

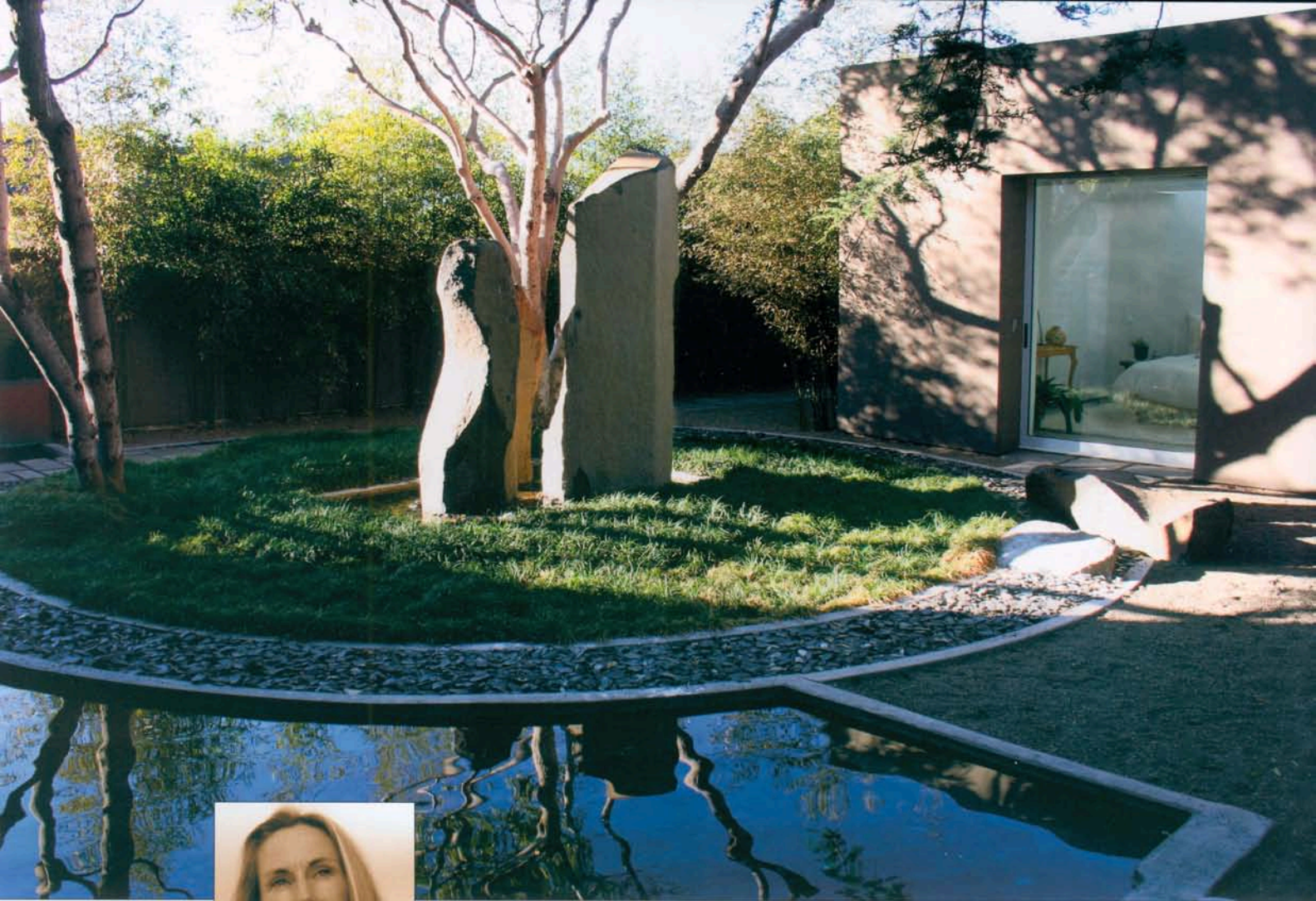


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Design with Nature

Landscape architect Susan Van Atta proves that environmentally healthy 'does not equal sacrifice'



Van Atta's award-winning Lagoon Park at UCSB

Congratulations is a word Susan Van Atta (LA '83) will hear frequently this year. In October, she received an American Society of Landscape Architects National Honor Award for her design of Lagoon Park at the University of California at Santa Barbara (UCSB). In making the award, the jury complimented her on the project for its design and economy of means: "proof that you don't have to have a huge budget to do fabulous things."

Lagoon Park is an example of this principle. Van Atta was asked by UCSB to turn a gravel parking lot into wetlands habitats as required by the California Coastal Commission. She saw the opportunity to do even more.

The result is six acres that immerse students in nature and give them an appreciation of the subtle beauty of vernal pools and

marshes, while overlooking the Pacific Ocean. Native vegetation, not fences, protect the wetlands from trespassers. Enhanced beach access via ramps and stairs, pedestrian and bicycle paths, and other amenities such as surf showers, bike racks and outdoor study areas protect habitats by concentrating use in defined areas.

With her firm, Van Atta Associates, located in Santa Barbara, Susan, her architect husband and two sons feel a close tie to the region. She likes its ecological diversity, saying that it "equals health."

Van Atta majored in environmental studies at UCSB and worked in Santa Barbara for several years, during which she discovered a "personal need to physically create environmental solutions, not just talk about them," a need her planning job didn't fulfill.

Pointing to a key moment in her decision to return to campus for a second degree, this time in landscape architecture, she credits Ian L. McHarg's book, "Design with Nature." McHarg was a pioneer in the concept of ecological planning, a notion that struck a chord with Van Atta and was a good fit with her background in environmental studies.

Looking for a place to study landscape architecture, Van Atta admits that Cal Poly's beautiful location made her decision easy, but it was the architecture and horticulture programs and the nature of a polytechnic education – learning practical hands-on skills – that were the real influences on her decision. In retrospect, Van Atta says that as a woman she wanted to focus on technical proficiency, believing this would be an important asset and confidence booster after graduation.

One of Van Atta's goals at school was to gain the education to start her own firm. Twenty-three years after founding Van Atta Associates, she remains committed to the belief that the education students receive at Cal Poly embraces more than core curriculum and creates leaders who are ready to direct a firm and not just be employees.

Today, Van Atta Associates is involved with a broad range of projects, a reflection of the many interests of its founder. Van Atta laughingly says that her professional role of landscape architect includes everything from "hand holding to being the authority" – her manner of encompassing the range from private, often well-funded projects to committee-led, tightly budgeted public work.

While delighted about her national award, Van Atta is already focused on the future, including the forthcoming publication of a book in June 2009, "Native Flower Gardens for Southern California."

Her awards and portfolio of work support Van Atta's credo that environmentally sensitive solutions do not equal sacrifice. Instead, these solutions can and should be healthier, more enjoyable, and attractive. She believes that concerns over the environment have placed landscape architects in positions as leaders, as they often have a broader view of the project than the other design professionals. Ideas that are certainly award-worthy. ■



A Van Atta landscape at the Joan B. Kroc Institute (left)

Below and opposite: A private garden renovation project called Two Pacific Rooms in Santa Barbara County won Van Atta a Southern California ASLA Residential Design Award of Honor in 2007.

