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# RENDERING: DESERT INTUITION

Kristi Hanson brings lush designs to the California desert

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PHOTOGRAPY BY Ethan Kaminsky





**This page:** The front courtyard of this Palm Desert home — with its lap pool, barbeque, and sitting area — make nine months of warm dry weather a breeze. **Right:** A large living room fireplace — a Hanson trademark — is set in elegant black Calcutta marble.



A hundred miles east of Los Angeles, the hills above the Coachella Valley thrum with life. Purple lupine bloom in quiet extravagance, fan palms trim roadways and the boulders lying in heaps on the hills radiate light and warmth. For 20 years, this luminous slice of desert known as Palm Desert and Palm Springs has been the backdrop for the innovative residential designs of architect Kristi Hanson. In residence after residence, Hanson's creatively imagined spaces reveal her ability to marry beauty and function in ways that make your heart skip.

Standing in the backyard of a recently completed contemporary home, Hanson said she comes up with her designs by visiting a project's lot alone and allowing it to speak to her.

"Obviously I'm going to be looking at the views," said Hanson. "But it's more intuitive for me than that. It's like it jumps out at me."





The technique, though probably impossible to teach, is by now surefire. Consider the results: 50 custom residences on the Bighorn Golf Club property alone; even more scattered across the West — including several in Hawaii — and eight in the planning stages. One of these is in Seattle, Washington, another in Sacramento, California. All of them generated by word of mouth.

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A few blocks from Bighorn's main clubhouse, a 7,300-square-foot desert contemporary that Hanson designed, faces the snow-capped San Jacinto Mountains to the south. The exterior is a variation of rectangles in rich earthy colors: dark brown Ipê wood, grey slate and tan. A whisper of Malibu beach house surrenders to desert abode as barrel cacti, agave and stones lead to a giant frosted-glass front door that swings open from a freestanding concrete frame. Through it, an outdoor oasis with a 50-foot lap pool, spa and sitting area with fireplace demands that worldly concerns remain in the car.

The great room here is voluminous and light; dining room, kitchen and patios on either side flow together like segments of a river. Eleven-foot-high glass pocket-doors on either side connect the house with its patios, which, when opened, let residents enjoy outdoor living during roughly eight consecutive months of dry, balmy weather. The variety of materials are eye-catching without inundating; from a

**Opposite page, clockwise from top left:** The space flows in this house. The kitchen repeats the selective use of Ipê wood and cream-colored granite radiates light from the patio. | With bright, comfortable furniture and a bar, the pool area is a natural extension of the home's living space. | Ribbed bamboo floors add warmth to each bedroom. | A two-bedroom guest suite mixes the textures of marble, wood and the soft fringe of shag rugs for playful style and comfort. | A 14-foot glass door brings you to a voluminous great room where vein-cut travertine floors and clerestory windows add to the natural brightness. Ten-foot glass pocket doors open onto a second north-facing patio, where the Bighorn golf course and Little San Bernardino Mountains form a backdrop.

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This page, from top: Travertine floors and fireplace bring style and comfort to the front patio of this house. | A front courtyard becomes a desert oasis when blessed with a 50-foot lap pool, spa, desert trees and flora, and a view of Mount San Jacinto.



playful hand-blown glass chandelier over the dining table to an array of glass balls protruding from a master bathroom wall to the ribbed bamboo flooring in each of the bedrooms. Hanson said she's always looking for new materials and new ways of using old ones. Like the shiny black marble that's patterned with design circles in the guest bath and the rippled Spanish cedar that comprises a ceiling.

Hanson knows how to leverage the desert's drama and glamour; it is one of the things that keeps her clients coming back for designs. Her exteriors, which utilize a panoply of stones, reflect the colors of the desert; her windows frame views in satisfying composition. Dave Butterfield, for whom Hanson has designed multiple homes, describes a window in the bar of Bighorn's Canyons Steak House, which Hanson designed. It could easily pass for a canvas, he says. "It frames the mountain perfectly."

In this particular desert contemporary, built on spec, individual areas invite you to settle in. The giant fireplace built into a slab of black Calcutta marble is one of them; the kitchen with mahogany cupboards that tag the dark wood on an opposite wall and its creamy quartz countertops is another.

Ninety-nine percent of Hanson's projects are residential, and she works in any design style requested. "I like the variation," she said. "I love the creative organic (style), but if I only did that, I think I'd be bored."

Hanson came to this northern edge of the Sonoran Desert directly following her graduation from architecture school at North Dakota State University (NDSU) in Fargo. (She only sent resumés to firms in warm climates.) Hanson grew up in Williston, North Dakota, just outside Fargo. It was there, when she was in seventh grade, she decided she would be an architect.

"Buildings fascinated me," said the statuesque blonde, dressed in blue jeans and heels. "I always wanted to know what was going on inside of them when I saw the outside. And I loved to draw." That said, she admits that in the seventh grade, she didn't fully know what an architect actually did. But her intuition was apparently working for her then, too.

The staff at Kristi Hanson Architects, Inc. includes one additional licensed architect besides herself. But almost everyone there has been to architecture school. They will do interiors for select clients, but they contract out landscaping design.

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(AIA) membership is female. That's an increase from 2000, when women comprised only 9 percent of the AIA. Hanson said when she began practicing 20 years ago (making \$6 an hour), the field really did feel like a man's dominion; she was aware that she was one of a few. Now, however, she

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doesn't even notice. And when she does, she sees it as an asset.

"I think I listen better," Hanson said. "And I would say my clients would say that I really listen to what they want and then give it to them in a way that's architecturally great."

Butterfield would verify this supposition. When Hanson showed him and his wife an initial drawing for the 18,000-square-foot house they are currently building, Butterfield's wife, Loie, said, "Can't we have any curves?"

Given her marching orders, Hanson went to work. The roof of their house gracefully tilts upward at its north-facing edges; its exterior has several sections that gently curve outward and are coated alternately by quarry stone and quilted copper. And that's just the beginning.

"She will listen and she will advise, but there is nothing we've thought of that is stupid or not thought through. She makes this a lot of fun." ■

*Isabelle T. Walker* is a freelance writer based in Santa Barbara.

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