

## **ROBERT IRWIN'S CENTRAL GARDEN**

### **AT THE J. PAUL GETTY CENTER**

**“Ever present, never twice the same.  
Ever changing, never less than whole.”  
- Robert Irwin**



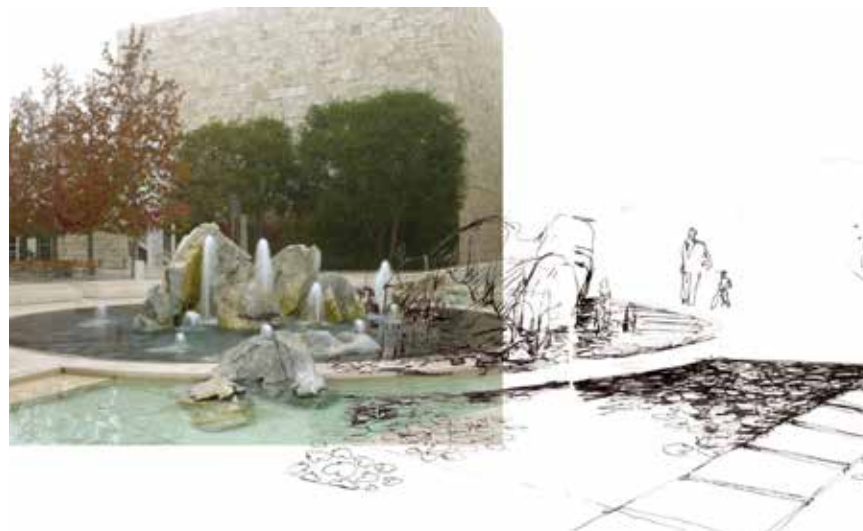
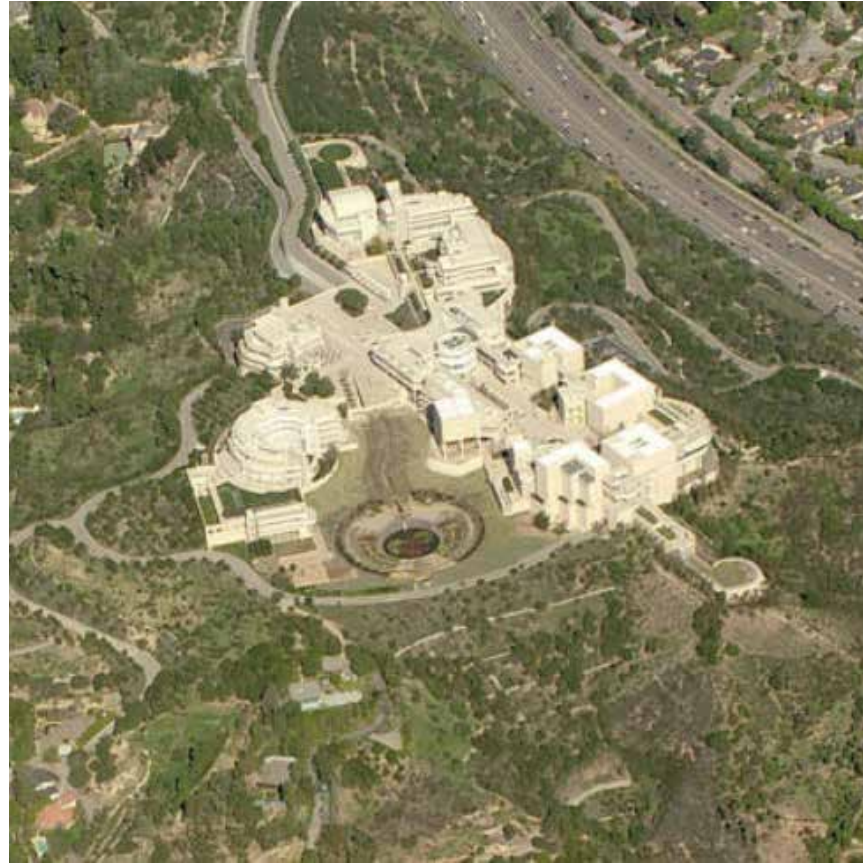
# BRIEF HISTORY

As one of the main cultural bastions of the City of Los Angeles, The J. Paul Getty Center's 24-acre campus sits 900-feet above sea level on a ridgeline of the Santa Monica Mountains. With its North-South axis, the Getty parallels the 405 freeway, and is surrounded by a 600-acre preserve featuring 10,000 native oaks, hundreds of conifers, dozens of cedars and thousands of ground cover plants. Design and construction of the site began in 1983, opening to the public on December 16, 1997.

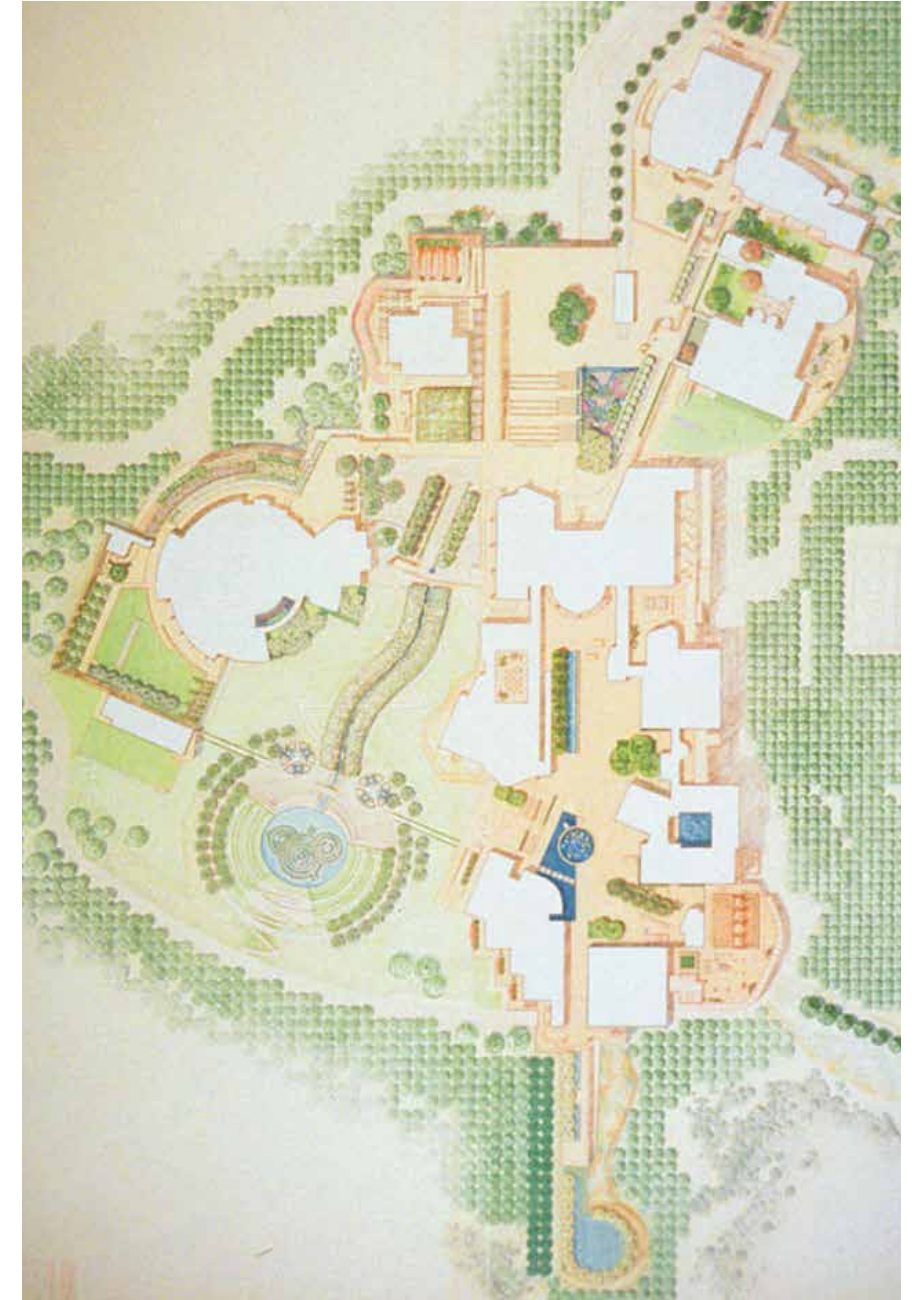
The architecture for the museum, foundation, research and conservation institutes that make up the campus was designed by modernist architect Richard Meier. Meier used the angle of the ridgelines to create two overlaying grids that are visible throughout the site. The modern and Bauhaus influence is strongly present in his design (controlled site views and the exposed travertine stone, to name a few), but other than designing big plazas, and leaving the woodland intact, Meier did not have big plans for the exterior (an echo to the modern architectural styles of Mies van der Rohe and Le Corbusier).

Laurie Olin and Emmet Wemple were the landscape architects commissioned for the main complex. Their design is strongly influenced by the Italian Renaissance hillside landscape, with stepped terraces, fountains, reflecting pools, and courtyards. The preserve around the site (which is both ecologically sound and acts as a buffer) also gives one the feeling of being in the woods on a hill, which is very much in keeping with Italian Renaissance villa design. The fountains, canals, and large reflecting pools echo the gardens of Moorish Spain, the Italian Renaissance & French Baroque Gardens. In response to Meier's modernist architectural design, Olin and Wemple's style was modernistic in its simplicity, with strong influences from both the Mediterranean gardens of the past and California post-war modernism.

The Getty's Board of Trustees wanted the exterior to shine and be as beautiful and significant as the artwork contained within, so they hired California abstract artist Robert Irwin to design the 134,000-square-foot area that would become the Central Garden. Originally a painter, Irwin had never designed a garden before, but was a pivotal figure in contemporary art, and was associated with the **light and space** movement. By the time he began work on the Getty, he had coincidentally just stopped making permanent art. He was much more interested in conditional or **phenomenological art**, where the site specific environment informed its creation.



Courtesy of [www.theolinstudio.com](http://www.theolinstudio.com)



Site plan courtesy of [www.asla.org](http://www.asla.org)





# DESIGN & PERCEIVED INFLUENCES - ROBERT IRWIN'S CENTRAL GARDEN

“Art doesn't reside in the object but in the moment.” - Robert Irwin

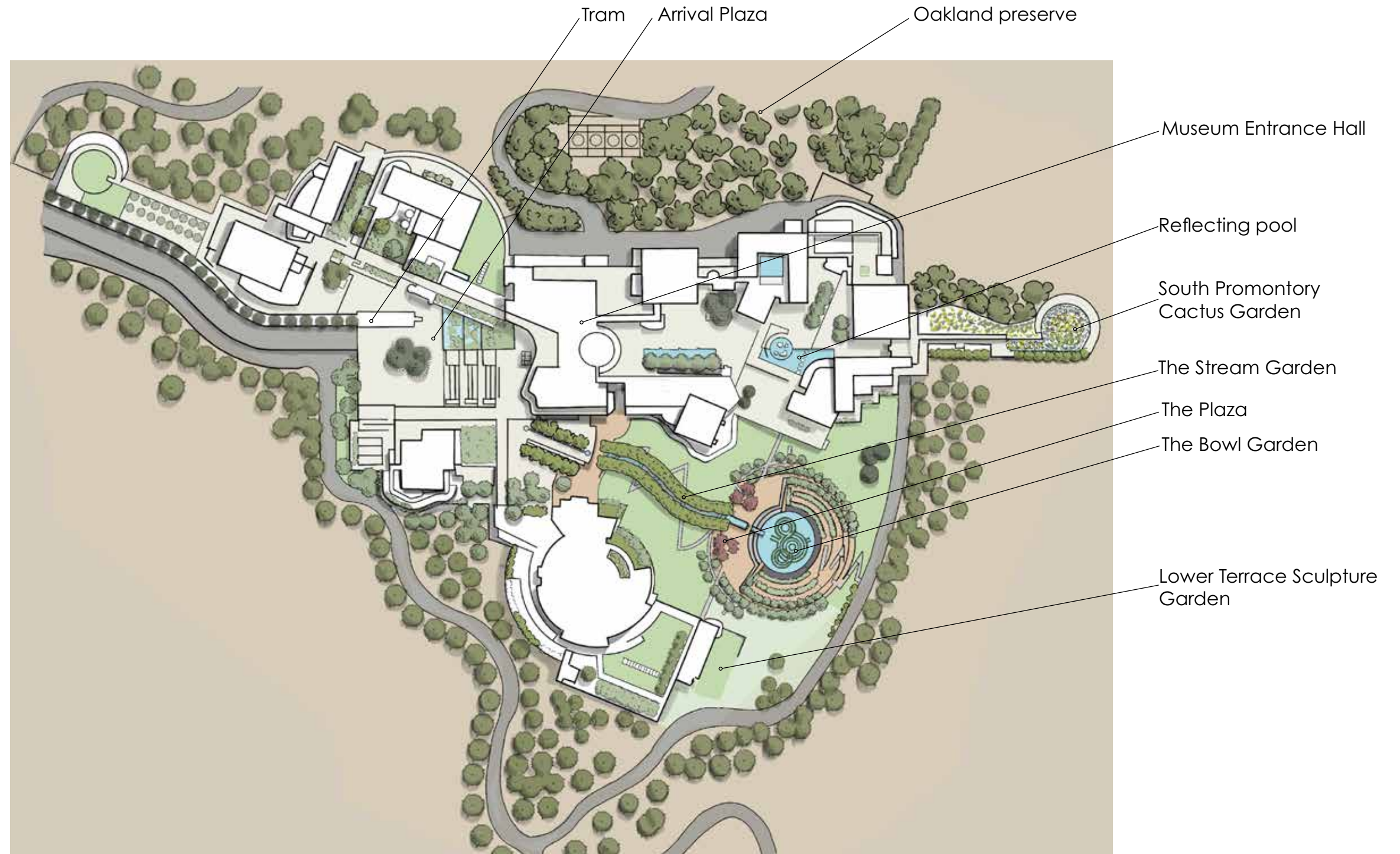
Robert Irwin's Central Garden has been described as a living work of art. Irwin describes it as “a sculpture in the form of a garden aspiring to be art.”

Irwin's landscape design as a response to Meier's architecture is essentially a great example of **abstract modernism**. Irwin layered combinations of plantings that juxtapose color, texture, density, sounds, and other sensory experiences with natural forms that change over time. Changes in light, temperature, sound, water, fragrance, wind, rhythms and architecture were carefully orchestrated throughout the **Central Garden**.

Irwin was influenced by Italian magic realism painter **Giorgio Morandi** (1810-1964), whose still life expressionist paintings inspired Irwin's use of color, shadow and shade. This is reflected in the garden with his careful choice of plant material and placement.

There are three parts to Irwin's design, which he began planning in 1992:

- The Stream Garden
- The Plaza
- The Bowl Garden



The Getty Center Site Plan





# DESIGN & PERCEIVED INFLUENCES - THE STREAM GARDEN

“There’s no palette as rich as a garden. And the intensity of it - I make this statement all the time: you can’t plan nature; you court her.” - Robert Irwin

Irwin recreated the stream that once curved around the canyon with a natural ravine lined with trees and rock outcroppings.

The water source begins at the fountain on the plaza level and flows through a canal into a grotto. The use of gravity and the long canal is rooted strongly in **Moorish-Spain** design. The grotto and fountain also show **Italian Renaissance** influence.

Irwin’s use of light and shadow is unique in the grotto. A small circle of light contrasts sharply with the dark inverted vase-like structure. His pioneer work with the **Light and Space** movement that developed in Los Angeles in the 1960s is strongly represented here. It compliments the travertine and white metal sheets of the Getty Center’s architecture.

As the flow of water meanders down the **zigzag** path, different sounds, colors and sensations are experienced throughout the way. Out of necessity, Irwin designed the zigzag walkway to comply with ADA requirements. The asymmetrical pattern is a clear example of 20th century modernist design. The design also echoes eras of the past (primarily **French Baroque** and early **Italian Renaissance** design) with its topiary hedge accentuating its edges.

Irwin’s use of boulders (specifically the outcropping at the beginning of the stream) and bridges echoes the symbolism represented in **Chinese** and **Japanese** gardens.



Canal on the plaza level leading to the Grotto.



The Grotto on the north side of the garden wall showing influence from the Light & Space movement.



Tree-lined zigzag walkway with understory plants organized by the complexity of their leaves.

Topiary hedge accentuates the asymmetry of the **modernist** pathway design.



Succulent plant palette

NTS 



Rock outcropping carefully placed to alter the sound of water.



Drawing of the Stream Garden looking north on the zigzag path. Every area was designed to sound, feel and look different.



# DESIGN & PERCEIVED INFLUENCES - THE PLAZA & THE BOWL GARDEN

“Gardening has always been an art, essentially.” - Robert Irwin

The stream gradually descends into the Plaza, where umbrella-like structures made of rebar uphold the bright colored bougainvillea - the main focus of the Plaza.

The large open swaths of turf that surround the Central Garden echo the **pastoral English** landscape. Irwin was said to have spent months in the Santa Monica mountains studying different blades of grass. He was interested in how the tufts would play against the marble or bougainvillea.

Every feature of the project was conceived, designed, and selected to offer a particular sight, smell and sound.

The Bowl Garden holds the denouement of the stream, as it cascades over a waterfall into the floating azalea maze. The maze has perhaps the strongest **French Baroque** and **Italian Renaissance** influence in the garden. The reflecting pool is another feature that represents design from this era.

Surrounding the pool of water are specialty gardens with 500 varieties of hand-picked trees, plants and ground cover. These paint the landscape, which Irwin wanted both the visitors and the people that worked there to enjoy.

The physical experience produced by the work and its perception through all the senses are key elements of Irwin's approach and intention. It is experiential and site-specific art; the quintessential modern garden.



Waterfall into the Azalea maze



Bougainvillea spilling over umbrella-like rebar trellis



NTS 



English pastoral-like turf



The Bowl Garden



Azalea Maze exquisitely manicured



Seasonal change in the Bowl Garden



View of the maze, waterfall, and bougainvillea sculptures

REFERENCES:

[www.thegettycenter.org](http://www.thegettycenter.org)  
[www.asla.org](http://www.asla.org)  
[www.worldarchitects.com](http://www.worldarchitects.com)  
 Additional photos courtesy of The Getty Center