

THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF PALM DESERT

THE GREGORY HOUSE 1986

73550 Pinyon Street, Palm Desert, CA



Completed in 1986, this 3-bedroom and 4-bathroom home, with 3,750 square feet sits on a large corner lot.

Known as "The Berm House", it is an early Palm Desert example of passive solar design and remarkable desert landscaping.



Photos by Linda Holden Clode



ARCHITECT:

IRA "BUD" JOHNSON, AIA

LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT:

RON GREGORY, ASLA

OWNERS:

RON & MARCY GREGORY



modernism week

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"In 1984, with our second child on the way and our house on Old Prospector Trail becoming too small, my wife Marcy and I purchased a large lot on Pinyon Street on which we planned to build a new home. We wanted a lot of outdoor space for the kids to play and also to have some fun with landscaping. We were enamored by the concept of passive solar mitigation, and I bought several books on architectural design which addressed differing means of shielding the structure from the sun.

A note from owner and landscape architect, Ron Gregory

It became apparent that our best approach might be to design an underground house, but a design that radical would likely be frowned upon in our neighborhood setting, not to mention that it would be prohibitively expensive to construct. With the front of our proposed house facing south, we decided that a compromise approach might work.

We had seen a home in Indian Wells which had a berm out front with a tall retaining wall holding back the berm about ten feet short of the house, creating small, shady courtyards between the retaining wall and the house. This approach, while screening the house from the sun's rays, didn't take advantage of the cooler soil temperature a few feet below grade, so we decided that our house would have a berm but we could make the retaining wall part of the house structure itself. In this manner, the cooler underground soil of the berm would abut the wall and transmit the lower temperature directly into the house.

We also considered other means of providing passive solar mitigation, including architectural "eyebrows" over the windows, a separate roof which would provide shade over the actual roof (we scrapped this idea because of the additional cost) and also planting large trees and palms on the south side to cast shade over the house.

I had initially been encouraged to move to the desert in 1977 by Ira L. "Bud" Johnson, a local architect who complained that there weren't enough landscape architects in town. He hired me to work part time for him, with the rest of my time directed to starting up my own landscape architectural practice. In gratitude to Ira, we engaged his services to design our new home. Bud was proud of his reputation for designing rounded-corner buildings, and our house was no exception.

Bud came up with the idea of a zig zag entry walk cutting through the berm, with retaining walls holding back the grade. This made the entry to our home more mysterious, an important tenet of Japanese garden design. As our property is located on the corner of Pinyon and Burroweed Streets, we faced the usual concern of a large area to landscape with limited usability. We decided to run a retaining wall inside the corner in a manner to carve out a large side yard off our family room. Over the years we have enjoyed privacy from the streets and unimpeded views to the west.

Our neighbors to the north, Mr. and Mrs. Clow, had lived in their stunning Walter S. White house (since torn down) for thirty-five years. When Mrs. Clow saw me standing high above her on our newly installed pad, she objected to the way she felt our property loomed over hers. Due to chronic flooding problems, the City had recently issued an ordinance requiring all newly developed lots to raise the finish grade six inches above the top of the step closest to the front door.



To make her happy, we got permission from the City to drop our pad to the same elevation as the top curb and then we had to rely on subsurface drainage to convey water from our entry walk to a lower point along Burroweed.

When we commenced construction on our house, another neighbor, Marian Henderson, wife of the founder of Palm Desert, developer Clifford Henderson – and herself chairwoman of Desert Beautiful, complained to me that our house was an eyesore and was totally unacceptable on her street. Our house was the first new house built on the block and with its raised grade and giant berm in the front yard, it was no doubt an appalling sight to her. I explained that people have different tastes and that our house would look less weird as the planting grew in. She was never pleased with our house, but her attention thankfully was diverted to a two-story condominium development she called “The Chainsaw Massacre” on the corner of San Luis Rey and Shadow Mountain, which she REALLY detested.

After we ran out of money building the house, I assigned a paltry budget of \$10K to do all the front yard landscaping. We purchased several 15-gallon trees, which are now the huge mesquite trees and I planted them myself. We were fortunate to purchase some bearded palms from the City of Rancho Mirage after they decided not to build their new city hall. We planted a handful of small date palms on the corner, and I raked into the berm a big bag of mixed native flower seeds from S & S Seed Company. Our irrigation system was a rudimentary Rainbird spray system (water was not an issue then), and I’d haul out a hose when I got home from work to spray the missed areas. The new landscape was spectacular when it bloomed, providing a striking burst of color in the spring, but eventually I tired of having to manually water all the dry spots. Additionally, the Brittle Bush got out of control and took over the landscape, so we knew that we’d have to plant different materials, and even now we’ll need to address the plantings on the east side of the entry walk after having the now huge mesquite trees trimmed.”

(Source: Ron Gregory, October, 2021)

Ron & Marcy Gregory

Ron Gregory founded RGA Landscape Architects in Palm Desert in 1977. In the course of the next 42 years, RGA became recognized as the leading landscape architectural firm in the desert. RGA has since merged with MSA, where Ron continues as Director of Landscape Architecture.



Photo by Linda Holden Clode

Mr. Gregory has been the Principal in Charge for well over 2,000 landscape projects in the Coachella Valley and the desert Southwest. He has been the liaison for the planning and public works departments in all cities within the Coachella Valley, as well as most water districts in the region. His projects have included large scale resorts, golf courses, parks, residential and commercial development and custom homes. (Source: www.msiconsultinginc.com)

Palm Desert resident Marcy Gregory is an artist who gives scrap wood and recycled cardboard a new life, reducing disparate shapes to an abstract uniformity, where shape and shade are of paramount importance.

Her introduction to the medium of discarded wood began in 1995 at the Palm Springs Art Museum in the adult artists' workshop taught by the talented artist and teacher Florence Treatman. Since the mid-90s, Ms. Gregory has amassed a seeming forest of wood in her studio. Also a contemporary realist portraitist, her commissioned paintings and sculptures have been featured in juried art competitions and museums, sold at auction and in galleries, and found in private collections.

(Source: www.marcygregory.com/home.html)

Ira "Bud" Johnson, A.I.A.

Ira Johnson, architect, studied under William F. Cody and worked in his office early in his career. His homes include homes in the Eldorado Country Club as well as a replacement of the Cody designed Malone House in Palm Springs.



Architect Ira Johnson with contractor Arthur Press
outside 73-895 Highway 111, Palm Desert, Desert
Sun, March 1964

Historical Society of Palm Desert
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