

Los Angeles Times

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For a more natural look, the cedar hot tub was set into the hillside just beyond the seating area of the amphitheater.

A ROCKY ROAD TO BEAUTY

BY ANNE HARNAGEL

Brian Andreas and Ellen Rockne's wish: a soft, clean, drought-resistant garden with Japanese influences. Enter Margie Grace to bring it all together.

When landscape designer Margie Grace saw her clients' new Santa Barbara home, she knew it would be a challenge to make the rustic yet contemporary dwelling fit its site and blend into the neighborhood near the Santa Barbara mission, where houses date to the late 1800s.

Designed by architect Michelle Kaufmann, the home consisted of four modular prefabricated boxes sheathed in Cor-Ten steel. Although the house is rectilinear and modern, the owners, Brian Andreas and Ellen Rockne, wanted something other than a spare, geometric look for the outdoor spaces. It had to be beautiful, Andreas said. "No rectilinear modernist garden, but something softer – vegetation and trees that feel like brush strokes across the landscape."



Grace chose relatively few plants, creating an uncluttered look that also met the owners' demands for low maintenance and water use.



In a nod to Japanese aesthetic, long stones were used in the frontyard landscape to evoke the idea of a dry creek bed.

Added Rockne, “We knew we wanted drought-resistant, and a clean, simple aesthetic with Japanese influences.” And it had to be zero maintenance. “We’re artists, and that’s not where we put our time and energy,” Andreas said.

To accomplish those goals, Grace, with training in – serendipitously – geology, devised a naturalistic setting with yellow sandstone boulders, changes in elevation and rolling sweeps of prairie-like grasses.

In preparing the site – a long-ago creek bed – for the modular units, nearly 280 tons of the sandstone had been unearthed, including a boulder Rockne described as “big as a VW.” After deciding to use it all, Grace and her crew began by sorting the rock according to size.

“It’s a pretty big puzzle to work with,” she said of scattering it with a back hoe, large boulders first, around the site. “As you dig into the piles, you see opportunities. You’re making it up as you go.”

But making it up as you go meant some of the stonework didn’t look quite right until it was partly buried. Inspired by a walk around the mission, where Andreas had noticed that its walls varied in age and states of repair, he and Grace decided to demolish a newly constructed stone wall in the front yard, hitting it with a tractor and allowing it to crumble and fall. “We were able to use the rock in a natural fashion, so that it looked like it had rolled down the hillside and silted in,” Andreas explained.

The relatively few plants Grace selected for the garden made for a unified composition; there’s a subtlety to it that’s welcoming and relaxed. The limited plant palette also satisfied the owners’ demands for low maintenance and low water use. Four grass varieties – Mexican feather grass, autumn moor grass, feather reed grass and giant needle grass – were chosen for their differing heights, the “feel” of their seed heads and their ability to play against the rock. “It’s amazing when the sun goes down, [the garden] really is radiant,” Grace said, describing the feathery grasses as they catch the light and ripple in the breeze.

Succulents were added near the fire pit and amphitheater so that they appeared to be volunteers. For little pops of color – maybe only 10% of the garden – Grace chose lavender, blue-eyed grass, Douglas iris and yarrow. Jacaranda, crape myrtle, Japanese maple and strawberry trees were picked for their near-calligraphic qualities and pruned to show off the simple lines, or brush strokes, of their trunks and branches.

The house has since been sold, though Rockne and Andreas recall the garden fondly. “Only Margie can take a pile of rocks and make them into something beautiful,” Rockne said.

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Modern house finds its softer side in the garden

December 11, 2010 | 10:30 am



Our latest garden gallery: Santa

Barbara-based [Margie Grace](#) took on the challenge of developing the landscaping around a home designed by architect Michelle Kaufmann, whose design called for four modular prefabricated boxes sheathed in Cor-Ten steel. Although the house is rectilinear, clients Brian Andreas and Ellen Rockne wanted something different for the outdoor spaces. "Something softer -- vegetation and trees that feel like brush strokes across the landscape," Andreas said.

Read our [article](#) or click through the [17-picture photo gallery](#).

-- Anne Harnagel

Photo, top: Nearly 280 tons of sandstone were unearthed in preparing the site for construction, and Grace deployed all of it as part of the garden design. Credit: Holly Lepere

Photo, bottom: The plan includes a fire pit, boulder benches and a hot tub that melds into the landscape. Credit: Holly Lepere



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LA Times Slideshow 1-5: Margie Grace brings it all together (Photos: Holly Lepere)



When landscape designer Margie Grace saw her clients' new Santa Barbara home, she knew it would be a challenge to make the rustic yet contemporary dwelling fit its site and blend into the neighborhood near the Santa Barbara mission, where houses date to the late 1800s.



Designed by architect Michelle Kaufmann, the home consisted of four modular prefabricated boxes sheathed in Cor-Ten steel.



Steps leading to the front door.



Although the house is rectilinear and modern, the owners, Brian Andreas and Ellen Rockne, wanted something other than a spare, geometric look for the outdoor spaces.



It had to be beautiful, Andreas said. “No rectilinear modernist garden, but something softer — vegetation and trees that feel like brush strokes across the landscape.” (The tower in the background belongs to a neighboring property and is not part of the new home or garden.)

LA Times Slideshow 6-9



Added Rockne, “We knew we wanted drought-resistant, and a clean, simple aesthetic with Japanese influences.” And it had to be zero maintenance.



To accomplish those goals, Grace, with training in – serendipitously – geology, devised a naturalistic setting with yellow sandstone boulders, changes in elevation and rolling sweeps of prairie-like grasses.



In preparing the site – a long-ago creek bed – for the modular units, nearly 280 tons of the sandstone had been unearthed, including a boulder Rockne described as “big as a VW.”



The plants that Grace selected for the garden made for a unified composition. Though some might object to the use of Mexican feather grass, which can spread uncontrollably unless the stalks are cut before seeds ripen, the plant does survive with little water and create the effect Grace’s clients wanted.

LA Times Slideshow 10-12



There's a subtlety to it that's welcoming and relaxed.



The limited plant palette also satisfied the owners' demands for low maintenance and low water use. v



The varieties were chosen for their differing heights, the "feel" of their seed heads and their ability to play against the rock.

LA Times Slideshow 13-17



Jacaranda, crape myrtle, Japanese maple and strawberry trees were picked for their near-calligraphic qualities and pruned to show off the simple lines, or brush strokes, of their trunks and branches.



“It’s a pretty big puzzle to work with,” Grace said of scattering the sandstone with a back hoe, large boulders first, around the site. “As you dig into the piles, you see opportunities.”



“It’s amazing when the sun goes down, [the garden] really is radiant,” Grace said, describing the feathery grasses as they catch the light and ripple in the breeze.



Succulents were added near the fire pit, amphitheater and hot tub so that they appeared to be volunteers.



The house has since been sold, though Rockne and Andreas recall the garden fondly. “Only Margie can take a pile of rocks and make them into something beautiful,” Rockne said.