

LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT
JC MILLER
 INTERVIEW

PHOTOGRAPHY J C Miller WORDS Nicole Chacon, Assoc. AIA



Mid-Century Modern in Palm Springs A pool deck drain remade to make storm drainage more visible and interesting

JC Miller, Landscape Architect and author based in Oakland California was co-author of *Modern Public Gardens: Robert Royston and the Suburban Park* and a contributing author for *Shaping the American Landscape: New Profiles from the Pioneers of American Landscape Design* and is a frequent contributor to *CA Modern Magazine*.

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At our April forum, Landscape Architect JC Miller, gave a presentation on *Modern Gardens for a New Century: Rethinking Mid-Century Modernism of the Bay Area through Landscape Design and its Possibilities for Current Environmental and Sustainable Strategies*. Interested in having our guest speaker expand on his ideas from the forum, I asked JC Miller if he would elaborate on landscape architecture and its involvement in the green movement.

NC: What are the current trends that seem to dominate landscape architecture?

JC: Just as green has become a booming trend in many other fields and lifestyles, it has definitely impacted landscape architecture in a big way. My expertise is in renovation and preservation of modern gardens, and there is a strong correlation with the mid-century boom in California, say 50-60 years ago, and the green movement we see happening right before our very eyes today. The principals of a modern garden are similar to our green landscapes of today. The two movements shift thinking towards new approaches. However, by today's standards, original mid-century modern gardens still fall short of sustainability and water efficiency. This has become an exciting time for my career as I am creatively challenged to constantly incorporate Green principals without losing the integrity of historic designs.

NC: How are these trends different from landscape architecture, say 10 years ago?

JC: 10-15 years ago, ideas for efficiency and conservation were considered good practices to use, but were not a driving force. Recently, within the last 5 years, landscape architecture has been more directly shaped by environmental awareness. For example, traditional storm water management took naturally occurring water off the site, and then a separate system would bring it back for irrigation or decorative purposes. We are now looking for ways to keep the natural water onsite and celebrating the preciousness of the resource. There are so many materials to use in a new way, such as permeable concrete. How one makes these materials beautiful and integrated within the design is exciting.

Additionally, it's not just the landscape architects who are studying new materials, irrigation systems and surfaces. Clients today are also educating themselves. A funny thing, the first time I saw permeable concrete, it was used as a driveway to a dumpsite and, at the time, I would have never imagined my clients asking to incorporate it into the landscape architecture.

NC: How do you think green landscape principals can be practiced by common individuals?

JC: The great thing about the movement towards green principals is it is scalable. A person does not need to have a large site to make green possible. For example, a 200-gallon rain barrel is something most anybody can have. For one person, it can be argued that it does not make a difference. However, if everyone did 200 gallons of rainwater water harvesting, the effect would be gigantic! The same can be said about reduction in turf/ lawn. Not only is this water efficient, but it easier to maintain. It is the thought that everyone participating in a small part of Green creates a meaningful sum.

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