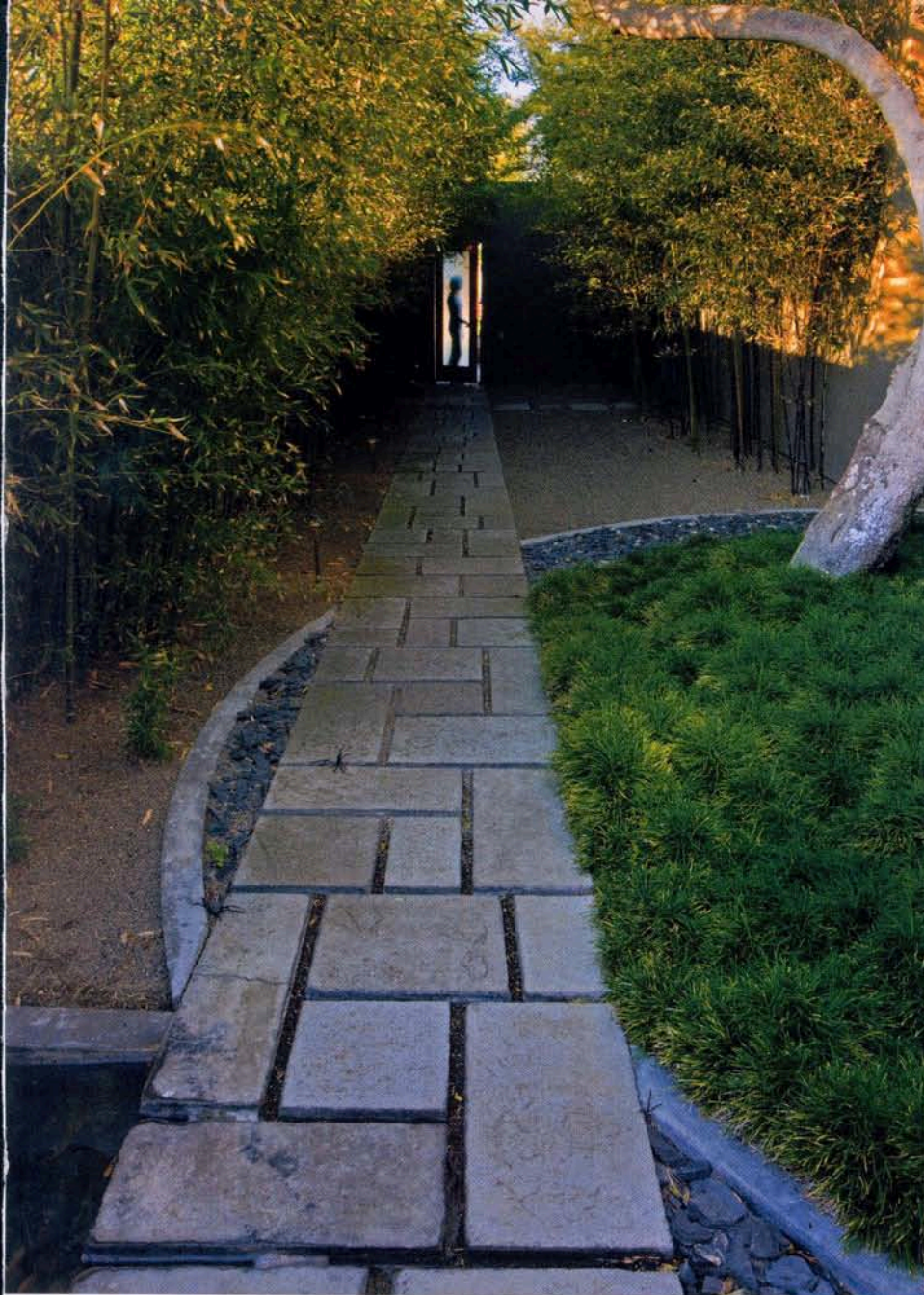


The house, outlined in blue, *below*, sits on a narrow lot between a marsh and the ocean. Unlike the rear garden, Van Atta Associates designed the interior courtyard to have strong geometric forms, *right*. The front entry, *above*, hints at the garden beyond. Parts of the entry were redesigned by Sullivan and Cowan after a multistem tree that was a major part of the Van Atta Associates design for that area, *left*, was lost in a windstorm.

Susan Van Atta, ASLA, earned a degree in environmental studies, and she is currently writing a book about gardening with California natives. But her influences are varied—everything from gardens she visited in Japan to nearby Disneyland.

Residential design makes up a little less than half of the firm's work. While Van Atta's commercial and institutional clients are expressing a greater interest in sustainable design, she says that few of her high-end residential clients are asking for it. Sullivan and Cowan were more interested than most and actually requested some naturalistic native plantings.





These photos show the path through the interior courtyard before any improvements were made, *above*, as it was designed by Van Atta Associates, *below*, and as it is today, *left*. Since the courtyard was constructed, the tree near the door was lost in a windstorm and the owners have replaced the black mondo grass in the outer ring so that the ring is now entirely chipped slate.



to the interior courtyard, is one of the first things you see as you approach the house. In both the front yard and the interior courtyard, it acts as an important accent in the landscape.

But the plantings aren't all naturalistic or native. At Two Pacific Rooms, the garden rooms reference the two shores of the Pacific Ocean. Zen Room, the courtyard between the garage/guest room and the main house, combines strong geometric forms with an Asian flavor. Dune Room, which has views out to the Pacific Ocean, has a more natural look with plants native to California's coastline. These two rooms don't just have different looks to them; they are experienced differently. As the firm wrote in a recent awards submittal, one is a "space to see" and the other is a "space to be."

Zen Room

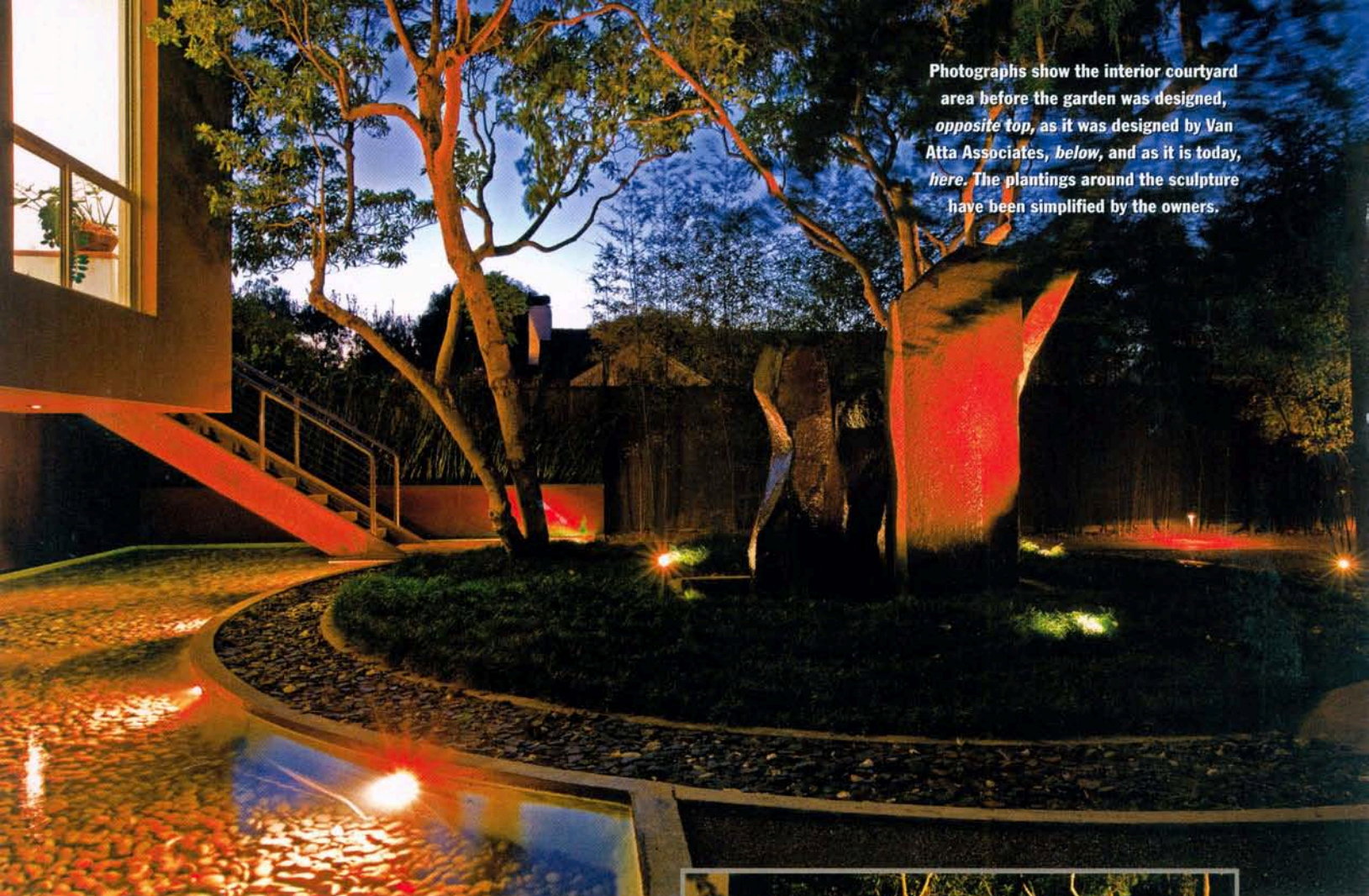
Sullivan and Cowan played a large role in imagining their new landscape, both its major themes and its details. "One of the things I really love about this garden is the red door," says Van Atta. "That was their idea." The red front door, which serves as a gate

The area in front of the house—a field of gravel edged with plantings along the property lines—is beautiful in its simplicity. As you walk over the irregularly placed pavers that lead toward the front door, carefully positioned rocks on either side of the entrance and a clump of bamboo provide hints of the garden beyond.

Moving through the doorway and into the courtyard, you enter through a narrow hall. The path is straight, and the pavers are arranged in a pattern that is more commonly found with flagstone pavers than the concrete pavers used here. Two types of bamboo—one on either side of the path—obscure the wall of the garage/guest room and screen the neighbor's fence.

As the space opens up, a narrow ring of chipped slate edged with concrete curbing intersects the path. A small grouping of rocks interrupts the ring, softening the space's strong geometric character and acting as a counterpoint to a simple rock sculpture at its center.

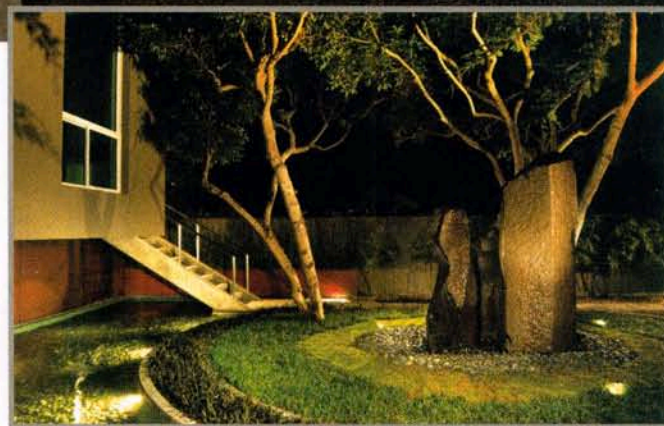
Photographs show the interior courtyard area before the garden was designed, *opposite top*, as it was designed by Van Atta Associates, *below*, and as it is today, *here*. The plantings around the sculpture have been simplified by the owners.



The plans for the sculpture, designed by Cowan, evolved considerably over the course of the project. Cowan originally imagined the sculpture as a group of concrete columns with water flowing over them, but Sullivan convinced him to go in a more natural direction. "I didn't want to undercut Connell's creative vision, but I was worried I was going to walk by it and hate it," she explains. So instead of concrete, Cowan chose three pieces of basalt and arranged them so they have a familial feel. Paul Lindhard, a sculptor familiar with the porous volcanic rock, helped execute the design, setting the stones to Cowan's specifications. Pipes were installed to produce a weeping effect.

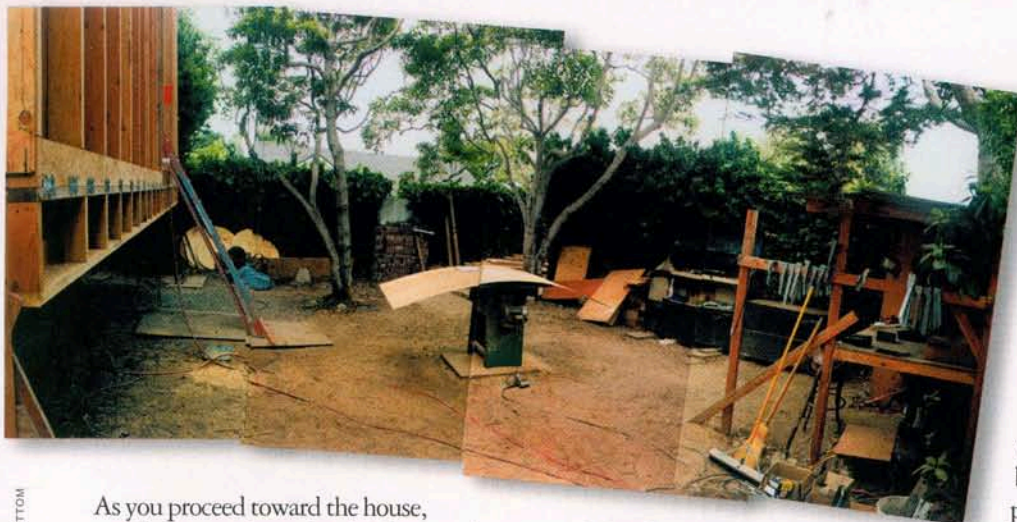
Two myoporum trees that already grew in this area were preserved, and they flank the sculpture on either side. These trees, which have a sculptural character themselves, frame views along the path. Their silvery-white trunks contrast with the dark green and black-stemmed bamboo and the red door. From certain vantage points, it appears as though one of the trees is growing up through Cowan's sculpture; however, the trees actually obscure views of the sculpture as you approach it from the entry.

The California Invasive Plants Council labels myoporum an invasive, but it is not as problematic as many other species given this title. It does not spread much vegetatively or by wind; its primary method of spreading is by birds eating its fruit. Van Atta says that while she never plants the species, she decided to leave it here for a



few reasons: It's very hard to get anything treelike to grow in that environment; the species is planted as a screen on almost every nearby property; her work in the nearby salt marsh involved removing myoporum, but it was not aggressively taking over that environment and most of what was there was obviously planted to screen an adjacent railroad; and the trees were old and didn't flower or fruit much anymore, so they didn't strike her as an ongoing hazard.

An oversized glass door connects the guest bedroom to the garden and turns it into a meditative space, reminiscent of the viewing areas in some traditional Japanese gardens. The bedroom is really the only place to linger within the garden; the garden is mainly experienced as the entry procession into the main house.



GUILLERMO GONZALEZ, TOP; STEVE GUNTHER, BOTTOM

As you proceed toward the house, you walk up a stairway that bridges a reflecting pool lined with smooth pebbles. The front of the main house is cantilevered over the reflecting pool to make the house feel as if it is floating on water, an idea Cowan suggested. The pool helped to solve one of the problems facing the landscape architects—how to disguise the fact that the main house was sticking up in the air. Though the cottage is protected by a breakwater, building codes required that the residence be raised a number of feet above sea level so high waves can crash beneath it. Van Atta Associates also designed Cor-Ten steel panels that will break away under the pressure of a

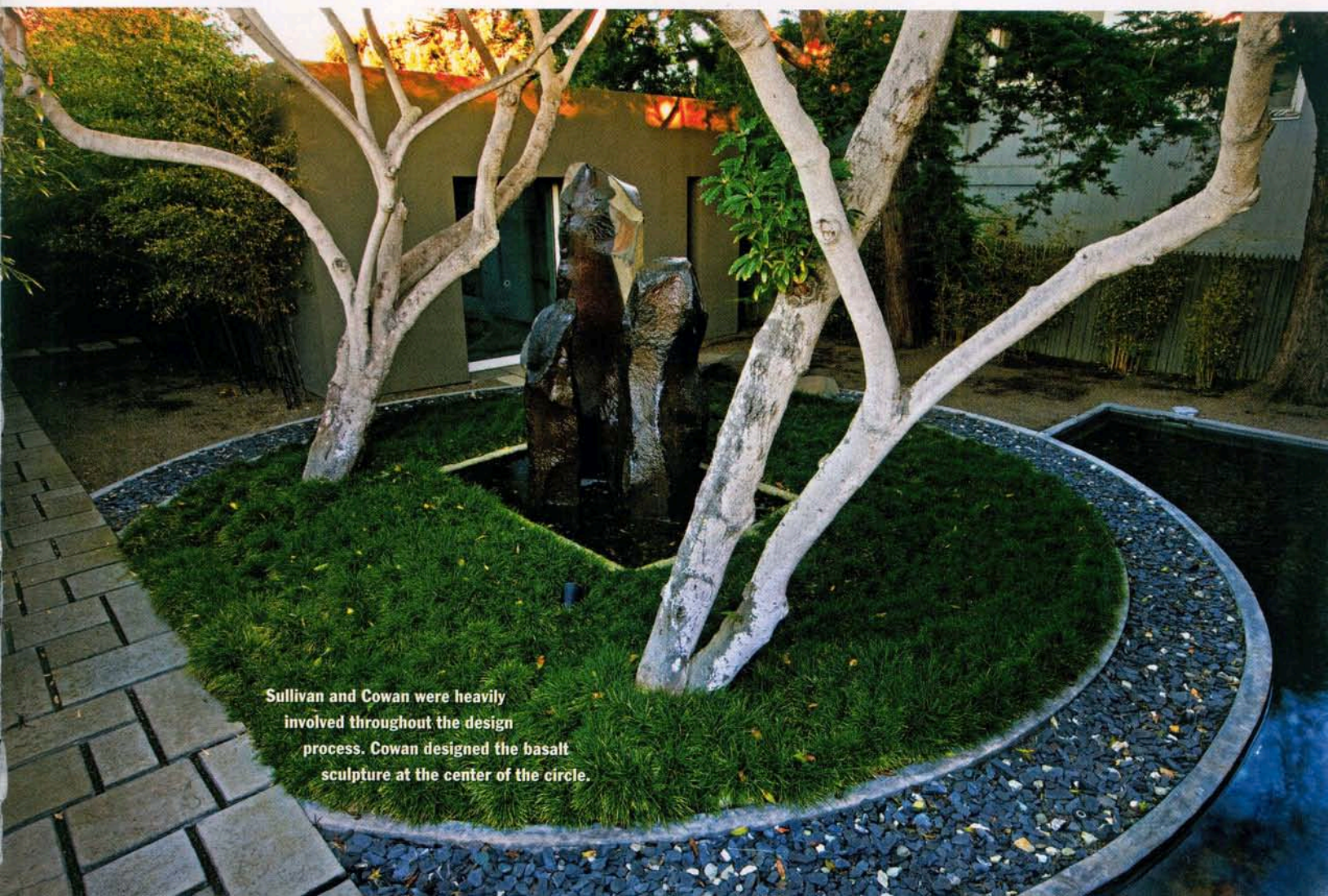
large wave to ground the structure and hide its unattractive concrete supports.

Dune Room

At the top of the stairs, a narrow pathway alongside the house leads to the rear yard. There, the couple requested more naturalistic plantings that reference the adjacent salt marsh and places to sit and look out on the ocean. Two terraces are connected by a simple sand path that winds through a bed of native plantings. Hedges near the property line screen the garden and enclose the space to make it feel like a room.

Many of the neighboring properties have lawns in the backyard, a difficult feat in this soil, which is nearly pure sand. Planting a lawn here requires extensive remediation to the soil and constant irrigation. But instead of changing the soil, Van Atta used native plants that would thrive in the soil that was there and require little additional water.

Sea pink (*Armeria maritima*) highlights the edges of the sand path. Farther from the path, the plantings are dominated by blue wildrye (*Leymus condensatus* 'Canyon Prince'). Van Atta notes that



Sullivan and Cowan were heavily involved throughout the design process. Cowan designed the basalt sculpture at the center of the circle.

this cultivar was actually discovered by the Santa Barbara Botanic Garden on one of the Channel Islands, which are just offshore. Other regionally native plants found within this area include beach morning glory (*Calystegia microstegia*), maritime ceanothus (*Ceanothus maritimus*), beach suncup (*Camissonia cheiranthifolia*), and seaside daisy (*Erigeron glaucus*). These plants stabilize the dune while tolerating the salty winds that blow off the ocean.

While, as Sullivan notes, the garden isn't big enough to meander through, it provides a number of places to sit and enjoy the outdoors. Large floor-to-ceiling glass doors make a rectangular patio, designed by the architects, feel like an extension of the house. The surface of the patio is raised to allow water to flow beneath it. Furnishings include two comfortable loungers and a table for eating outside. The furniture is all white, and it contrasts nicely with the gray color of the house. Four large pots are used as accents. Sullivan and Cowan are currently planting them with a type of restio (a group of grasslike plants native to Africa).

Van Atta Associates designed the more irregularly shaped concrete patio that is tucked into the rocks at the top of the breakwater. Here, you are able to sit and look out over the beach. A small fireplace is protected from the wind, making it a comfortable space to catch the sunset, even as the temperature drops. The surface has a salt finish, which looks more at home in this intimate garden than in the big-box retail outfits throughout the Southwest where it is commonly seen. Concrete steps allow you to descend to the beach for swimming, surfing, or a quiet walk.

Fine-Tuning by Owners

The gardens were designed and completed nearly 10 years ago, but only recently bestowed with an Honor Award by ASLA's Southern California chapter. Over that time there have been some changes—changes to the garden itself and changes to the way that Van Atta Associates approaches sustainable design.

Some of these changes were caused by natural forces beyond anyone's control. Four trees were originally preserved in the design, but recently two of these were lost in a windstorm that took down trees all along the coast. In the front yard, where one of the trees was an important part of the design, it led Sullivan and Cowan to rethink parts of that area. "If you move one thing, you have to move 20 other things to make that all work," says Sullivan. "It was sort of like we lost our design, yet a new design came out of it."

Other things have been changed by Sullivan and Cowan to better suit their tastes. The plantings in the Zen Room were originally much more complex. When Van Atta Associates first designed the area, it specified three rings of plantings surrounding Cowan's sculpture, not just the mondo grass and chipped stone there today. There was originally a ring of scotch moss at the base of the sculpture, a ring of green mondo grass, and, in part of the more defined ring where the chipped slate is today, there was black mondo grass (*Ophiopogon 'Nigrescens'*). After a few years, the owners decided to simplify this on their own. "It was too much in too small of a space," explains Cowan. Also, "I wanted that

outer ring to be all in the same thing. I just thought it would have a cleaner look." As Van Atta remembers it, the failure of the black mondo grass to thrive in that environment may have also played a role in the decision.

The look of the bamboo has also changed over the years. In early photos of the garden, before the bamboo matured, it was very lush; today, the lower stems of the bamboo are exposed. Cowan likes the idea of exposing the stems so that they can be lit at night to cast interesting shadows against the wall. But the change was precipitated by other factors. The space is quite narrow, and when the stand of bamboo fills in with new canes every spring, that cuts out light to the lower branches. Eventually they die back and need to be trimmed off. While the couple hires a gardener to do maintenance on the property once a week—mostly trimming and raking—Cowan takes care of thin-

ning the bamboo himself. "There's something meditative about thinning the bamboo, deciding which canes go and which stay," reflects Cowan. "I could have somebody do it, but I choose to do it myself." He's even had an expert come in to give him a lesson.

Additionally, salt burn has been an issue with the golden bamboo (*Bambusa multiplex* 'Golden Goddess') in the Zen Room. The black bamboo (*Phyllostachys nigra*) seems to be less affected, but it is also better protected from the winds. Van Atta says that bamboo is found on lists for seaside planting, but its success seems to depend on where it is used.

The couple is currently debating whether to remove the remaining myoporum trees. "I fought to keep those trees," explains Sullivan. "I wanted to keep anything that was old." But today she wonders whether it wouldn't be nicer to have open views of the sculpture and the house as you walk down the entry path. It's a tough decision to make, made tougher since they lost the other tree in that area. The trees aren't ideally located, but they add a great deal to the courtyard with their contrasting color and the way they frame the door.

The changes in the rear garden have been more subtle. Some things have grown better than others. According to Sullivan, there was originally more ceanothus on the beach side and it died off, although two patches have held on and managed to grow. Plants have also been added here and there. The agave near the fire pit was originally planted in one of the pots on the patio, but Sullivan and Cowan moved it after the other agaves went to seed. Salts in the air and soil also seem to have affected the Pacific wax

**"THE ONLY SUCCESSFUL
GARDENS ARE GARDENS THAT
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myrtle (*Myrica pacifica*) used for the hedge—something that surprised Van Atta because the species naturally grows along the coast—so they are considering options to replace it. One pleasant surprise has been how the sea pink has grown together, something it is not known for.

When *Landscape Architecture* asked Van Atta how she felt about the ways that the design had changed over the years, she said she was comfortable with it. “The only successful gardens are gardens that belong to the people who live there,” she says. “Over time, they’ve fine-tuned it, which is the way it should be with a garden.”

She even noted a change she would make, were she designing the garden today. “If I had done the project more recently, I might have arranged [the reflecting pool] more like the water feature at

my office.” At her office, a small water feature is fed from the roof. This cuts down on the amount of city water necessary to run the feature and helps to clean the roof water before it is released. “[At Two Pacific Rooms], I don’t even know where the downspouts come down. Now that’s the first thing I ask.”

PROJECT CREDITS **Client:** Susan Sullivan and Connell Cowan. **Landscape architect:** Van Atta Associates Inc., Santa Barbara, California (Susan Van Atta, ASLA, principal; Michael Sanchez, project manager; Guillermo Gonzalez). **Architect:** Neumann Mendro Andrulaitis Architects LLP, Carpinteria, California (Andy Neumann, David Mendro, Bob Pester). **Landscape contractor:** Monteverde Landscape, Santa Ana, California (Sandor Hadosy). **General contractor:**

Chismahoo Construction, Carpinteria, California (Frank Louda). **Sculpture design:** Connell Cowan, Los Angeles. **Execution/installation of sculpture:** Paul Lindhart, Art City Studios, Ventura, California.



Rather than amending the existing sand soil, *above*, to grow lawn, Van Atta chose plants that would thrive in these conditions. The sea pink and blue wildrye seem to be particularly happy, *here*.

