

THE LIGHTEST TOUCH

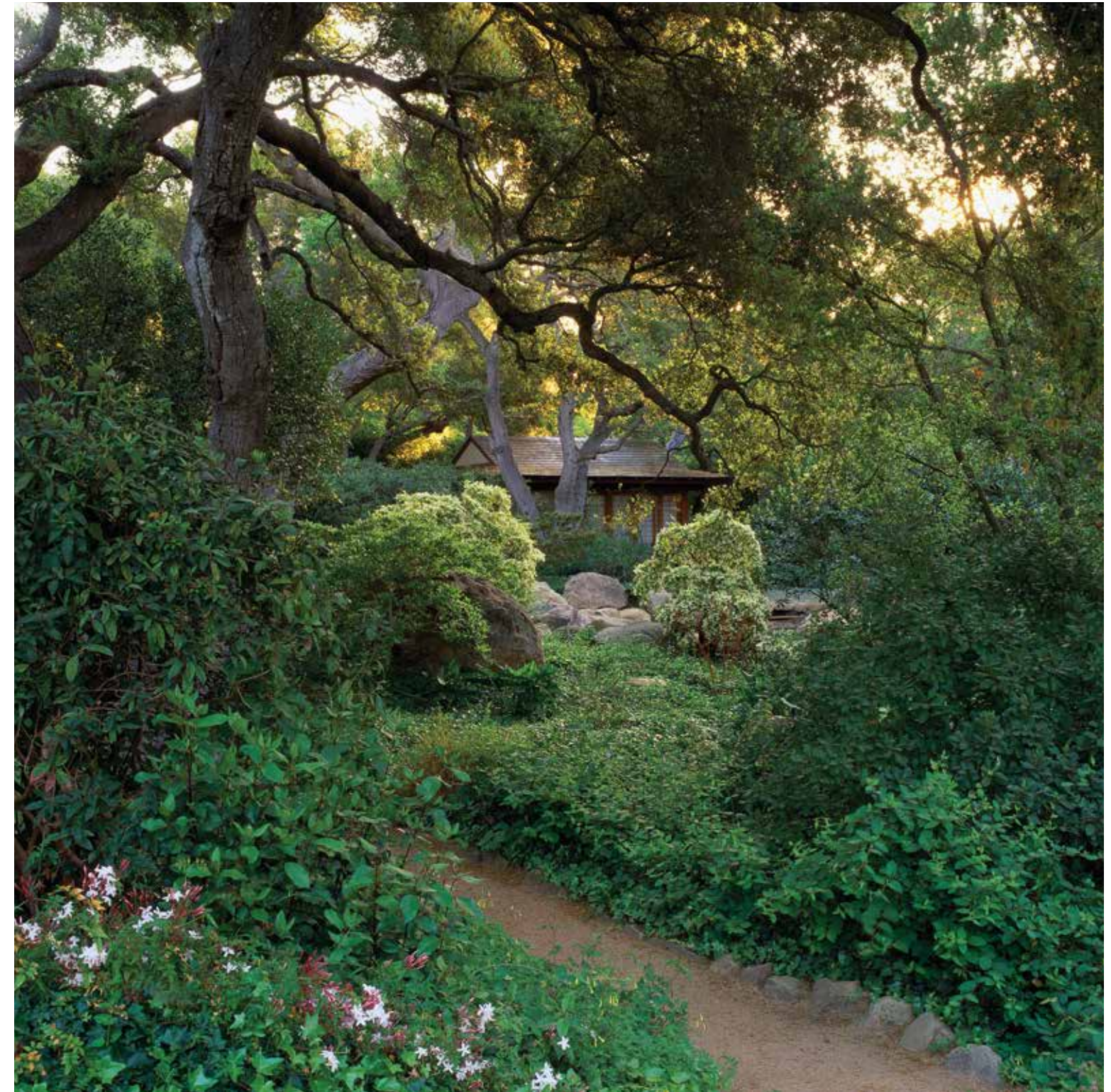
ISABELLE GREENE'S ENDURING DESIGN FOR THE LOVELACE GARDEN.

BY LISA GIMMY, ASLA / PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARION BRENNER, AFFILIATE ASLA

ISABELLE GREENE, FASLA, has been practicing in Santa Barbara, California, since the 1970s. Her love of the native California landscape and her insistence upon design as an inquiry into specific site conditions have resulted in many original and distinctive gardens. When Greene invited me to visit the Lovelace garden last year, I was enchanted by its beauty, the superb choreography of its details, and its technical innovation. Photographs by Marion Brenner, Affiliate ASLA, capture the magic of the place Greene created for the Lovelaces over a 40-year-long engagement.

Greene was a young and relatively inexperienced designer when she was approached by Jon and Lillian Lovelace in 1972 to design their pool in Montecito, California. She vividly recalls her first trip out to the site, and, knowing that she was on the clock, she was ill at ease as she walked the property. She didn't have an idea of what she would do.

She recalls, then, the weather shifting, and a pattern of light appearing on the ground between the shadows cast by the massive oak trees, and coming to the realization that the shape of the light could be the shape of the pool.





Montecito lies 90 miles north of Los Angeles. It is bounded by the Santa Ynez Mountains, where the land slopes gently toward the Pacific Ocean, and its heavily forested coastal plain is one of California's most beautiful places. Ever since the area became accessible by car and rail in the early part of the 20th century, it has been a favored location for estates and marvelous gardens, among them El Fureidis, Val Verde, and Lotusland.

The Lovelaces' house was designed by one of Montecito's well-known architects, George Washington Smith, in 1923, but not in his usual style. Smith is known for Spanish Colonial buildings, including the Casa

del Herrero, but his client, Harold Gladwin, requested an English style home, and Smith obliged, creating a simple, elegant dwelling nestled within an oak woodland.

The house is small by Montecito standards, simple and planar, with irregularly spaced windows. A fanciful touch is provided by the butterfly cutouts on the window shutters, which refer to Mrs. Gladwin's love of these delicate creatures.

Most estates in Montecito include swimming pools that are typically designed as an extension of the architecture, reflecting the Spanish, or Italian, or even Dutch Colonial style of the house. The pools are



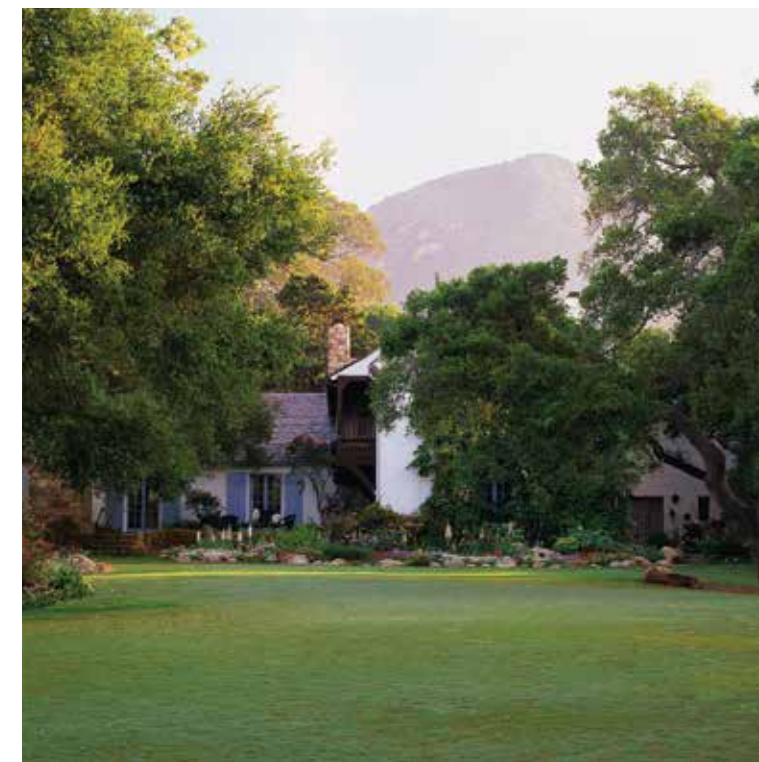
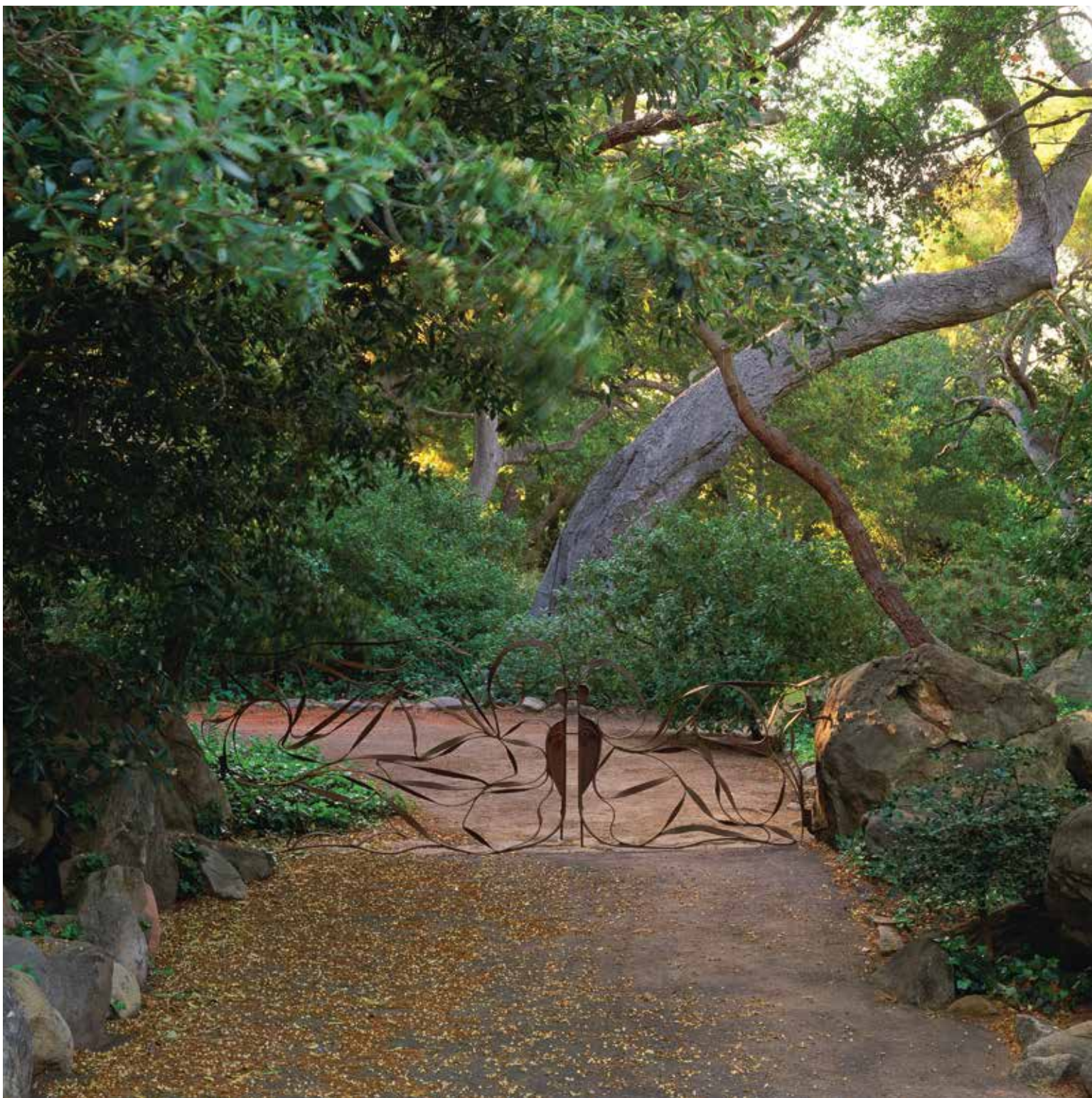
almost always placed on axis with the house, to relate their shape and details to the house, and the spaces they create are rectilinear spaces that extend the architecture's reach into the landscape.

The design that Greene created for the Lovelaces has none of these characteristics. It is not seen from the house. It is discovered, and when it is found, it appears to be a part of its natural setting. This superb and innovative fit between pool and site came about through Greene's design and her ongoing involvement throughout the construction process.

Greene's first career was as a botanical illustrator, and the habit of close

observation is at the heart of her design approach. After studying the site, she built a small clay model that explored the scale of the stones relative to the size of the pool and to one another. Realizing that she needed expert help in construction, she partnered with the licensed landscape architect Michael Wheelwright to help her in developing the section for the pool and coordinating the engineering for the complicated bond beam with shelves that allow the boulders to extend underwater. Greene was fortunate to work with Pat Scott Masonry, a contractor who shared her enthusiasm and vision for the project. Scott had experience working with Santa Barbara stone, and knew which stones were harder,





which softer. Together, he and Greene shaped the pool and placed the rocks, which all came from the Lovelaces' property.

The pool construction was, of course, not an easy endeavor, and Greene's construction photos document the lengthy process required to create it. The largest obstacle was the discovery of an enormous boulder located in the exact center of the proposed pool location. The costs, of course, rose far beyond what had been anticipated. Greene remembers being "covered in shame" when Jon Lovelace reminded her that the client really ought to be notified if the costs were more than twice the original estimate.

The Lovelaces were, finally, thrilled with their pool, and Greene continued work with them for more than 40 years. She designed a pool fence and gate, a delicate, wrought-iron construction that recalls the butterflies on the house shutters, and persisted in getting it approved by the building department despite its lack of conformance to code. She choreographed a path connecting the pool to the house, passing by massive boulders and accented by finely cut paving stones. Years later, when the Lovelace children grew older, and the needs of the family changed, Greene worked with a longtime collaborator, Andy Neumann, to site a Japanese teahouse that contains a pool bath and changing



rooms. Its location, at a slight rise from the pool, provides a delightful view of the pool and the surrounding oak forest.

Greene's landscape work ultimately encompassed the approach to the house. The threshold to the property is demarcated by a band of rough granite cobbles, which contrast with the finer pattern of cobbles laid in a fan pattern. Along the driveway, an irregular band of linear stones accents the transition between cobbles and boulders. As with the pool, views of the house appear only gradually. A landscaped island in front of the entry is anchored by boulders and sculptured pines, and beyond

it, you glimpse the house, draped by ancient vines trained in the shapes of clouds.

This remarkable garden, so carefully choreographed and considered in every detail, exemplifies Charles Eames's famous statement about the role of the designer, who he described as "a very good, thoughtful host, all of whose energy goes into trying to anticipate the needs of his guests." At the Lovelace house, nature, client, and architecture are the honored guests of Isabelle Greene. ●

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