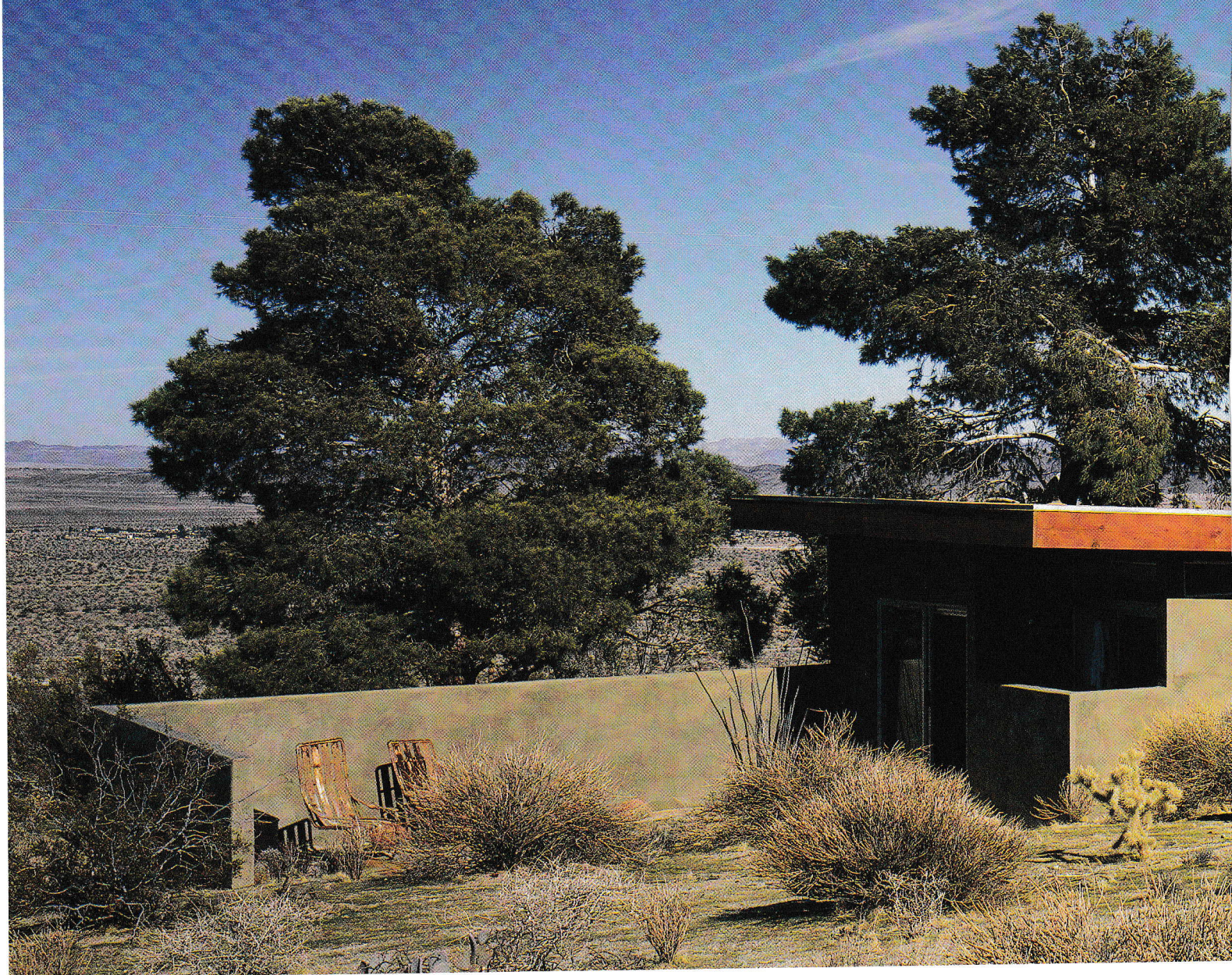


JOSHUA TREE SOLITAIRE

MARMOL RADZINER AND ASSOCIATES

CREATES A TINY MODERNIST JEWEL

IN THE SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA DESERT





ARCHITECT RON RADZINER HAS A FELICITOUS WAY of describing the houses he designs: "They should sit gently in the environment." Certainly it is an apt description of the small house he created in the town of Joshua Tree—a rocky expanse of high desert with more cactus than citizens—about 50 miles northeast of Palm Springs, California. Nestled among voluptuous boulders at the very boundary of the 1,240 square miles of Joshua Tree National Park, the house is both unobtrusive and striking.

Leo Marmol and Ron Radziner established their reputations as renovators of Southern California mid-century design. Their Los Angeles-based firm, Marmol Radziner and Associates, is widely recognized for the restoration of houses by legendary architects Richard Neutra and Rudolph Schindler. Understandably, Marmol and Radziner's original architectural work demonstrates an allegiance to their progenitors' ideals, the most marked being delight in the natural world.

That, in brief, is what drove John Schuster and Clea Benson to recruit Radziner after buying 7½ acres of land bordering the national park. "Ron was a great choice because he understands small spaces and the relationships between indoor and outdoor spaces," explains Schuster.

After years as busy professionals in Los Angeles, Schuster and Benson were enthralled by the distinctly unbusy Joshua Tree. While the couple still own houses in Los Angeles, they wanted to spend more time in

opposite: Woven leather chairs and wood side tables are on the terrace, which is accessed by a folding glass door (top). The space is partially shaded by an opaque plastic screen and a series of joists made with wood—free of knots—from mature Douglas fir trees in Oregon (far left and left). **above:** Sunlight pours through the loftlike interior. A 1950 Bruno Mathsson table is surrounded by rattan chairs. Behind the custom casework, with a eucalyptus veneer, is a Murphy bed.



Joshua Tree. "We fell in love with the desert," Benson says. They began with the 388-square-foot guesthouse, where they spend weekends until the 1,400-square-foot main house, which will be situated farther back among the great rocks on the property, is completed.

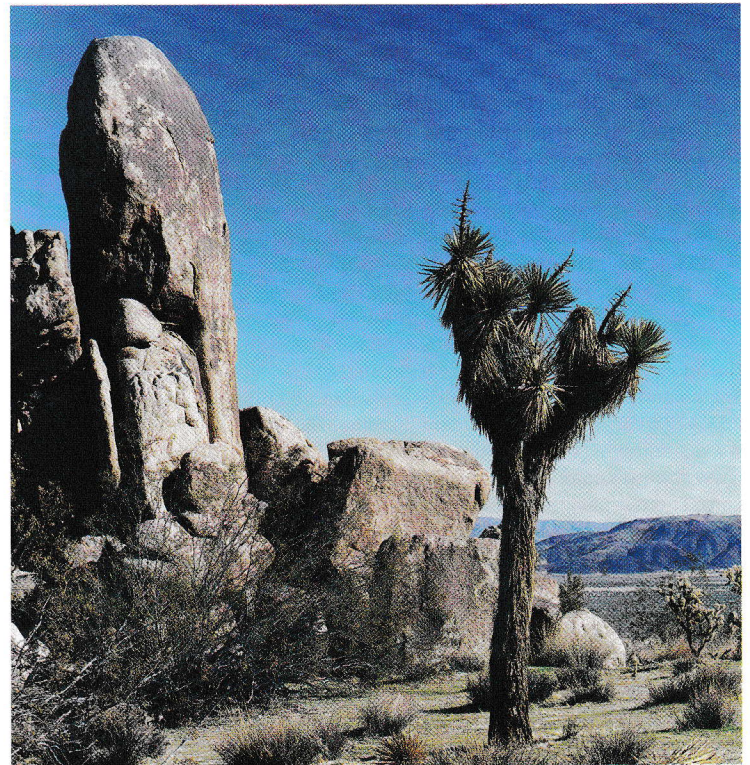
Working with a diminutive footprint, Radziner avoided a radical design and followed the guidelines of the shack that had come with the property. Joshua Tree has been studded with such shacks since the 1930s, when homesteaders came to the area seeking land. Radziner added to the concrete-slab foundation of the original shack, canted the roofline upward to add height and replicated the original patio. The result is an updated interpretation of a vernacular style: a shack for the twenty-first century. "We used as much of the original structure as possible," says Radziner, "and expanded on that in a straightforward, economical way."

The house consists only of a dining-and-kitchen area, a bedroom and a bath. The walls of the dining area and bedroom are fitted with sliding glass doors, while the front door is a piece of vertically folding glass. "You get to borrow space from the expansive landscape outdoors," Radziner explains. "It's not broken up into rooms. The bedroom melts into the kitchen, which melts into the dining area." The bath, which features an outdoor shower, is the only enclosed room. An in-line water heater was installed, so even on a cold morning Schuster and Benson have endless amounts of hot water under which they can stand and watch the rabbits run wild among the ocotillos and creosote bushes. Instead of installing a spa, Benson bought a horse trough and had it powder-coated in chocolate brown and placed next to an outdoor pair of water taps. "We come out here, sit in the tub, look at the sky, and it slows us down," Schuster says. "Off the bedroom, the garden opens to the landscape," says Radziner. "The patio with a trellis roof is a transition space between the house and Joshua Tree. The house feels warm but never removes you from nature. That's in all the work that we do."

"The kinds of materials we use there—metal, concrete, wood—have a certain integrity and naturalness to them," says Radziner, "and we use those materials in a fairly rigorous way. It's an economical little house, but it always takes time to get things of high quality done." To maintain the clean aesthetic, the joists over the patio had to be free of any knots, so wood from mature trees in Oregon was imported. Radziner chose eucalyptus panels for the dining area's single wall, which also conceals a Murphy bed. The same honey-toned, deeply grained wood is used on cabinetry in the kitchen, the bedroom and even for a storage area under the bed. "It's like a ship," Schuster says. "Everything has to have a place to go."

"It sounds silly to say that a piece of architecture can change your life," says Benson. "It's amazing, but it did. Now we come down almost every weekend. It changed how we live and how we think about the world in a lot of ways." ↵

opposite: The dining area window frames an unobstructed view of the national park. **above left:** Beyond the kitchen and the dining area is the bedroom. **above right:** Eucalyptus-veneered cabinetry, designed by Marmol Radziner and Associates, offsets polished limestone countertops in the kitchen.



bottom right: Grey Crawford