

# atomic ranch

MIDCENTURY MARVELS

SPRING 2011



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# Movie Star Digs

The interior design evolved from impulse buys of kitschy '50s knickknacks to upgraded lamps, tables and accessories with designer pedigrees. The family room is visible beyond the black bullet planter from Hip Haven, one of the few modern-made pieces, along with the black Eames LCW, the low Eames wire base table and the Noguchi coffee table. Midcentury originals include reupholstered '50s club chairs, a generic dresser against the wall and the brass floor lamp, likely a Lightolier.





## An L.A. couple turns a Palm Springs wreck into a green desert oasis.

It's been 12 years since my husband, Ron Diliberto, a psychotherapist, and I purchased a 1958 three-bedroom house in Palm Springs. Over two and a half years, we restored the home, installed a swimming pool and landscaping, and renovated the interior.

Built on a corner lot in the Bel Desierto subdivision, a committee of world-renowned local modern architects and developers—including John Porter Clark, Albert Frey and Culver Nichols—oversaw the design of the tract's homes. Created on what was once the El Mirador Hotel's golf course, the area was called The Movie Colony since the early 1920s, when Hollywood stars came to the desert and built winter homes to escape the prying public eye.

*text* Andy Marcus  
*photography* Christopher Watson

When we bought the house, it had a leaky roof, moldy carpeting, stray cats were using the fireplace as a litter box and there were hypodermic needles lying around. It was a pretty scary sight. We had to fill two dumpsters just to get rid of what the former owners left behind. The house was scrubbed from floor to ceiling, and then painted and reroofed. Once we had that done, we threw a mattress on the floor in the master bedroom and began with the basics—flooring and window coverings.

I'm a senior v.p. at MySpace and have done a variety of interior design projects at our West Hollywood condo and for friends, while Ron, prior to becoming a psychotherapist, had a home remodeling business. We brought pros in for the electrical and some plumbing, but most of the work—drywall, framing, flooring, tile work, etc.—was done by us on weekends.

The architect had originally designed the family room as an outdoor patio, but previous owners enclosed it to create a fourth bedroom and seating area off the living room. This made for small, dark spaces and restricted flow throughout the home.



Looking toward the dining room, a pair of Norman Cherner ribbon armchairs with white leather covers made by Plycraft flank an Eero Saarinen pedestal side table from Knoll and Danish modern candlesticks. A dining version of Saarinen's table came from my childhood kitchen, and the Saarinen No. 71 chairs surrounding it were found on eBay. The Nelson bubble lamp is by Modernica, while the rug underneath is from IKEA and the shag area rug was fashioned from Tuflex carpeting.

The fireplace surround was one of several tile projects. The biggest challenge was realizing after I started that I needed to fill in the mortar seams between the cinderblocks. I had to go back and do that in order to have a level surface for the new glass tile to adhere to. The vintage starburst Westclock timepiece was found on eBay, and the period wall scones are French.

I put the outdoor table on casters so we could move it inside if the weather was too hot or too cold, and framed it in stainless steel so it would be weatherproof, like the Emeco chairs from Modernica. The glass tile top shines in the sunlight, and sparkles under the IKEA holiday lights.

A linoleum floor, based on a pattern from a 1957 *Home and Garden* advertisement, completes the kitchen makeover.





We created one large, open living space of almost 1,400 square feet by removing walls and windows in the fourth bedroom and installing 12" sliding glass doors. They provide mountain views and created access to the kitchen from the family room. This public space has an open, circular flow that centers on a double-sided cinderblock fireplace, which I covered with glass mosaic tile one weekend as a surprise for Ron while he was out of town.

The previous owners remodeled the kitchen sometime in the 1970s. The cabinets were pickled green with black wrought iron pulls, and there were several layers of very unfortunate looking vinyl flooring to pull up. While the footprint was there and the cabinets were solid, the flooring, countertops and appliances had to go.

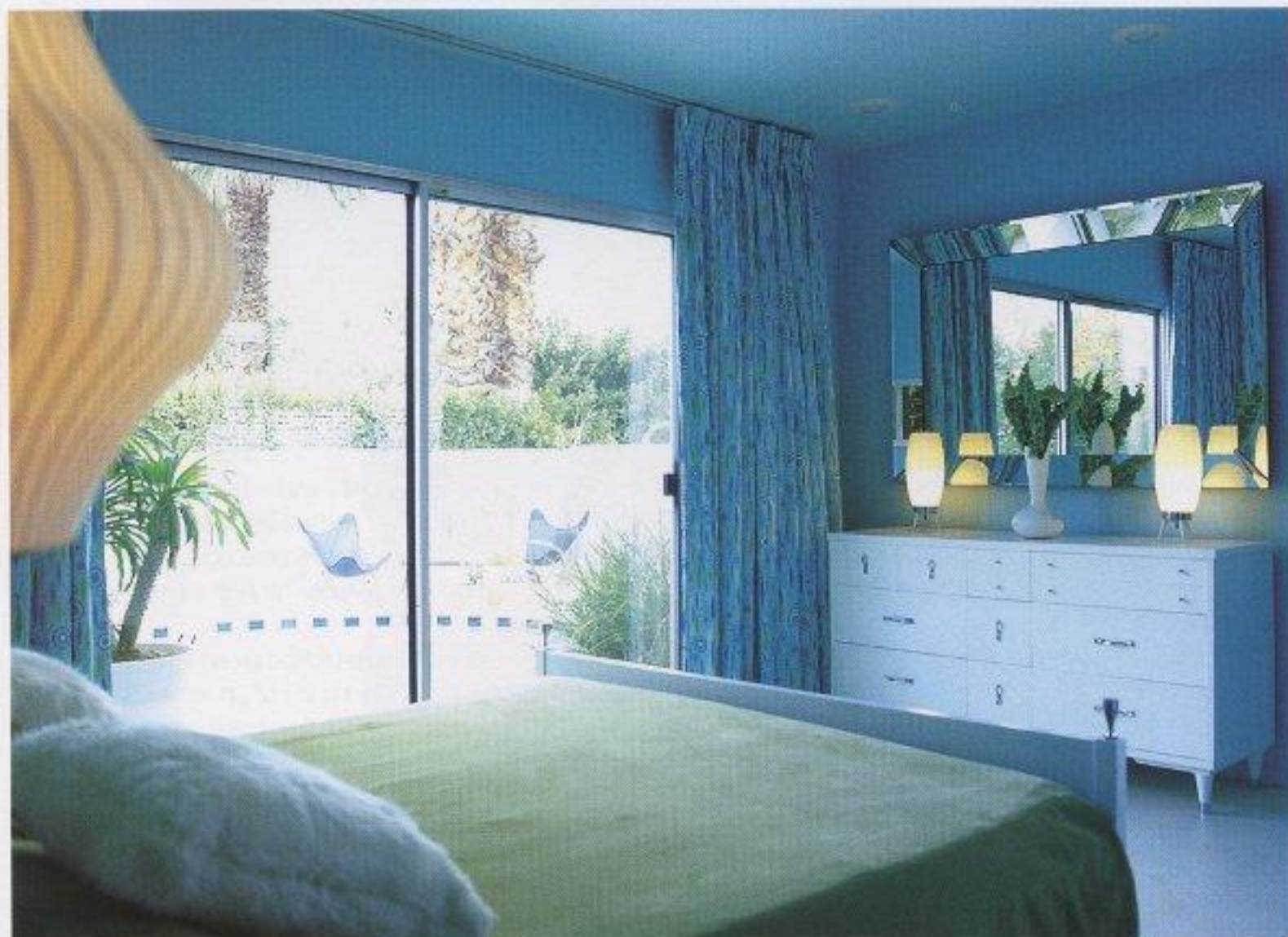
A closet-size dry bar original to the dining room was removed to create more usable space and square footage in the kitchen. We were able to put a bar-height countertop with vintage barstools from a diner in its place. New counters, appliances, flooring and tile were installed, and the cabinets were refinished.

We celebrate Christmas in Palm Springs, and a few years after we moved in, a new robe hanging above an electrical wall heater in the master bath caught fire; before we knew it, the entire bathroom was enveloped in flames. We grabbed the fire extinguisher and did our best to put it out before the fire department arrived.

Hakatai tile is the real star of the bathroom: it creates a colorful, yet relaxing retreat. A buffet from a local thrift store was refinished just like the master bedroom set, and outfitted to hold a vessel sink with a Kohler Stillness faucet. The original tub was retained and a custom mirror installed over the vanity.

In the master bedroom, a 1960s set was refinished in white lacquer, and its hardware replated in chrome, as were the bases of the pod lamps on the dresser. The pear-shaped George Nelson bubble lamp is from Modernica.

Opposite: In the corner of the master bedroom is an armchair reupholstered in aqua barkcloth, and the vintage-look curtain fabric is from Contemporarycloth.com. The Blenko glass is from Dazzles, here in Palm Springs.



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home and garden magazines and  
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from 1955–1960  
as a reference guide

When it was over, the house was covered in white powder from the fire retardant, and every curtain and all of the upholstery and rugs had to be shampooed professionally. A new bath was now a priority.

I came up with the color scheme and design, which involved stealing the hallway linen closet footprint for the toilet and creating a large, open shower with a window in it. I used a refinished vintage buffet and a vessel sink for the vanity, and wall mounted the faucet.

I used home and garden magazines and furniture catalogs from 1955–1960 (i.e., Herman Miller, *The American Home*, *House and Garden*, *Better Homes and Gardens Decorating Book*) as a reference guide, and chose a palette of interior and exterior colors popular in 1958. For the furnishings, I have a ritual of visiting Palm Springs thrift stores, consignment shops, estate sales, antique malls and higher-end vintage collectors on a monthly basis—it's like a treasure hunt for me. I can go for months at a time and not find anything, and then walk into a thrift store and find a Dorothy Draper chest of drawers for \$60, knowing full well that it would sell on websites like 1stdibs.com for thousands of dollars; that makes all the months of looking worth it. I never get tired of finding vintage designer furnishings that people have discarded and don't realize what they're tossing away. We've mixed vintage Tommi Parzinger pieces with Murano glass lamps and Heywood-Wakefield end tables, and accented with IKEA cabinets customized with hairpin legs.

In 2005, we adopted a daughter, Charley Jean, and the family needed a larger dining area for holiday dinners. I designed a stainless steel Parsons table on casters and used glass mosaic tile left over from the



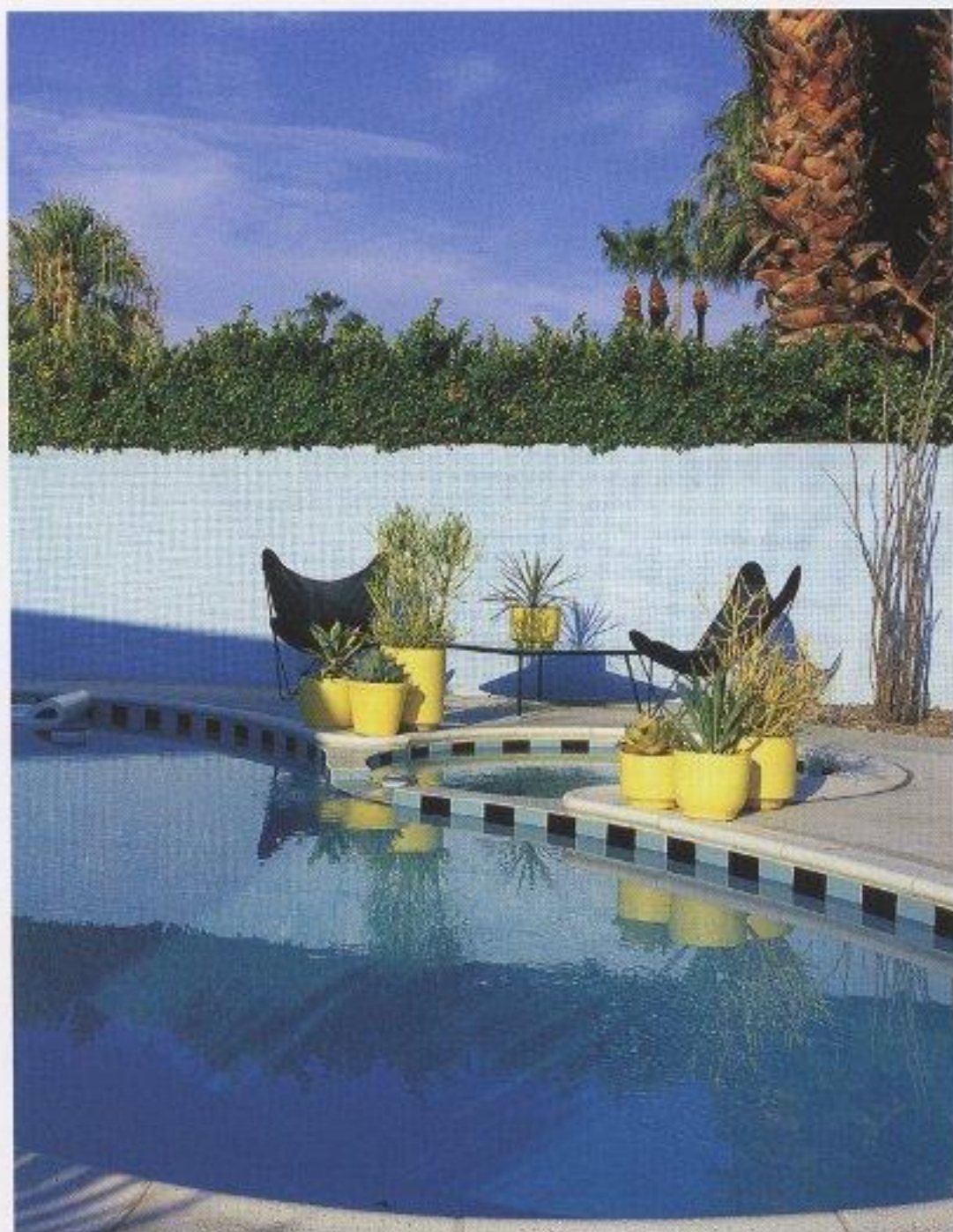
living room fireplace for the top. Now, an outdoor dining and living area adjacent to the family room accommodates our extended families for Thanksgiving and Mother's Day gatherings.

The home is on a 12,000-square-foot lot, with large front and back yards. In 1999, the most prominent feature of the landscaping was a pair of dead 50' pine trees flanking the front walkway. We removed dumpsters full of oleander bushes, tamarisk trees and dead shrubbery. Our new landscaping scheme integrated the front and back yards through the use of a combination of rolling sod, boulders and river rock, and mounds of packed desert sand, with a large variety of cacti, succulents and indigenous drought-tolerant shrubbery that blooms throughout the year.

We also designed a kidney-shaped swimming pool with 1950s bull-nose coping and aqua and black tile. A steel paneled fence with a strong, repetitive vertical line was used to enclose the pool area and back yard; the steel panels are repeated in the backyard patio cover as well.

Our weekends are as close to a resort retreat as you can get without checking into a hotel. We have two golden retrievers, sisters named Lola and Fannie, and many of our friends come and spend weekends with us with their families in tow. It's a great entertaining house, but also a place where we take long naps in the afternoons during the summer, and drink hot chocolate and read books by the fireplace in the winter. We just love it. ❀

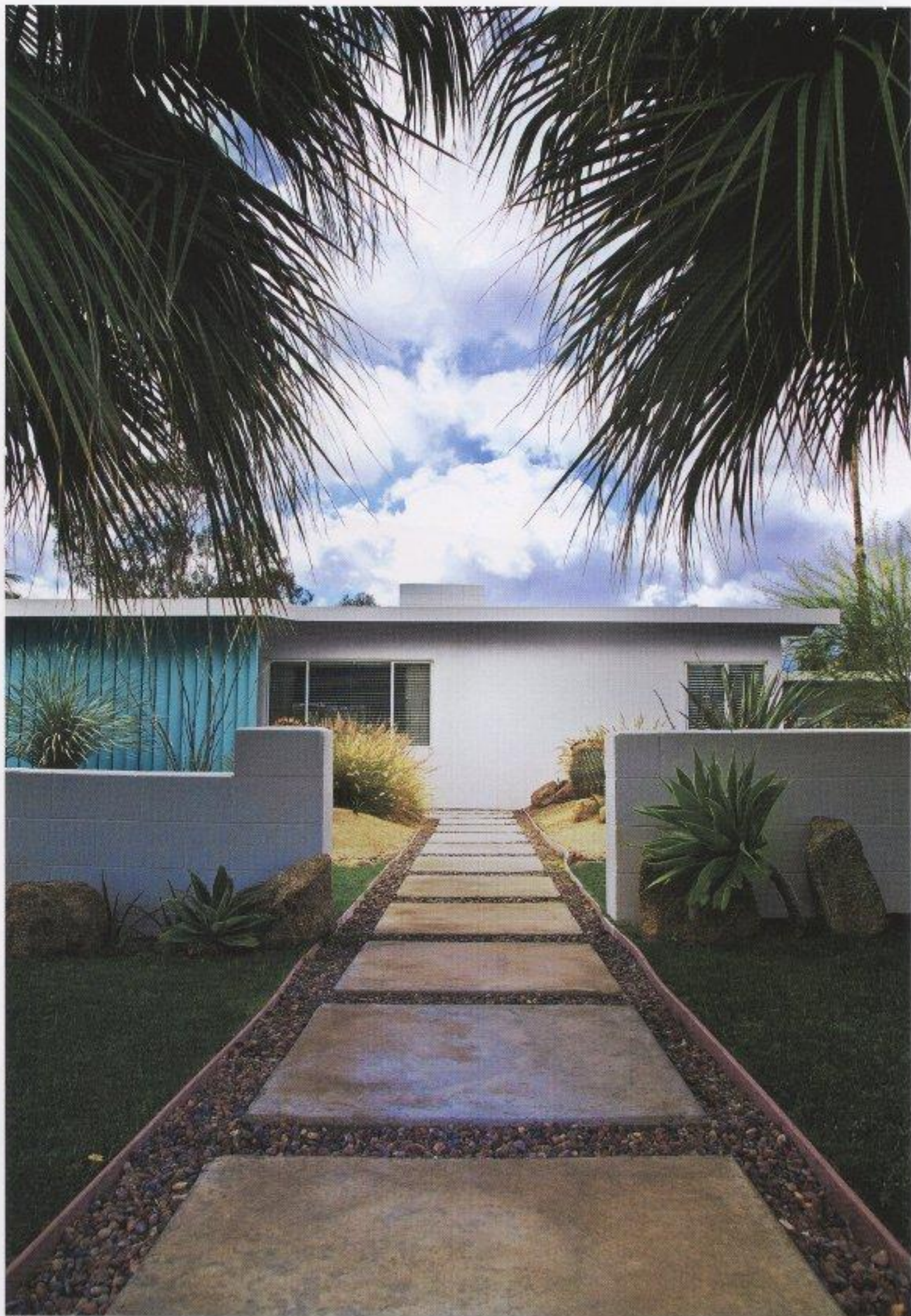
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Turquoise is a recurring color on the front door, privacy screen, tile porch floor and in the kidney-shaped pool in the back. The pool area features yellow Garney Ceramics pots and vintage Knoll butterfly chairs, along with more Hakatai tile installed on the wall.

Ashley Huang





Azhar Hung