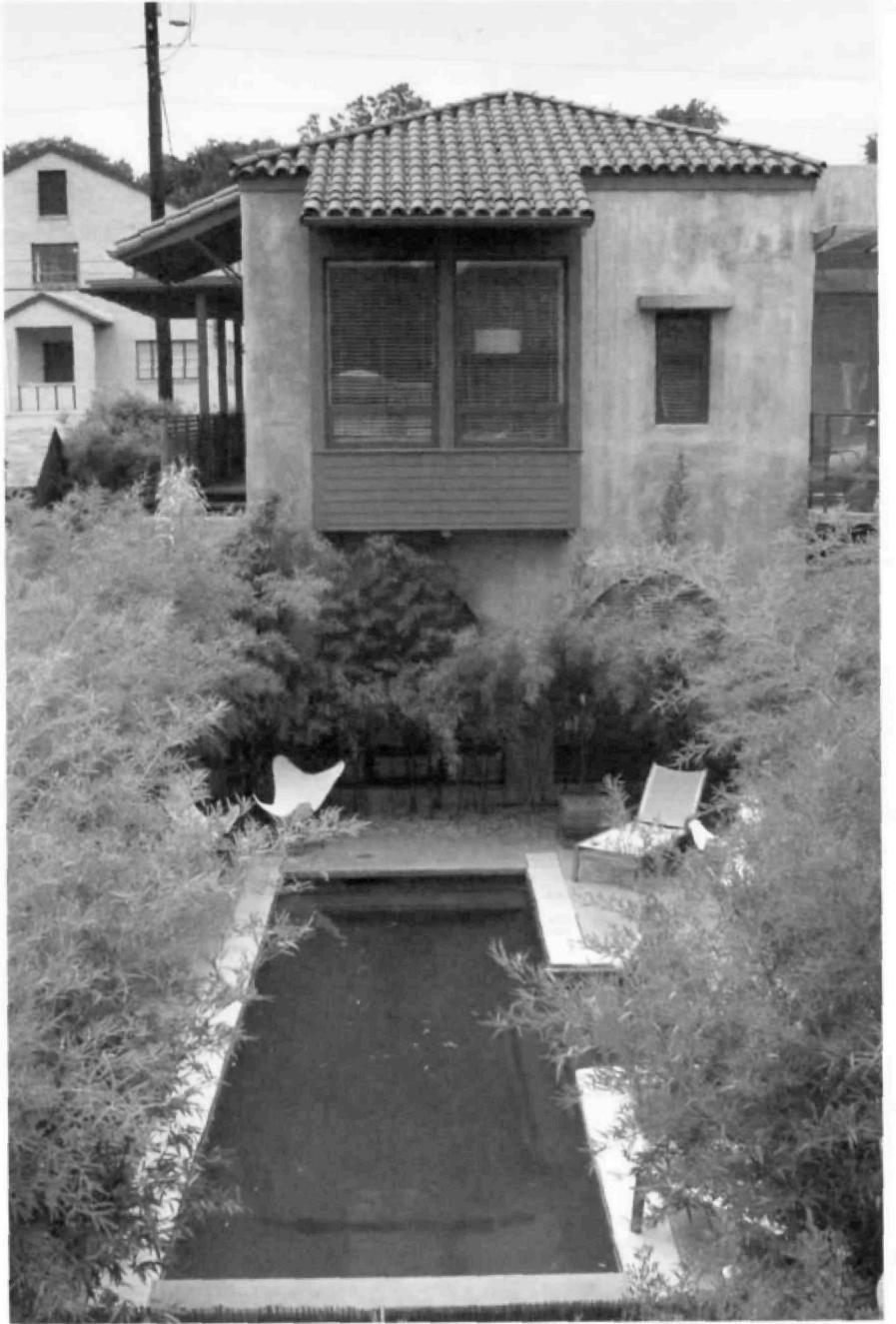


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# Hotel SAN JOSÉ

DO YOU KNOW THE WAY?



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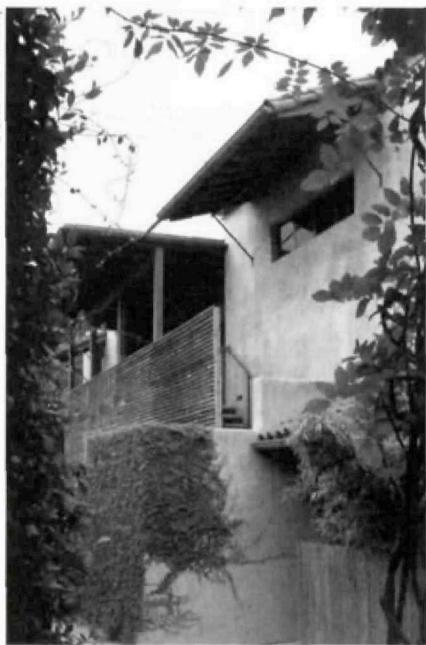
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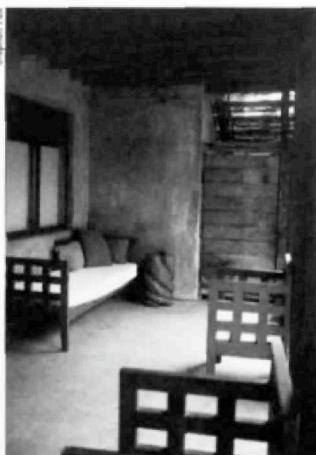
Stephen Fox



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Stephen Fox



## THE ZEN OF MOTOR-COURT RENOVATION

BY NONYA GRENADER

### IT WASN'T EASY TO REINVENT AUSTIN'S SAN

**JOSÉ**, a 1930s-era motor court on South Congress Avenue. In its heyday, the San José was a picturesque tourist spot, but by the time Odessa-born Liz Lambert bought it in 1995, the place was dilapidated — many would say beyond repair. Lambert, a lawyer, left a position in the Texas Attorney General's office to keep the motel running, hoping to re-create it room by room.

In retrospect, says Lambert, "it was a blessing not to have the money to do it all at once." She kept the doors open while observing every possibility — the bones and layout of the existing buildings, the quality of light and shadow, and the unique site in the midst of burgeoning development on South Congress. The venerable Continental Club, a nightclub that had been attracting well-known musicians since 1957, was directly across the street. Antique shops, thrift stores, and restaurants added to the mix.

In 1998, after assembling a team of architects and craftspeople who shared her design sensibilities, Lambert closed the motel for renovation. David Lake and Ted Flato (Lake Flato Architects), with their project architect Bob Harris, examined the typical U-shaped motor-court layout with its two-story front office and room wings flanking center parking. Lake immediately envisioned a new back building that would form a fourth

edge. In a practical sense, the addition doubled the rental possibilities from 20 to 40 rooms. And as a design move, the new structure completed a frame for the courtyard that today is continuously filled with guests and locals alike.

The exterior is as compelling as the interior. Bamboo and cactus punctuate walkway and pool edges. Rainwater is channeled into sculpted concrete catch ponds, and vines have overtaken metal pergolas. And just when the gray-green palette seems almost too restrained, pink antique roses invade the color scheme. The same contrasts infuse the spare interiors. A woven Ikea lounge mixes with a classic red Eames chair. Vibrant Indian prints cover beds that float on slabs of East Texas pine. Rooms are equipped with compact disc players, and the extensive CD library ranges from Leonard Cohen to Louis Armstrong.

It is not surprising to learn that Lambert has made a film to document the transformation of the San José — as she calls it, "an homage to its previous life." For Lambert, the "before" is as important as the "after" — just another juxtaposition. It is the easy cadence between differences in style and materials that make the San José so intriguing and so difficult to categorize. When Hank Williams III visited, he observed that, at the San José, "Japan meets Mexico." He was just about right. ■

## REAL COOL

BY STEPHEN FOX

**THE HOTEL SAN JOSÉ IS COOL.** It is also real. This is less of a paradox than it seems. Coolness pertains to style, which involves performance, appearances, attitudes. Reality is (or is supposed to be) about how things are, irrespective of how they act, look, or what people's opinions about them may be. That the San José is simultaneously real and cool is a critique of all the places that are not cool because they try to evade the reality of their circumstances. The San José makes the real cool by engaging its setting, but selectively. Economy of means leads to spatial clarity and ambient tranquility.

Green and gray: you would never guess there are so many variations of these two colors. At the San José, green

and gray are the tones of the stucco walls and painted trim of its buildings. They are the predominant tones of its copious but restrained vegetation. If you look at the walls, you begin to notice that they are tonally continuous with the plant species alongside or on them. At the San José you notice that you notice such things, even if you don't usually notice such things. That's the kind of place it is.

It's fun to be outdoors at the San José. There are spaces to explore. Linear open-air corridors fringed with bamboo and punctuated by trees that shoot up through decomposed granite paths, pergola-sheltered passageways between buildings, views into distant courts and through horizontal wood lattices into

sheltered patios, inset porches furnished with upholstered day beds: it's not about something (or someplace) else. It's here.

The rooms are spare, animated by reflected light that makes you remember that *lux* ("light") is the Latin root of "luxury." A polished concrete floor, a bed consisting of a mattress on a pine platform with arms that serve as bedside tables, a pine counter-table-desk hung from the wall on black-painted steel struts, a molded red chair, and a bright-colored sliding panel that is the bathroom door. And a page torn from a book of poems, thumb-tacked to the bathroom wall.

At the San José you feel happy. You're glad you're here. You wish you could stay longer. ■