DAVIS RESIDENCE

1996
El Paso, Texas
Martha Schwartz
When looking at the Davis Residence garden designed by Martha Schwartz, one may not immediately think of it as a garden. Schwartz is known for fusing sculpture, art, and landscape, and the Davis garden is no exception. The minimal use of planting in the design challenges our assumptions of what we accept as a garden, but it is just as engaging and dynamic as any other. Influenced by modern Mexican architecture, walled gardens, and designers like Luis Barragan, Schwartz created a structured, contained landscape that consists mainly of brightly colored stucco walls. The original enclosed space was surrounded by a low concrete wall, which inspired the theme of containment and enclosure.

The maze-like set of vibrantly colored walled gardens play with space and perception, and contrast from the more naturalistic garden outside of the existing wall. The rich color palettes of El Paso murals and the walled gardens of Ciudad Juarez across the border are reinterpreted into an explosion of electric colour and playful geometry. The plants in Schwartz design are used as more of sculptural, symbolic pieces in the design, rather than defining space, which the series of boxes do instead. Each room is making a symbolic gesture through the materials used. A grid of 12-inch spikes references the barbed wire atop the nearby border with Mexico, a mound of gravel echoes the Franklin Mountains to the North, a crown of blue glass shards make a reference to the cheaply available burglar deterrent of broken bottles. Three of the garden rooms are punctuated by beds of cacti, which include an orderly grid of Golden Barrel cacti, to a dense bed of humorously phallic Cereus in the changing room, and two stately Saguaro cacti that are as majestic as any Renaissance sculpture. The simple palette and minimal planting work well for low maintenance purposes in the arid climate of El Paso. The entire design, from concept to color choice, reflects the cultural identity of the place it is located. It is bold, practical and it successfully plays with the both the mind and the senses.