The J. Paul Getty Center was designed by the architect Richard Meier out of New Jersey, who conceived of the master plan and had a hand in the landscape design. The well known Southern California landscape architect Emmet Wemple conceived the preliminary designs and worked on the project till his passing in 1996. Wemple previously designed the landscape for the Getty Villa in Malibu. In 1992 the landscape architect Laurie Olin, of Olin partnership in Philadelphia joined the team and stayed on till the projects completion in 1997. Planting was executed by Fong and Associates of Orange County and Raymond Hansen.

There are many different micro-climates located here at the Getty Center. We are currently in a Lush Canyon Bottom of jacarandas, peppers, crape myrtles “aerial hedge” and a formal hedge of sweet-smelling Myrtus communis. Other micro-climates consists of a dry south facing cactus garden, hidden-shady jungle floors between buildings, hill sides of oak trees, hedges protruding from architecture, and of course the well manicured central garden. The gardens here at the Getty Center are largely Mediterranean or Californian in their planting, with attention to sensory details of colors, textures, and scents.

The design style in this lower terrace garden is modern, probably derived from designing atop the rectangular parking structure. With that said you’ll see how the Getty Center at the top breaks from this simplistic style of straight rectangular edges and material into the post-modern. Postmodern forms introduce curves, elaboration, and decorative features as well as contemporary materials. Majority of the architecture here is subterranean leaving the soil depths on the roofs as shallow as 1-1/2’ in some areas and a few feet deep in others.

Being a center for the arts you’ll notice the collection of sculptures that reference back to the Getty Villa in Malibu, but with a contemporary twist that introduces you to the Getty Center and the Getty art collection to come. This narrative links ancient history to contemporary history and again to the present. Acropolis like in it’s presents and importance, this post-modern citadel, references both history and establishes its historic importance as one of the worlds most important and influential center’s for the arts.
1976, J. Paul Getty died at home two years after establishing his museum in Malibu. Getty bequeathed oil stocks to the museum, and the Getty Trust was formed. 1981, Harold Williams is named president of the trust, and began to generate ambitious ideas to promote the arts and create a museum for Getty’s art collection. The trust’s endowment was $700 million then Texaco oil bought Getty Oil and the endowment increased to 1.7 billion. The Getty Trust purchased 110 acres on the hilltop of Los Angeles’ west-side. An invitation letter was sent out to 33 world famous architects to submit proposals for the museum, including Richard Meier. 1984, Richard Meier, is selected to be the architect to create the Getty museum. Same year, Meier receives Pritzker prize. 1983 the budget for the museum was $700 million, but after a sum of $1.3 billion the Getty Center was inaugurated in 1997.

The volumes are organized according to the topography and following two main axes, the eastern and western. The eastern ridge is parallel to the San Diego Freeway as it runs past the site; the western ridge, shifted 22.5 degrees with respect to the eastern, corresponds to the angle of the same freeway as it leaves the grid of the city going north through Sepulveda pass.

Meier envisioned the Getty Center to be conformed of horizontally arranged spaces interconnected around courtyards on different levels, with large and small rooms opening out to the landscape. In a modernist style Meier used the principles of the Bauhaus Movement in his design, including the repetitive use of a module, in this case a 30”x30” and its modular divisions. Meier was inspired by the Acropolis in Athens as to circulation and movement, and Hadrian’s Villa at Tivoli for its asymmetry and surprise, and also the Southern California houses of Neutra, Schindler and Frank Lloyd Wright, for the openness and horizontality, all of which characterize the Getty Center.

Building Materials

- Travertine: Mariotti quarries at Bagni de Tivoli, Italy. Symbolize history and permanence. Counterbalanced the lighter materials such as metal.
- Steel: Light-weight open structures.
- Aluminum: Enameled aluminum in two shades of white: Meier White (Artic White), Getty White (Cream color.)
- Glass: transparent elements to benefit from natural lighting, integration between interior and exterior.
- Golden California light
- Use of outside frames to view the surrounding landscape.

No mortar was used to connect the travertine blocks, which is an anti seismic mechanism. Their modular dimension of 30”x30” pertains to Le Corbusier studies of the human proportion, that attributes this space to one individual, which Meier used horizontally and vertically throughout the entire building.

Building structures consisting of Museum Entrance Hall and five main pavilions, all organized around the Museum Courtyard; Research Institute building, Foundation and Conservation building, Trust Administration building, Auditorium, and Restaurants building, with main two gardens: Central Garden and Cactus Garden forming and integral part of the main structure.