The landscaping at the new $1 billion Getty Center flows with the construction details of the world-class facility. The elements of landscaping and architecture unite to create a seamless design.

Eighty-six acres of landscaped gardens and terraces, including the Central Garden designed by artist Robert Irwin, provide sweeping views of the Los Angeles basin, the mountains, the ocean, and the surrounding 600 acres preserved in their natural state.

Architect Richard Meier collaborated with landscape architects Emmet Wemple, Laurie Olen and Dan Kiley to develop a master plan for the landscape that, according to Meier, "is, in some ways, as important as the buildings themselves."

The design naturally invites visitors to wander indoors and out, exploring galleries and gardens alike. The plan encourages visitors to come and go as they please, making their own routes, and pausing in the courtyard to listen to a fountain.

Inspired by the garden traditions of California and the ancient Mediterranean, the landscaping contributes to the Center's mix of ancient and modern artistry. Visitors are surrounded by recurring colors, textures and scents.

Under the direction of the design team and grounds superintendent Richard Naranjo, the landscape will evolve, "with the intent of creating an intimate, ever-changing tableau that enhances the visitor's experience of the Getty's artistic and educational mission," says Meier.

The view

Perhaps the most important element of the Getty Center is its hilltop site in the Santa Monica Mountains, just off the San Diego Freeway. From there, visitors can take in prominent features of the Los Angeles landscape—the Pacific Ocean, the snow-capped San Gabriel Mountains, the vast street-grid of the city, the Palos Verdes peninsula, plus sunsets over the Pacific Ocean.

Inspired by this interplay, architect Richard Meier sought to design the new complex "so that it highlights both nature and culture," he says.

The buildings

When approached from the south, the modernist complex appears almost to grow from the 110-acre hillside. Two three-car, computer-operated trams ferry visitors from street-level parking to the hilltop site. The campus, clad largely in cleft-cut, Italian travertine, is organized around a central arrival plaza, and offers framed panoramic views of the city. The Getty Center's six buildings follow a natural ridge in the hilltop. Working with this natural topography, Meier's plan suggests a connection between the organization of the Center and the layout of the city's grid. Galleries, offices and the Auditorium lead out to courtyards and terraces; all offices receive natural light. Because the Getty's neighbors requested that the complex be no more than two stories above grade, all of the buildings extend underground and are linked with subterranean corridors that facilitate the moving of artwork and other materials.

Stones

The use of stone—1.2 million square feet of it—is perhaps one of the most remarked-upon elements of the new complex. "This beige-colored, cleft-cut, textured, fossilized travatine catches the cont. on page 34L
bright Southern California daylight, reflecting sharply during morning hours and emitting a honeyed warmth in the afternoon,” according to Meier.

The 16,000 tons of travatine used in the project were quarried in Bagni di Tivoli, Italy, 15 miles east of Rome. Split along its natural grain, detailed impressions of leaves, feathers, fish, and shells can be seen in the Canter’s travatine; one particularly unusual piece holds the fossilized remains of a deer antler. Meier and his staff worked for a year with the Bagni di Tivoli quarries to invent a “guillo-tine” process that would result in a rough, textured finish. “About a dozen of these stones,” Meier explains, “are incorporated into the regular grid for a change of scale and color—to break things up—and mark a key point.”

Travertine panels cover not only the retaining walls and the bases of all buildings, but also serve as paving stones for the arrival plaza and Museum courtyard.

Dramatic arrival

Upon entering the front gate, visitors may notice the groves of sycamores planted by the entryway. The trees are meant to evoke the Getty Villa in Malibu, whose Canyon Drive entryway is also lined with sycamores.

The Lower Tram Station introduces visitors to the lush plantings that await them at the top of the hill. Beyond the station, picnickers can lounge on the grass, shaded by white-flowering wisteria on a lavender-colored trellis. Purple blossoms hang from the jacaranda trees, while across the tramway, a row of crepe myrtles bloom white. Through the leafy screen of a California pepper tree grove, one can see a view of the Getty Center.

From the tram, visitors can see the more than 8,500 native oak trees planted in rows on the hillside; deer, birds and other local wildlife are sometimes visible there as well. The hillside’s ground layer has been planted with poverty weed, local chaparral and shrubs, in order to prevent erosion and fire and to preserve the natural environment. More than 100 Italian stone pines are planted along Getty Center Drive. The grid pattern of the oak plantings sets the tone for the organic order of the architecture on the hilltop.

Four tall stone pines stand at the center of the open Arrival Plaza. In years to come, these pines, which will be trimmed flat so as not to obstruct views from other points of the Center, are expected to produce a 50- to 60-foot wide canopy that will shade visitors from the Southern California sun. To the north, toward Mt. St. Mary’s College, Aleppo pines appear just beyond the travertine wall; they are expected to reach 60 to 70 feet in height.

Along the left side of the Museum steps, water cascades down into a fountain. A bed of blue-flowering ceanothus and rosemary follows the water’s path, tumbling down, to and over the lower wall. Visitors ascending the stairs to the Museum catch glimpses of the foliage through portals in the travertine wall.

The cooler temperature of the campus’ north side is reflected in the cooler colors of the plantings—pale greens, blues, purples and grays being the dominant hues. On the north side, in between the grass-covered helipad and the Auditorium, a series of terraces serve as shaded, outdoor “rooms”—separated by trimmed hedges and Italian stone pines—from which to observe the hillside and the southern face of the Getty Center.

At the Auditorium Plaza, a stand of purple-and-white-flowering jacarandas echoes the colors of the Lower Tram Station. In the cool, shady “canyon” between the North and East Buildings, tree ferns, tall kantia palms, and Asian jasmine groundcover create a lush palm court. The East Building features its own outdoor courtyard—an open lawn shaded with flowering trees—where staff can gather and eat lunch. The walkway between the North and East Buildings to the Museum is connected by an “aerial” hedge of white crepe myrtle, Spanish lavender and star jasmine, all of which accent the colors and scents of the campus.

The star jasmine that borders the North Building walkway ends at the Museum’s entrance with a grove of California sycamores. Inside the Museum courtyard, graceful Mexican cypress trees hang over the 120-foot linear fountain. A small grove of camphor trees rises from the dark green phittosporum groundcover. Come spring, hundreds of yellow daffodils will bloom here. Boston ivy climbs up one of the pavilion’s travertine walls from a bed of fragrant jewel mint.

On the Museum’s South Terrace, near a trellis covered with classic California red bougainvillea and hundreds of birds of paradise (Los Angeles’ official flower), visitors can take in views of the city—a cactus garden is located at the southern end of the courtyard, the hottest and driest point on the Getty Center campus. Here, the warm yellow-orange of the agave and fresh green of cacti remind visitors of LA’s desert environment.

The warm yellow-orange of the agave and fresh green of cacti remind visitors of LA’s desert environment.
An intimate, ever-changing tableau that enhances the visitor’s experience.

The sound and movement of five distinct fountains and water features are at the heart of the architecture of the Getty Center. In addition to heightening the visitor’s sensory experience, the location and design of each fountain and water feature is geared towards accentuating an important axis running through the site.

- The first water feature encountered by visitors is the cascading waterfall alongside the grand stairway connecting the Arrival Plaza to the Museum Entrance Hall. The water flows directly into a long narrow pool, built so shallow as to seem an extension of the Plaza floor. Within that pool, fountain jets shoot streams of water directly upward, creating a soothing sound which, Meier explains, “helps create the sense that one has indeed arrived in a refreshing place.” The placement of this fountain is in perfect alignment with both fountains in the Museum Courtyard and the center of the round Museum Entrance Hall.

- In the Museum Courtyard, 46 jets shoot streams of water from right to left forming perfect arcs over the 120-foot linear basin, situated beside a row of Mexican cypress trees. The eye is directed both to the left edge of the fountain, which is the center axis of the site, and back along that same elongated line to the center of the large boulder fountain, whose center is in perfect alignment with the center of the Museum’s circular entrance hall, the linear basin’s edge, and the edge of the cascading fountain at the Arrival Plaza.

- In the tradition of Asian gardens, the boulder fountain at the south end of the Museum Courtyard is part sculpture, part reflection. The circular pool, with its sculptural boulders and “playful” water, is meant to contrast with the geometric design of the surrounding architecture, yet is placed not only on the site line to the Museum, but also the axis to the Scholar offices in the Research Institute.

- Tucked between the East and South Pavilions, a smaller boulder fountain rests at floor level, almost an extension of the East Pavilion’s lobby.

- The final water feature is located west of the Museum entrance, at the top of the Central Garden. It begins with a travertine headstone, designed by Meier, where a constant flow of water rises as if from an eternal spring. The water runs down the front of the headstone and along a dramatic chute, finally emptying into a hole that delivers the water to the Irwin’s Central Garden. From below, the water trickles into a grotto of chiseled travertine. The extra-rough texture of the large dome shape “recreates the tranquil sounds of springtime rain,” according to Meier. Aligned perfectly with the centerline through the Central Garden, the fountain not only connects the garden to the buildings, but serves as the source of its own stream.