

HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY

DEGNAN-GUERRA RESIDENCE

HALS NO. CA-151

Location: 5200 Alta Canyon Road, La Cañada Flintridge, Los Angeles County, California

34.222653, -118.210555 (center of site, Google Earth, WGS84)

Significance: The Degnan-Guerra Residence in La Cañada Flintridge, California, was designed by prominent Black architect Paul R. Williams in 1927. The spectacular Mediterranean estate, which has been meticulously restored by its current owners, was originally surrounded by extensive grounds filled with garden follies, whimsical faux bois, and beautiful water features, many of which are extant today. While the architectural importance of the home has been widely recognized, the landscape architecture is also magnificent in its own right, worthy of attention, documentation, and preservation. Despite that a significant portion of the original landscape was lost to subdivision and development over the years, the remaining site still hints at the grandeur and beauty of this architectural gem in a magical setting in the foothills of Los Angeles.

Description: Nestled among giant 100 year-old Deodar cedars at the edge of the Angeles National Forest, the Degnan-Guerra Residence was originally built in 1927 on five-plus acres for the grand sum of \$125,000. (“Giant Deodars” 1956; Sutton 2003-04; “Alta Canyon Activity” 1929) The sixteen-room estate, designed as a weekend retreat for prominent attorney James Degnan and his family, was one of the earliest homes designed by Paul R. Williams, a now-famous Black architect who approached the racism of his time by learning to sketch upside down so as not to get uncomfortably close to his white clients. (“Alta Canyon Activity” 1929; Hudson/Hollywood 2012, 9-11)

The original estate was spectacular, graced with two hundred Deodars, an enormous heated swimming pool, a golf driving range and putting green, and courts for playing horseshoes, croquet and tennis/badminton. (Bowers 1946; “Alta Canyon Close” 1938) One of the former owners, the renowned actor Dennis Morgan, described the menagerie of animals he kept at the property, including a flock of turkeys, wild ducks, chickens, horses, rabbits, peacocks, and dogs. (Bowers 1946). There is a world-class collection of faux bois in the garden, including furniture, light fixtures, planters, a grotto, and a “Tea House” reputedly created by a Japanese artisan brought in to craft the whimsical structure. (Cormaci 1998) Wild animals climb around on the concrete limbs in the Tea House, which has intricate details such as knots and nail holes carved into the colored concrete. A beautiful alcove with a ceramic Della Robbia sculpture set in a mosaic of glass, fishponds and tiled fountains, concrete

sculptures of majestic lions and delightful mushrooms, and a glass-inlaid “throne” also grace the grounds. These garden follies and landscape treasures still exist today.

In 1956, the Morgans sold the property and it was subdivided by a developer, leaving the home on an acre and a quarter of land. (Sutton 2003-04). Many of the original landscaping features were lost as a result. For example, there was a large rose garden with an evergreen allée and clipped formal boxwood hedges that no longer exists. Also lost was a fantastic barbecue hut or “Amusement Grill,” a screened-in rock structure with a log roof and faux bois trim over the screens. (Estate of Dorothy Degnan 1941). Outside of the hut were strings of hanging lights, a faux bois bridge over a meandering stream emanating from a rock waterfall, and a Japanese ishi-dōrō or stone lantern. A full-sized Shinto arch and a faux bois and stone wishing well did not survive, nor did the Sunken Garden, the Rock Garden or the original Cactus Garden that graced the landscape. (Estate of Dorothy Degnan 1941) Stunning pictures of these features still exist, as they were lovingly preserved by the Degnan and Morgan families.

The estate was purchased in 1999 by Rod and Gina Guerra, who have spent many years restoring it to its former glory. They have added a tiered heirloom vegetable garden with local stone wall borders and an extensive rose garden with historic and modern roses. They also created a cactus garden atop the Tea House featuring the faux bois cacti that the Guerras only discovered, to their great surprise and delight, after they removed the giant jade plants that had taken over the roof of the structure. While a good portion of the landscape is lost, this grand property continues to evolve and inspire its residents with its timeless elegance and historical significance.

History: The Degnan-Guerra Residence was designed and built by Paul R. Williams in 1927. Williams was the first Black architect to be granted membership in the American Institute of Architects (“AIA”), in 1923, and he was the first Black to become an AIA Fellow in 1957. (Hudson/Legacy 1993, 19). In 2016, Williams was awarded a posthumous Gold Medal, the AIA’s highest honor for architectural achievement, again being the first Black architect to win this prestigious award. (Kilston 2017; Hawthorne 2017). It is truly remarkable that Williams created this multi-acre Mediterranean masterpiece, described as a must-see by architectural historians David Gebhard and Robert Winter, in a suburb that touted itself in the 1920s as only being open to “desirable members of the Caucasian race,” with “permanent race and building restrictions.” (Gebhard and Winter 1994, 362; Beauty Undefined)

With only four owners of the property (excluding the developer who subdivided it in the 1950s) over the past 90 years, the Degnan-Guerra Residence is largely in its original condition with the exception of the lost acreage. The property was owned and loved by the Deganans, who commissioned its design and construction

and whose descendants still hold dear stories and photos of the estate from 1927 to 1945; by the actor Dennis Morgan and his family, who entertained Hollywood's elite (including swashbuckler Errol Flynn) at this suburban compound in the 1940s and 1950s and whose descendants also have shared stories and photos with the current owners; by the Edelbrocks, who lived there for decades after the subdivision and kept the estate largely untouched; and by the Guerras, who have been inspired and transformed by the estate and its setting. (Hudson/Hollywood 2012, 50) The site has, by all accounts, aged and evolved gracefully, notwithstanding its lost landscape.

Diane Keaton's book featuring the property captured the essence of the residence beautifully:

“Is that what a home in a California canyon should be? The visitor passes the doors of Spain, though the loggias of Italy, under ceilings decorated as if for a banquet hall in Mexico City, across a floor in black-and-white domino as if this were Venice, past geometric tile work from North Africa, and into the light and air of an early California evening. Having crossed so many boundaries of time and space, the house may seem slightly unreal as a consequence.”

(Keaton 2007, 112)

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Historian: Gina Guerra, current co-owner of the Degnan-Guerra Residence

July 15, 2020

Entry 2020 HALS Challenge: Vanishing or Lost Landscapes



This photo of what is known as the grotto shows the incredibly skilled and creative use of faux bois and colored concrete. The structure actually appears to have been an intricate fountain, not yet restored because of its complexity, as there are remnants of water sources inside the concrete. (Gina Guerra, April 2018)



This is another shot of an area in the grotto, depicting a miniature waterfall feature. The water flows through the log and onto the fall and then dips underground and reappears at another waterfall feature nearby. The waterfalls have not yet been restored because the method of water recirculation originally used is still a mystery! The detailing on the faux bois is incredible. (Gina Guerra, July 2020)



The Tea House is another faux bois garden folly on the property. Stalactites crafted in colored concrete hang from the ceiling, and wild animals crawl around the concrete branches in the interior of the structure. There are inlaid-glass mosaic cabinets inside, and a faux bois table featuring a chess board graces the center of the space. The artisan even sculpted nail holes and knots into the “wooden” slats that make up the bench inside. It is truly unique! Gina Guerra, July 2020)



Atop the Tea House is a cactus garden, featuring faux bois cacti and a little river (now filled with blue glass) edged in stones. The owners only discovered them after removing the large jade plants that had flourished on the structure when the house sat empty for years before it was purchased by the Guerras. It was an incredible find and totally unexpected. (Gina Guerra, April 2020)



This is another shot of the cactus garden on top of the Tea House. The dappled sunlight provides an ideal spot in which to grow succulents. (Gina Guerra, November 2017)



Stately lion statues guard the main staircase leading down to the swimming pool. Note that the planters above the lions have lighting actually built into them, with the wiring somehow set into the concrete itself. (Gina Guerra, June 2019)



This colorful glass mosaic featuring a Della Robbia sculpture of Madonna and Child is a prominent feature on the living room terrace. The craftsmanship is remarkable: the grout in between the individual pieces of glass actually changes color to match the design in different areas of the mosaic. (Gina Guerra, July 2020)



This “eye” or orb is, frankly, a mystery. Perhaps it was a light or lantern of some sort, although there is no evidence of electricity inside of it. It supposedly flanked one side of a long semicircular driveway for the original property. Its mate was lost in the subdivision. (Gina Guerra, July 2020)



This faux bois table and chairs were found by the current owners half-buried in the yard along the side of the pool. They literally had to be dug out of the ground by a crew of people. From what some of the photos from the home from the 1930s show, the set was originally in a grove of huge trees in what appears to be a spot very close to where they were found. (Gina Guerra, July 2020)