

Reclaiming the garden

Uncovering 45-year-old landscape plans, an Eichler couple seeks out their garden's original designer and launches a restoration



Story: Jack Levitan
Lead photography: David Toerge

FINDING THE PERFECT EICHLER HOME, one that remained true to the purity of its design, took Iris In't Hout and Michael Sainato months. The couple, both successful designers who love all things modern, were thrilled when they found an intact Jones & Emmons atrium model in Terra Linda—equipped with original interior paneling, fixtures, and fold-out breakfast table.

But the house proved even more special than they had imagined. Not only was its original architecture intact, so was its landscaping—a design by modernist pioneer Robert Royston, created with his partner Asa Hanamoto circa 1961.

Although best known today for his parks and other public spaces, Royston designed hundreds of residential gardens, including many for Eichler homes. He designed landscapes for Eichler's Laguna Heights apartment complex in San Francisco's Western Addition, for the model homes of at least one Eichler subdivision, and for individual Eichler homeowners.

Today, In't Hout and Sainato are restoring their garden with landscape architect JC Miller, a senior associate for the firm that Royston founded, Royston Hanamoto Alley & Abey. Miller, who considers Royston a close friend, has also written a book about the master landscape architect and his work.

The goal, In't Hout and Sainato say, is neither historic preservation nor nostalgia. They want a garden that works. "The plans were good. It all makes sense," says In't Hout, who designs children's clothes.

"It's the idea of trying to keep it true to the house," adds Sainato, art director for the modern furniture retailer Design Within Reach. "We're not some of those people who want to live back in the '50s. It's really interesting to create something that has some history to it. But it's still completely current. When people come here, I don't think they're going to say, 'What a cool '50s garden you have,' Sainato says. "It's going to be a beautiful garden."

The restoration is a remarkable story for several reasons. First, Miller notes, homeowners rarely restore vintage modern gardens—though he believes they

should. "What they are doing is very unique," he says.

Miller has worked with other Eichler homeowners who have remnants of modern gardens, often designed by well-known landscape architects. Most homeowners prefer to start from scratch, retaining only large items of hardscape, like pools and walls. "They want something clean and contemporary, to complement their Eichler."

There's nothing wrong with that, Miller says. But he's surprised that more people don't recognize what they have in their own backyard. "We have people who collect George Nelson lamps and other modern collectables," he says, "and here they have a pedigreed design object in their backyard and they don't even know it."

The story is also remarkable, Sainato says, because "it's a case of coincidence."

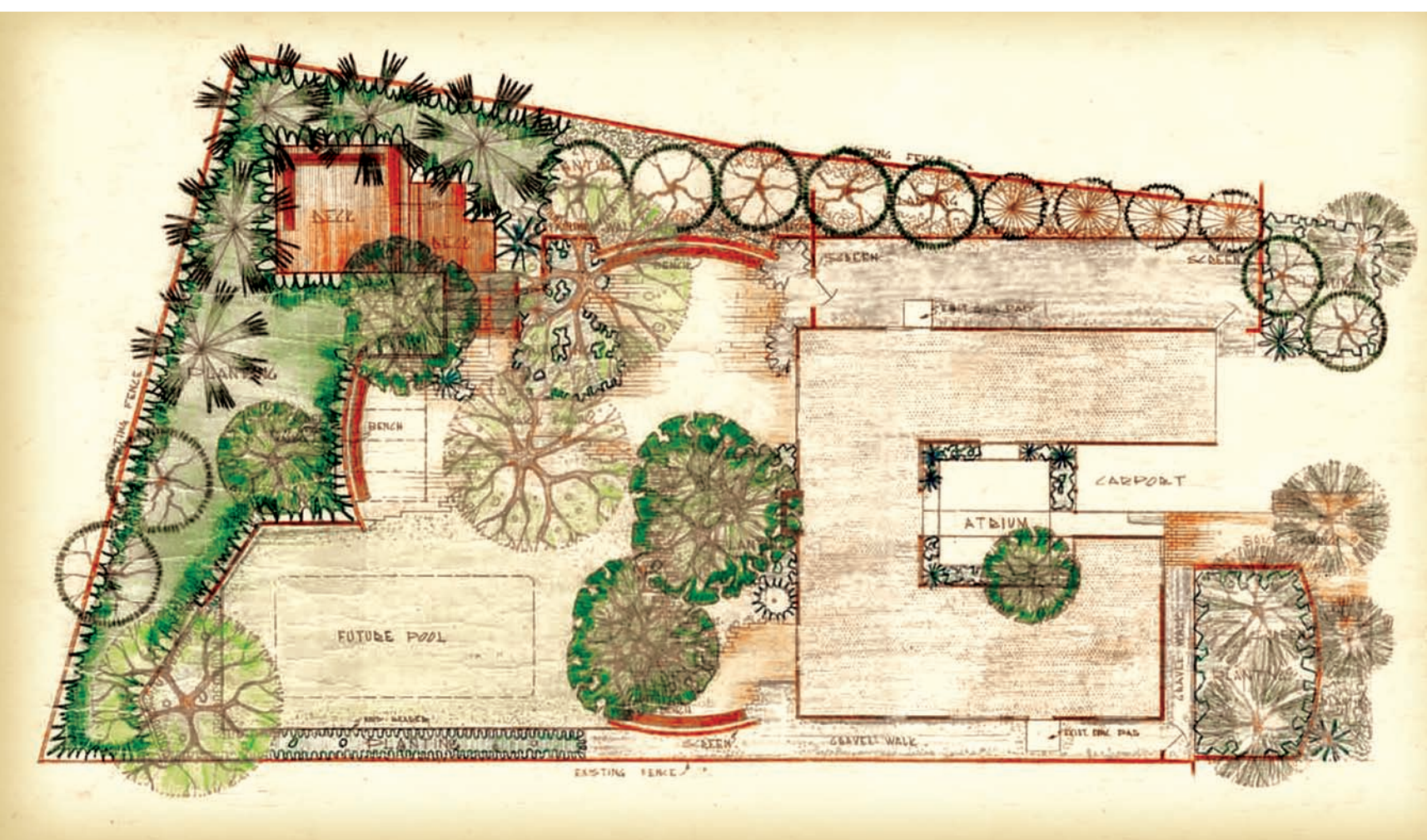
Although both Iris (pronounced *Ee-ris*) In't Hout and Michael Sainato are knowledgeable about architecture, neither knew much about landscape architecture or thought about restoring their landscaping until, a few days after buying the house in 2001, In't Hout found Royston's original plans in



GARDEN ORIGINAL. At their Terra Linda Eichler, owners Michael Sainato and Iris In't Hout. Top: Landscape architect JC Miller meets with In't Hout.

a kitchen cabinet. She also found Miller easily enough. The Royston office was just a few doors from her design office in Mill Valley.

"Iris came in one day and said, 'Hi, I just bought an Eichler home and we found these drawings in the kitchen cupboard. The house is pristine but the garden is at the end of its life. We would like to bring it back,'" Miller recounts. "I said, sure, let's do it."



MASTER PLAN. The original 1961 Royston-Hanamoto landscape plan (above) for the Terra Linda Eichler illustrated both the hidden details and beauty of their vintage garden. The plan includes three benches, a deck, and even a location for a pool that was never built. With minor exceptions, the restoration faithfully follows the original plan. Top left: Backyard of the Terra Linda garden today. Top right: The original brick paving still stands.

What Miller found when he visited the site was a classic Royston garden—a limited number of plants, chosen for foliage rather than flowers, and for shape and color massing; plantings and screens used to define usable outdoor spaces; and a sophisticated and at times complex layering of space.

In the front, for example, Royston and Hanamoto created a symphony in silver, pale green, and plum, with dark-leaved plum trees complementing the Cordova brown of the house and playing

off the silvery-green bush germander and silvery groundcover. Adding drama is a stand of spiky, purple New Zealand flax.

A Royston garden is not ascetic, but self-assured. "It's really simple," Sainato says. "In the front yard there are only three things going on."

Miller also recognized characteristic Royston details, including the extensive brick patio. "The materials he uses here could be in Williamsburg," Miller says, referring to the colonial showplace in Virginia. "Brick is not thought about as

being modern, but Bob used it in a very modern way."

Royston, who often blended the natural with the man-made, played games with the brick. In the front of the house, a swath of ground cover planting bursts through the brick walkway, like nature reasserting control. And as the walkway winds through the backyard, the spacing of the bricks grows further and further apart, as though the ground were made of pulled taffy.

Royston, who claims he learned as

much at the University of California, Berkeley, from his painting instructors as his professors of landscape architecture, often composed his landscape plans like abstract paintings. That too can be seen in In't Hout and Sainato's garden.

The plan is a composition of rectangles and curves. Since his goal was to treat landscape and interior as a unified entity, Royston always based his designs on the house. In this case, the house is rectangular, as is the rear lawn. For contrast, Royston provided

a low, curving retaining wall in front, with a characteristic zigzag pattern in its wooden boards. Seating in the backyard is provided by benches built against slow-curving wooden walls.

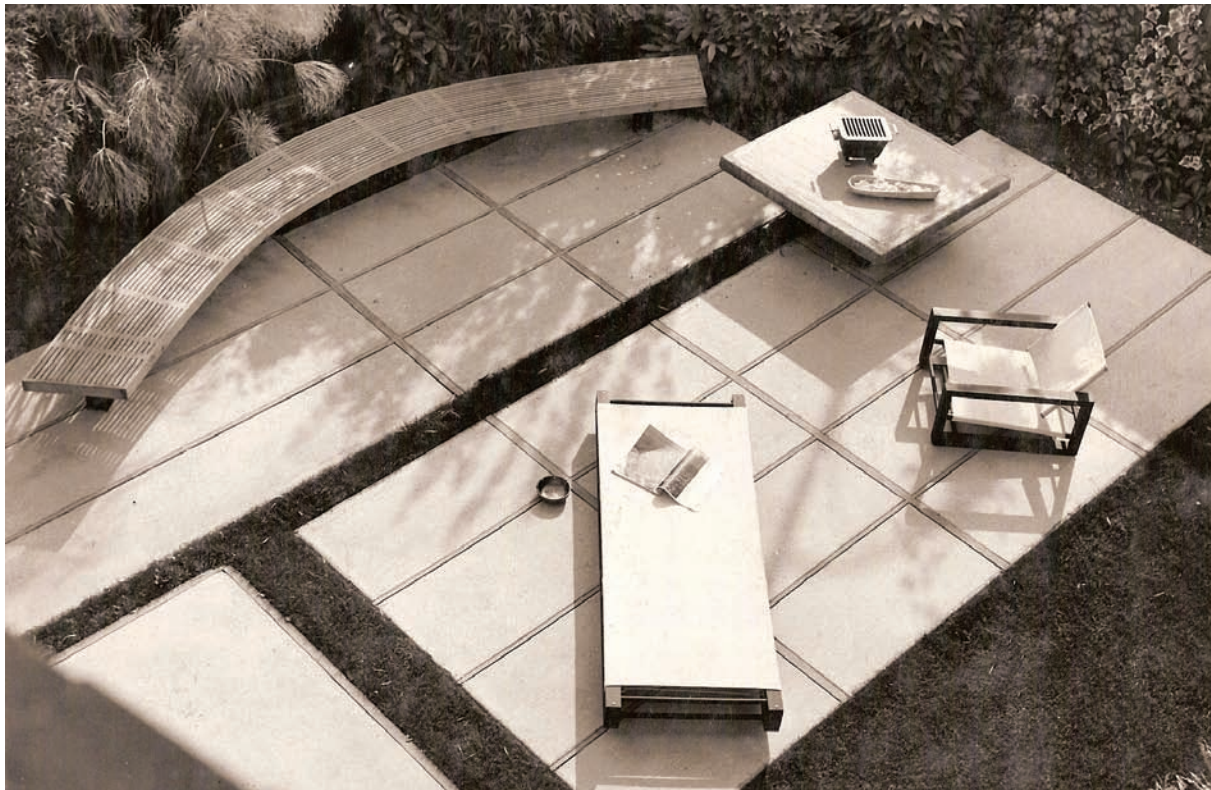
Modern landscape design, which Royston helped define in the 1940s and '50s, is "about spaces and the relations between spaces," Miller says. "Things like plants are important, but play a secondary role to the creation of spaces."

garden lights shaped like a mushroom, in one case; and a flying saucer, in another—also remained, and still work.

Much about Royston's plan, however, had been eaten away by time—and some elements, including the rear deck—with two interlocking planes, had never been built. Vegetation was badly overgrown in some spots—the vines were so intense in the atrium that In't Hout and Sapiano eventually had to replace a wall—and

changes to the Royston original, substituting cherry trees for mayten, for example, because In't Hout prefers cherry, and replacing some other plants with varieties that achieve a similar visual effect.

Much remains to be done, particularly in the backyard. In't Hout and Sainato figure it will be another two years before they get to the rear deck. And plans for the "future pool are on hold. "When we win the lottery," In't Hout says.



PAST CREATION. The Royston garden above, from Berkeley 1948, shows a curved bench similar to the three presently being restored at the Sainato-In't Hout house. Right: Robert Royston and JC Miller today.

"If there is a Bay Area style," says Royston, 88, who lives in Mill Valley surrounded by a garden of his own creation, "it is to make the transition between the building and nature as quickly as possible, by actual line, form, and space. The nature comes in and the structure goes out."

In't Hout and Sainato's backyard plan provides a dining area, a more private area for relaxing off the bedroom, a sitting area on a rear deck, and a "future pool." A line of droopy-leaved mayten trees screens the rear of the garden from the front, but allows the spaces to drift into each other. "You can look through them," Miller observes.

"There are interlocking spaces, floating planes that slide by each other, another characteristic modern design," he says.

In the rear, a wooden zigzag screen defines the outdoor sitting room off the master bedroom. Another eye-catching vintage feature—small, freestanding

dead or dying in others.

In't Hout particularly regrets the loss of a wonderful, but ailing, silver maple that shades the outdoor dining area they use most evenings. "It's a natural umbrella," she says.

In't Hout and Sainato appreciate Royston and Hanamoto's plan because it successfully links house to garden, providing usable, defined spaces.

"There's also not much color," In't Hout notes. "The color is all in the green tones, and silvery."

"Anything that flowers is basically white," Sainato says.

"We like that," In't Hout adds.

"It's a small palette," Sainato says of the plan. "Things repeat. There's continuity—silvery, plum, with the greens mixed in. And it keeps its look most of the year round, which is another thing we like." The garden is low maintenance, except for the lawn, they note.

Miller's renovation will make some



Both the atrium and front yard are complete and already attracting attention. "People like what we're doing, the simplicity of it," Sainato says of the neighbors. But some were surprised by its simplicity.

"When it was done," Sainato says, "they kept asking when the rest of the plants are going to show up. It is done." ■

Additional photography: Ernie Braun, and courtesy JC Miller and Royston Hanamoto Alley & Abey

Do you have a mid-century modern garden?

LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT JC Miller believes there are many people who own mid-century gardens but don't realize it, and hopes the restoration of the garden in Terra Linda serves as inspiration.

"There are still Eichler homes out there with important gardens," he says. "It will help people realize, 'Wow, it has aged and it has frayed, but maybe there's something here that can work for my life.'"



If you have a mid-century modern garden, or its remains, there are several ways to learn about it and restore it. The owners of the Terra Linda garden, Iris In't Hout and Michael Sainato, were lucky enough to have the original plans. If you aren't so lucky, plans can sometimes be perused at the Environmental Design Archives at UC Berkeley (510-642-5124, www.ced.berkeley.edu/cedarchives), which owns archives by some of the leading Bay Area landscape architects, including Royston, Douglas and Maggie Baylis, Thomas Church, and Garrett Eckbo.

The Garden Conservancy, a nonprofit that helps preserve public gardens, can also provide advice and references to landscape architects of a historical bent. E-mail them at projects@gardenconservancy.org.

Useful books include *Landscapes for Living* by Garrett Eckbo, *Gardens Are for People* by Thomas Church, Marc Treib's *Modern Landscape Architecture: A Critical Review*, Trieb's *Garrett Eckbo: Modern Gardens for Living*, and Peter Walker's *Invisible Gardens*. Vintage issues of *Sunset* magazine provide hundreds of photos of modern gardens.

Modern Public Gardens: Robert Royston and the Suburban Park by Reuben M. Rainey and JC Miller is now available, published by William Stout, Publisher.