ABOVE
The park's wall and seating blocks were fabricated to suggest the sedimentary bands visible in area rock faces.

MILLICENT HARVEY, AFFILIATE ASLA

DESERT COOL

RIOS TAKES CUES FROM THE CANYON FOR A PARK IN DOWNTOWN PALM SPRINGS.

BY JONATHAN LERNER

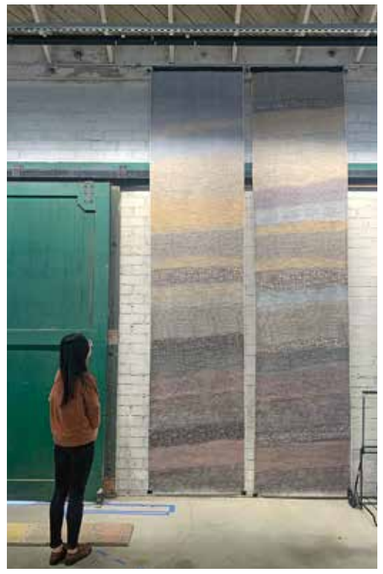
THE COACHELLA VALLEY in inland Southern California was formed by the San Andreas Fault, along which the Pacific and North American tectonic plates have been separating for millions of years. Sometimes called Greater Palm Springs, after the desert resort that is its dominant city, the valley has a floor as flat as a pancake, but mountain ridges rise precipitously all around. As I drive in from Los Angeles, there are unnerving moments when it feels as though a crash into the rocky palisades is inevitable. But the highway swerves at the last minute. This illusion occurs within Palm Springs, too, since the city sits snugly against the steep flank of Mount San Jacinto.

Another local result of the fault is that groundwater can surface through seeps and springs, which makes habitation viable in this torrid environment. For several thousand years, the region's oases and canyons offered succor and protection to the Indigenous Cahuilla People. Europeans trickled in throughout the 19th century, and Americans looking for gold would later displace much of the native population. In what is now Palm Springs, a sanatorium called the Desert Inn opened in 1909. It was soon reconceived as a deluxe hotel—the first of many, designed to attract tourists looking for a winter resort. During the postwar boom decades, the city expanded rapidly as a second home and retirement destination. Originally, the valley was

LEFT
The RIOS team looked at the rocks, sand, grit, and gravel and found ways to use them on the site.

OPPOSITE
Models and full-size printouts helped visualize layering of the wall's shotcrete bands.

RIOS



RIOS

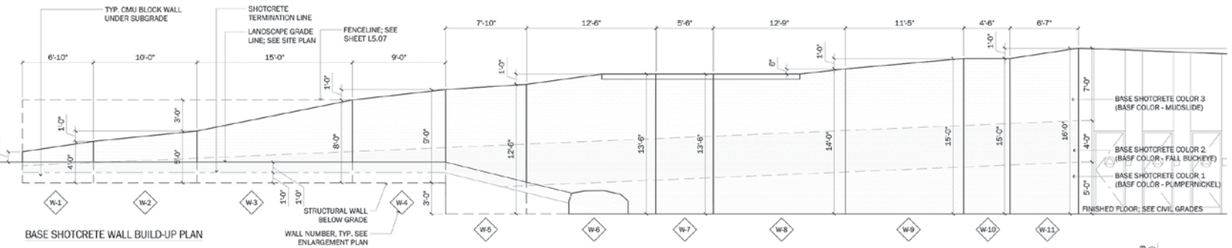
surveyed in mile-square sections, creating urban sprawl typical of most midcentury American cities. In Palm Springs, section lines are now long, wide, uninterrupted streets, punctuated by gated communities and single-family homes hidden behind tall hedges. There's a linear commercial district but only a notional town center. The effect is spacious, controlled, rectilinear, and horizontal—in tension with the craggy, folded, soaring mountains that are never out of view.

From this bracing opposition of the rational and the rough came the concept for a new park, designed by the multidisciplinary firm RIOS. The park is part of a redevelopment plan that will insert a mixed-use district into Palm Springs's downtown, on part of the long-gone Desert Inn's site. "Our early instinct was not to riff on the midcentury, but to try to find something more intrinsic," says Nate Cormier, ASLA, RIOS's managing studio director, who co-led the project team with Jason Shinoda, ASLA, the firm's design director for landscape architecture. Their team included the landscape architects Heejae Lee, Zhihuang Li, and Tamar Cotler and the architects Crystal Huang and Laura Kos.

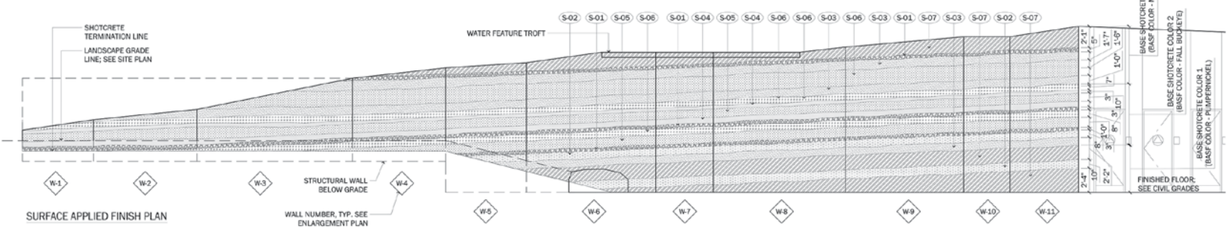
Rather than to the city's signature modern style, they looked to the landforms and ecology of the local desert and mountains, taking inspiration from the presence and preciousness of water and the plant life it supports and the colors and patterns of the rocky terrain. Instead of channeling the midcentury modernism that's the city's unofficial brand, this meant "peeling everything back," Cormier says. "It was about a timelessness to what draws everybody out here. Once we put it that way, people said, 'That's why I'm here.' And they could imagine the connection to Indigenous people, and to early generations of settlers."

In plan, the roughly one-and-a-half-acre Palm Springs Downtown Park, which won an ASLA Professional Award of Excellence for General Design in 2022, has virtually no right angles or regular geometry. Ideas for the principal elements and the decorative motifs were derived from the team's hikes to what Cormier calls "reference points" in the nearby mountains. Entering the park from the adjacent business district, you

SEDIMENTARY ARCHITECTURAL WALL—ELEVATION AND MATERIAL (DETAIL)



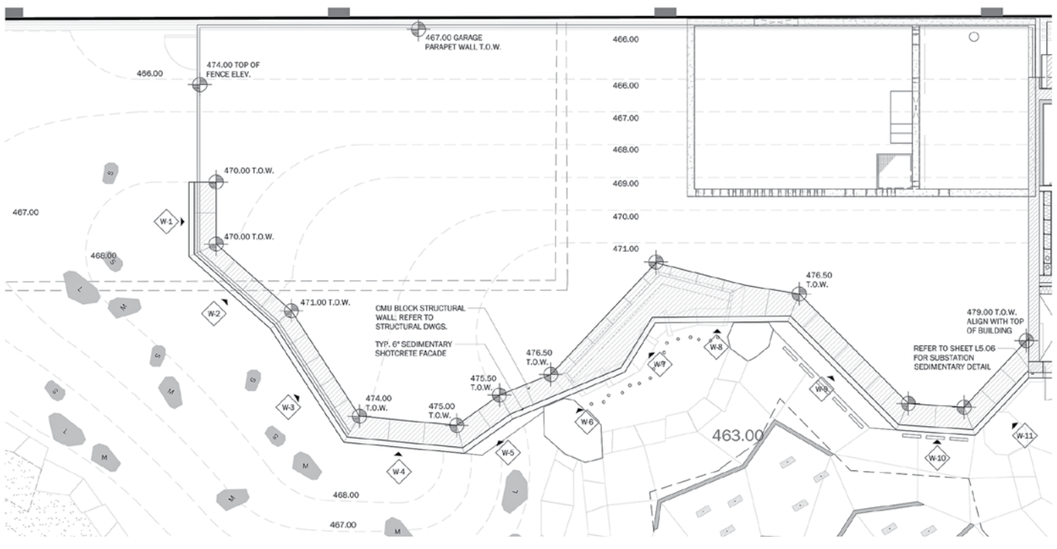
BASE SHOTCRETE WALL BUILD-UP PLAN



SURFACE APPLIED FINISH PLAN

SEDIMENTARY WALL FINISH SCHEDULE			
SYMBOL	KEY	MATERIAL	FINISH
	S-01	HAND SEEDED "PALM SPRINGS GOLD" AGGREGATE 3/8"	-
	S-02	SAND APPLIED FINISH - DARK CEDAR COLOR	SURFACE RETARDER #3
	S-03	SAND APPLIED FINISH - ROSA COLOR	SURFACE RETARDER #3
	S-04	SAND APPLIED FINISH - CIBOLA COLOR	SURFACE RETARDER #3
	S-05	SAND APPLIED FINISH - UMBER COLOR	SURFACE RETARDER #3
	S-06	SAND APPLIED FINISH - SPAR COLOR	SURFACE RETARDER #3
	S-07	STAMPED TEXTURE SHOTCRETE BASE	MEDIUM SANDBLAST

SEDIMENTARY ARCHITECTURAL WALL—ENLARGEMENT PLAN



ABOVE
Plant and color palettes were derived from hikes to "reference points" in nearby mountains.

RIOS

RIOS

pass through a grove of some 130 native California fan palms. The trees' fronds turn brown and droop when they die but remain attached, forming thick, shaggy skirts around the bole. When used as street trees, regularly spaced, skirts neatly trimmed, "you want matched groups," Cormier says. Here their layout resembles a palm oasis in a local canyon, where trees of different ages stand and lean in naturally random clusters. An aerial map of the canyon was "superimposed on the park site," Shinoda explains, "for the study of how dense and irregular they should be." As a result, the park's palms are clumped in gravelly beds that appear unplanned, threaded between an equally unsystematic network of paved paths. The two conditions of the palm grove upend the more common experience of Palm Springs: dappled shade and spatial idiosyncrasy.

The project's most prominent feature is a simulated rock outcrop—an abstracted representation of a canyon wall—that zigzags along the park's north boundary. It suggests a sense of enclosure, while hiding a parking deck that occupies the other half of the same city block. It serves multiple other functions as well. At its east end, where the wall is 16 feet high, it's the facade of a small building housing a police substation and public restrooms. It continues from there, its facets variously tilted

"OUR EARLY INSTINCT WAS NOT TO RIFF ON THE MIDCENTURY, BUT TO TRY TO FIND SOMETHING MORE INTRINSIC."

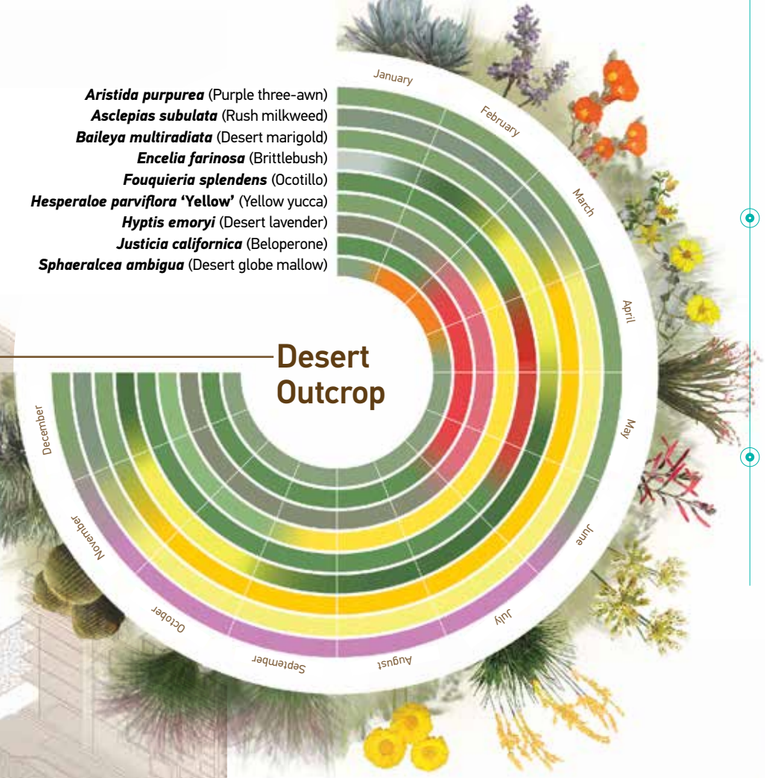
—NATE CORMIER, ASLA

Palm
***Phoenix dactylifera* 'Deglet Noor'** (Deglet Noor date palm)
Washingtonia filifera (California fan palm)
***Washingtonia* × 'Filibusta'** (Hybrid fan palm)

Paloverde
***Parkinsonia* × 'Desert Museum'** (Desert Museum paloverde)

Mesquite
***Prosopis* × 'Phoenix'** (Phoenix thornless mesquite)

Aristida purpurea (Purple three-awn)
Asclepias subulata (Rush milkweed)
Baileya multiradiata (Desert marigold)
Encelia farinosa (Brittlebush)
Fouquieria splendens (Ocotillo)
***Hesperaloe parviflora* 'Yellow'** (Yellow yucca)
Hyptis emoryi (Desert lavender)
Justicia californica (Beloperone)
Sphaeralcea ambigua (Desert globe mallow)



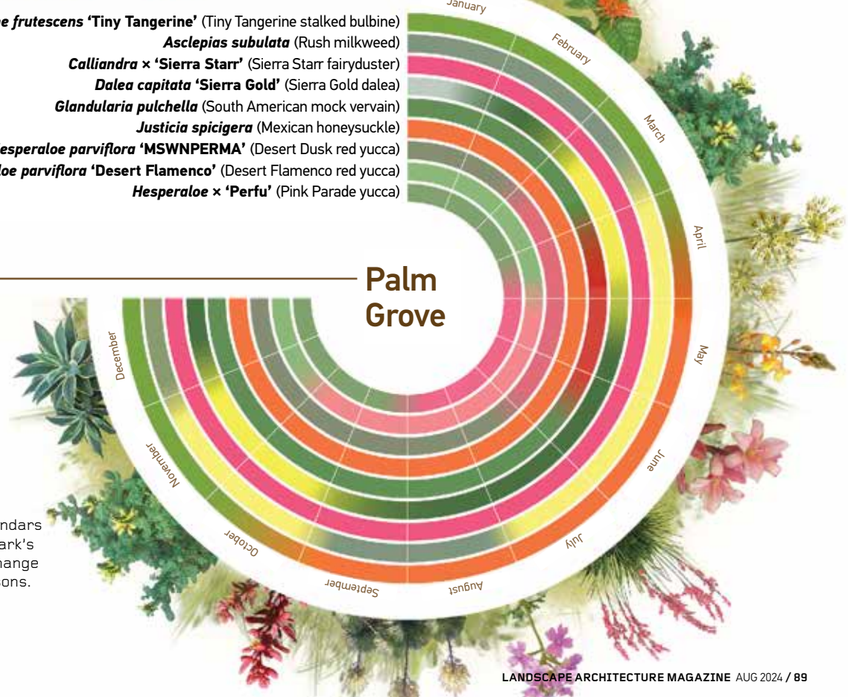
PLANT LIST

Additional plants not represented at left or below.

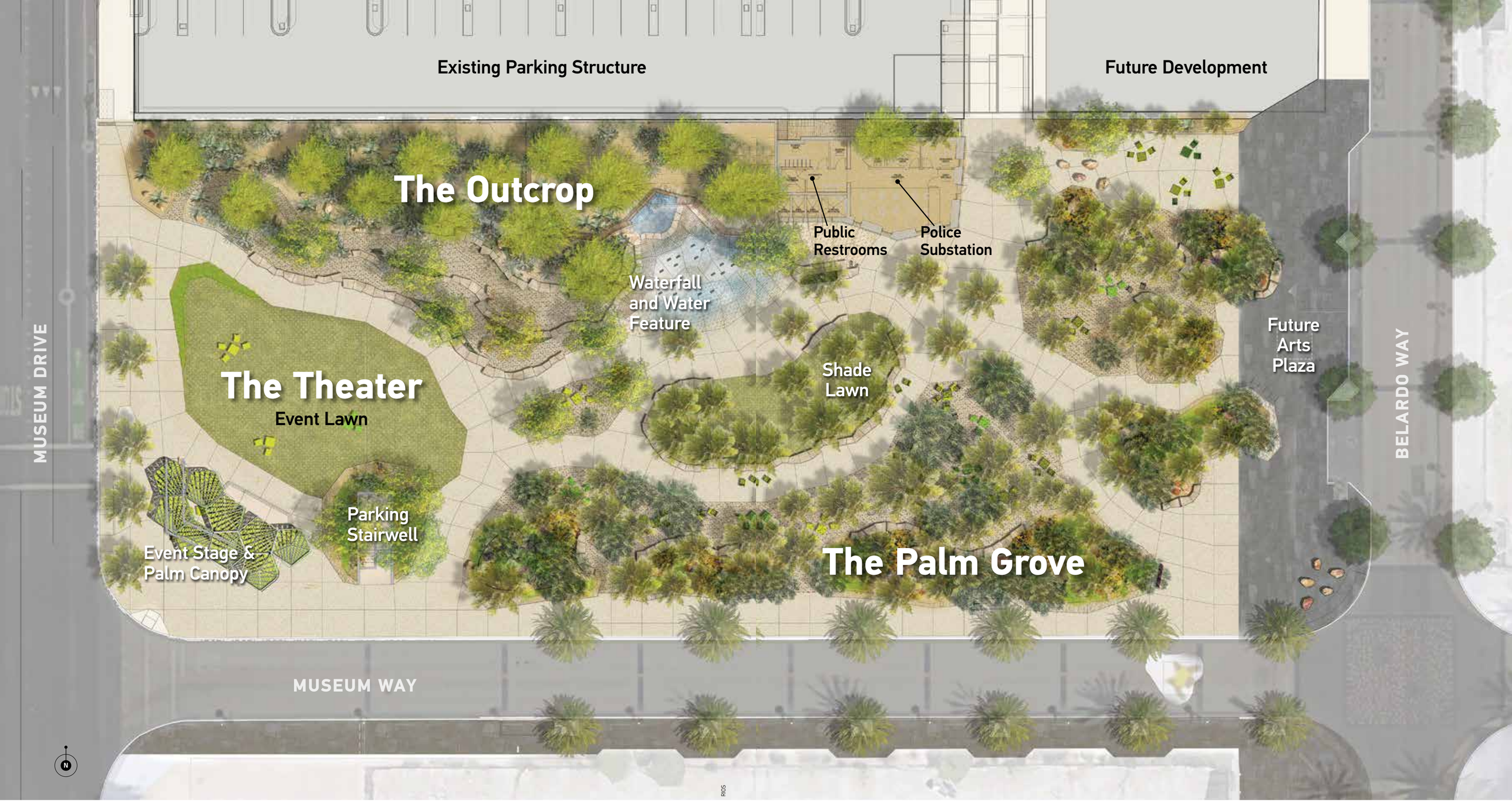
DESERT OUTCROP
Agave ovatifolia (Whale's tongue agave)
Calylophus hartwegii* ssp. *fendleri (Hartweg's sundrops)
Dasylirion wheeleri (Common sotol)
Echinocactus grusonii (Golden barrel cactus)
Larrea tridentata (Creosote bush)
***Muhlenbergia lindheimeri* 'Autumn Glow'** (Autumn Glow muhly)
Muhlenbergia rigens (Deer grass)
***Opuntia cacanapa* 'Ellisiana'** (Ellisiana spineless prickly pear)
Vauquelinia californica (Arizona rosewood)
Yucca elata (Soap tree yucca)

PALM GROVE
***Agave attenuata* 'Variegata'** (Variegated foxtail agave)
Calylophus hartwegii* ssp. *fendleri (Hartweg's sundrops)
***Dalea frutescens* 'Sierra Negra'** (Black dalea)
***Muhlenbergia lindheimeri* 'Autumn Glow'** (Autumn Glow muhly)
***Poliomintha maderensis* 'Lavender Spice'** (Mexican oregano)
Yucca thompsoniana (Thompson's yucca)

***Bulbine frutescens* 'Tiny Tangerine'** (Tiny Tangerine stalked bulbine)
Asclepias subulata (Rush milkweed)
***Calliandra* × 'Sierra Starr'** (Sierra Starr fairyduster)
***Dalea capitata* 'Sierra Gold'** (Sierra Gold dalea)
Glandularia pulchella (South American mock vervain)
Justicia spicigera (Mexican honeysuckle)
***Hesperaloe parviflora* 'MSWNPERMA'** (Desert Dusk red yucca)
***Hesperaloe parviflora* 'Desert Flamenco'** (Desert Flamenco red yucca)
***Hesperaloe* × 'Perfu'** (Pink Parade yucca)



ABOVE
Color-wheel calendars reveal how the park's vegetation will change through the seasons.


Existing Parking Structure
Future Development
The Outcrop
Public Restrooms
Police Substation
Waterfall and Water Feature
Shade Lawn
Future Arts Plaza
The Theater
Event Lawn
Parking Stairwell
Event Stage & Palm Canopy
The Palm Grove
MUSEUM DRIVE
BELARDO WAY
MUSEUM WAY
N
RIOS

OPPOSITE
The downtown plan intends mixed-use, mid-rise structures like this surrounding the park.

MILLICENT HARVEY, AFFILIATE ASLA

THE PARK'S SHADE AND WATER SHOULD TEMPER THE HEAT. THE RIOS TEAM WANTED TO FIND OUT BY HOW MUCH.

off the vertical and its top edge sloping gently lower. At 13 feet high, its angles establish a shallow alcove that frames a waterfall. This also serves as a backdrop for an interactive water feature with nozzles for jets of both water and fog set into the paving at grade. Toward the west, the wall melds into an informally terraced bit of hillside. The wall is sheer, without footholds or handholds, but this slope can be mounted via twisty paths resembling mountain trails. It also provides some amphitheater-like seating for performances on the stage it faces. As might be expected, its pebbly banks are planted with typical desert materials, including mesquite and paloverde trees; shrubby plants such as agave, cactus, and yucca; and flowering species such as desert-adapted milkweed and marigold.

But RIOS's iteration of a canyon in the park goes further toward realism. The waterfall, for example, was inspired by one in nearby Tahquitz Canyon. Its flow is affected by "twists in the rock that give it some interesting animation," Shinoda says. To approximate those results, RIOS created foam models of the weir caps and tested them "to get the right kind of trickle. 'It's too flat, it's too glassy—let's notch it some more.' Everybody got out their knives and started chopping." Less subtle but more painstaking is the representation, in shotcrete veneer on the outcrop wall, of the sedimentary bands visible in the mountains' exposed rock faces. Here, as in nature, the strata range from darker, rustier tones and nubbier textures at the bottom to paler, yellower, and smoother ones toward the top.

"The materiality was a great learning curve for us, looking at the rocks and the sand and the grit and the gravel, in a hyperlocal way, saying, 'How do you make things out of this?'" says Mark Rios, FASLA, the firm's founding partner. "At one point we had printouts on the wall of the office that were

full-size color depictions of what that wall could look like. 'How deep should that layer be? What colors contrast too much?' And, 'Does it look good or not?' It was a laboratory and will translate to other projects."

Similar stratigraphy was also used on the sides of seating blocks and of the low platform that becomes a stage. The lawn in front of the stage plus the facing hillside can accommodate an audience of 1,000 or so for special events. At other times the stage serves as an unprogrammed pavilion. It has a canopy of perforated aluminum screens in three hues of green that resemble the radiating crowns of fan palms, similarly letting through mottled sunlight. On a typical late afternoon, visitors have

ABOVE
Seating blocks serve as retaining walls and play structures.

OPPOSITE
Layout of the palms was based on a natural grove in Tahquitz Canyon.

MILLICENT HARVEY, AFFILIATE ASLA

MILLICENT HARVEY, AFFILIATE ASLA

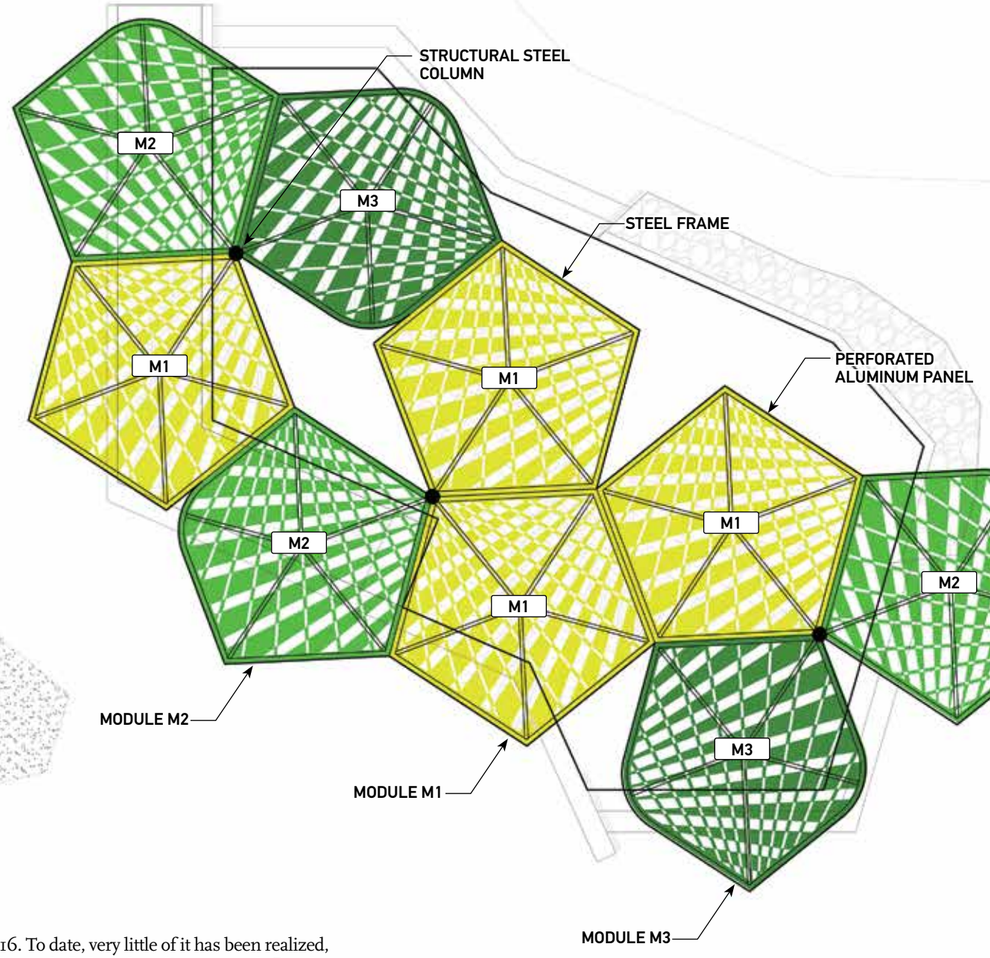
RIGHT
The waterfall's weir caps deliberately replicate the "interesting animation" of a nearby waterfall.

moved some of the park's chairs onto the stage to enjoy the shade.

The seating blocks are in four shapes, two trapezoids and two irregular quadrilaterals, of slightly different heights. Inspired by the tumbled boulders of a canyon riverbed, the seating works as benches, retaining walls, and potential climbing structures for children. During the advance public conversation about design of the park, there was discussion about including a playground. "The types of things people ask for are what they know," Cormier points out. The RIOS response, he says, was, "Can we just make the whole park playful?" Kids play on and in the splash pad, the arrays of seating blocks, the outcrop hillside, and the peekaboo spaces of the palm grove.

Palm Springs's downtown redevelopment plan, of which the park is a central element, was adopted

SHADE CANOPY AT EVENT STAGE



ABOVE
In shape, color, and filtering effect, shade structure elements mimic the palms' crowns.

OPPOSITE
The low stage does double duty as an informal pavilion.

RIOS

MILLICENT HARVEY, AFFILIATE ASLA

in 2016. To date, very little of it has been realized, and the park feels rather disconnected. For the time being, it's largely surrounded by parking lots and future building sites; the Palm Springs Art Museum is a felicitous exception. Directly across the street from the park's western edge, its angular, blank front walls are finished with a gravelly texture and rusty color, not unlike the mountainside rising just behind the building. There are spots from which the museum's facade appears to be a seamless extension of the park's outcrop wall. That reinforces the park's underlying concept—what Cormier calls "a poem to the desert"—and will surely lend a sense of extra space when it is surrounded by mid-rise buildings.

To serve the mixed-use district that is promised, a different approach could have yielded a more conventional, less naturalistic space—which might more appropriately have been called a plaza or square instead of a park. "If Palm Springs was a denser city, then maybe it would have lost something by not having a park that's more urban in character, more hardscaped," says Brooke Hodge, the former director of architecture and design at the Palm Springs Art Museum. "But that landscape is on the city's edges, everywhere, and our other parks don't have that character. They're grassy and have rec facilities. It does provide something the other parks don't, bringing this more natural element into a quarter of the city that eventually could be very built up."

While park visitors will surely sense its connection to the Coachella Valley environs, they may have less clear, or only subliminal, awareness of how some of its features address what Cormier refers to as "the thermal comfort thing." (Unlike some recent public spaces designed to grapple with climate issues, there are no explicit interpretive or educational elements.) Consider that Palm Springs's average daily high temperature in July has been at least 110 degrees Fahrenheit in five of the last seven years. It's an obvious assumption that the park's shade and water would temper the heat. But the RIOS team wanted to find out by how much. On a June afternoon last year, they took measurements in an empty lot across the street and in several areas of the park. They found, for

MILLICENT HARVEY, AFFILIATE ASLA

OPPOSITE
The wall can seem to merge with the flank of the mountain.

example, that air temperature in the park, 96.5°F, was about five degrees cooler. Decomposed granite surfaces were eight degrees cooler. Shinoda's own body temperature, taken with a non-contact thermometer, was as much as five degrees lower.

This project, and another Cormier and Shinoda-led project in Houston, piqued their interest in how various cultures have adapted to life in very hot climates. The RIOS report *Culture of Comfort* gives examples of things such as clothing, food, urban form, shading and ventilation devices, and behaviors that have evolved to acclimate people to hot places. The report also implies, by contrast, the lack of preparedness for the coming conditions, and how difficult adjustment to a hotter future might be. Shinoda mentions one of its findings: "In an extreme heat environment, you have to accept that there are parts of the year when nobody is going to be outside for most of the day. But there are things you can do to at least extend the shoulder periods, the morning and the evening, for a little more usable time. Or you think about the nighttime." Just one small reminder that to live with climate change is to change how we live. ●

JONATHAN LERNER'S NOVEL *LILY NARCISSUS* IS PUBLISHED BY UNSOLICITED PRESS.

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