

# L.A. at Home

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« Previous Post | L.A. at Home Home | Next Post »

## The Dry Garden: A theatrical low-water landscape rises at Valley Performing Arts Center in Northridge

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When the [Valley Performing Arts Center](#) opens to the public in February, others will convey the thrill of seeing a remarkable new building rise on the campus of Cal State Northridge. My admiration is reserved for the landscape architect who encircled the center with 173 native trees, then punctuated the courtyard with a Dr. Seuss-worthy assembly of succulents while achieving a tenfold reduction in the site's water use.



That landscape architect is Stephen Billings of the Santa Monica firm **Pamela Burton & Co.** Billings was in his 20s when the **Northridge earthquake** struck the campus in 1994. Now 43, he still seems young and amounts to a startling newcomer in a field where being entrusted with a public project of this scope is a career-crowning moment.

The air of precociousness about Billings only intensifies when you learn that landscape architecture wasn't his first career. That was architecture. As a graduate of Syracuse University's architecture program in 1990, he went on to work for some high-toned firms run by the likes of **Dean Nota** and **Richard Meier**, but along the way he wearied of the paperwork and permitting of buildings and became enamored instead with what he calls the "fluidity" of landscaping. "You can test ideas and see the results really quickly," he said during a recent tour of the arts center site.

After Billings left "Uncle Dean" in the late 1990s, to his amazement, the Westside landscape architect Pamela Burton hired him. "I didn't know anything," he recalled. "I didn't know what plants were. I didn't know Latin."



Burton's approach was trial by fire, he said. She gave him increasingly difficult work to see if he could do it. He stuck around just long enough to make himself indispensable, then six years ago he told Burton that he was going to apply to UCLA to study for a degree in landscape architecture.

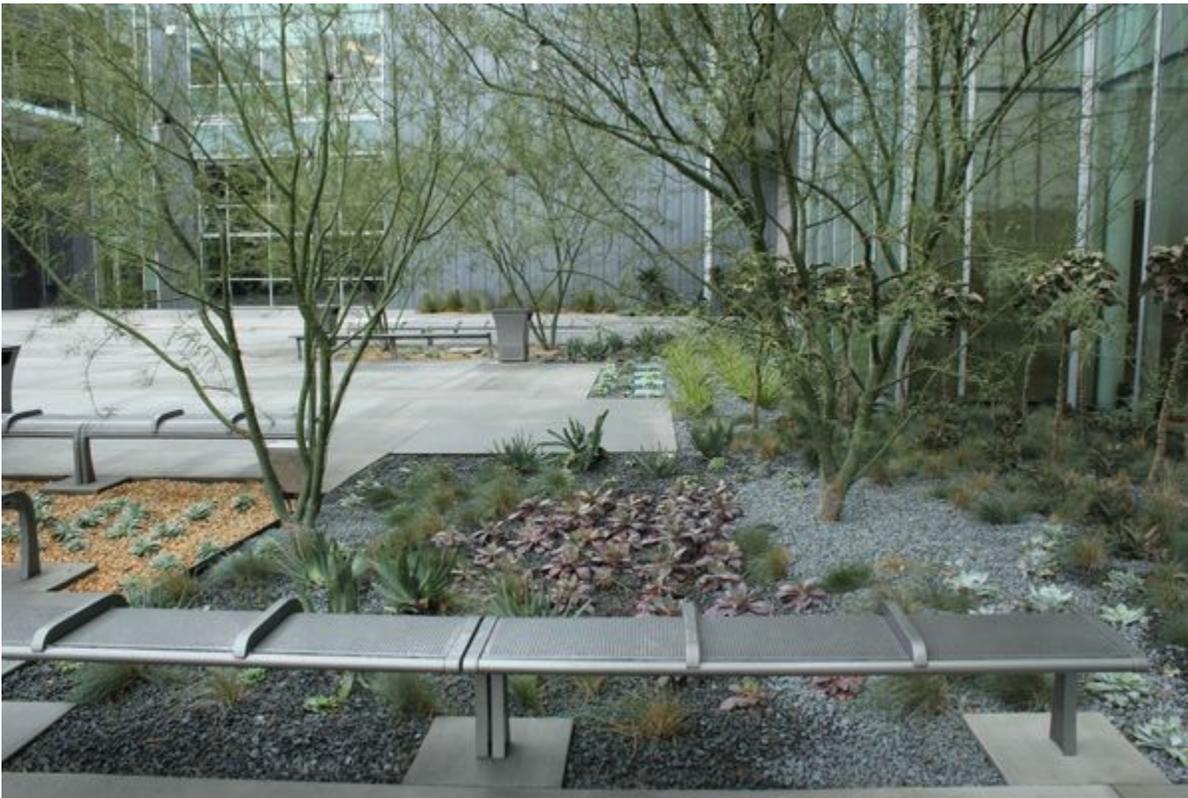
He worried that she would be upset. She was. "There was an 'Over my dead body' in there somewhere," he said with a laugh. "She said, 'You're not going to UCLA. You're going to Harvard.' " She then picked up the phone to help make that happen.



After completing Harvard's three-year course in two, Billings was on staff with the New York landscape firm **Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates** when Burton called to ask what it would take to bring him back West. His first

job on rejoining her firm four years ago was to design the gardens around the Valley Performing Arts Center.

The commission didn't fall from the sky but from Burton, whose work on the Cal State Northridge master plan went back three presidents, to right after the Northridge earthquake. It helps to look north of the new performing arts center -- to a memorial to the 6.7 temblor -- to understand what rebuilding the campus must have meant to any Angeleno with a soul. Burton, who has done a number of gardens and street plantings on campus since the quake, was involved early on to help the university rebound in a better, smarter form.



As Billings showed off the new center's garden last week, Colin Donahue, the associate vice president for facilities, was leading his own tour of the premises, where water consumption for irrigation has dropped from almost 9.5 million gallons a year to just shy of 900,000. Donahue's department did that while still providing lolling students and arts center visitors with a belt of Marathon turf near the new building.



The lawn was a compromise. Billings' personal choice was for wild and wavy grass, but it's not his campus, and college students do flop. This startling deep green field gives way to knolls encircling the western and northern perimeters. Billings created these knolls using soil excavated during the construction of the building.

Then came trees. Lots of them.

"It's always so hot," he said, "I thought, 'Why not create a forest?' Nobody said no, so I just kept going. I put in nearly 180 trees. All native. Sycamore, ash."

The trees serve another function. "They are a way of enclosing the space, of making it more intimate," he said.

The job of managing heat in a large courtyard next to the building included using light pavement and smaller trees and beds. However, here the dominant values aren't so much environmental as practical and aesthetic. Spiny plants such as spoon yucca and agave have been used near the building's metal siding to discourage traffic that might produce dents and graffiti. Trees, including palo verdes and Chinese pistaches, have been chosen for lacy foliage, summer flowers, striking bark and autumn color.



A recurring theme is drought tolerance and ease of care. Succulents, grasses and flax that thrive on drip need little weeding and look swell against colored rock mulches. But what strikes you passing from bed to bed is the whimsy of the plant choices, the Flax in the Hat quality of a courtyard garden where a wacky Madagascar succulent with a periscope stalk and cabbage-like head can look you in the eye.

Even as a light rain intensified during the tour, Billings couldn't suppress his joy.

"You come out of these jobs so aware of what went wrong," he said, "but I am so happy."

So, it seems is Burton. Billings is hard at work on an even larger job, a 10-acre site around the UC San Diego Jacobs Medical Center, scheduled to open in 2015.

-- Emily Green

*Green's column on sustainable gardening appears here every Friday. [Bookmark the blog](#) and check back for future installments.*

*Photos, from top: Aloe trees outside the new Valley Performing Arts Center at Cal State Northridge; landscape architect Stephen Billings; tall aloe growing over spiky agave, rush and grass; Seuss-like Kalanchoe beharensis growing in front of glass; wispy palo*

*verde trees and an interesting palette of rock in the courtyard; lawn, deployed sparingly and paired with plenty of trees; a joyful Billings; spoon yucca enlisted for visual effect and to deter traffic near the building, photographed as crews readied the building for its opening. Credit: Emily Green / For The Times*