

# NUOVO

INSPIRED BY QUALITY



## GIULIO CAPPELLINI

THE AESTHETE



**ART SCIENTIST**

*Tom Sachs*

**WELLENDORFF**

*Master Goldsmiths*

**MARIA GIULIA MARAMOTTI**

*Max Mara's Next Generation*



## INSIDE SUNNYLANDS

The Annenberg abode.

by Christopher Hume

The year was 1966. Hair was growing longer and time shorter. While Canadians prepared for the country's upcoming centennial celebrations, Americans were embroiled in an increasingly futile and bloody war in Vietnam, as well as race riots at home. Meanwhile, far from the madding crowd, Walter and Leonore Annenberg were putting the finishing touches on the 200-acre estate in Rancho Mirage, California, that they called Sunnylands. Though it was constructed in the Coachella Valley, part of the Sonoran Desert, they transformed their property into an oasis of green, lushly planted with trees, grasses, and even a private nine-hole golf course. A series of small lakes dotted the landscape, and still do today. Both Annenbergs are dead now, but the remarkable Sunnylands lives on. These days, when it's not serving as a high-level retreat centre for the President of the United States, the Secretary of State, non-partisan Congressional leadership, the Supreme Court, leaders of other nations, and select private organizations, it's a destination for visitors who come to wander through the exquisite gardens.

The Annenbergs' house, designed in the 1960s by prominent Los Angeles architect A. Quincy Jones, is one of a number of mid-century modernist residences built in the vicinity. By the 1940s, Palm Springs

and environs had become fashionable with the distinguished set, many of them Hollywood movie stars. In its heyday, this was party central for everyone from Frank Sinatra and Bob Hope to Dwight Eisenhower and, yes, the Annenbergs. Mr. Annenberg had made a fortune as the publisher of *The Philadelphia Inquirer* and increased it with the launches of *TV Guide* and *Seventeen* magazine. His vast wealth allowed the couple to assemble an important collection of Impressionist and Post-Impressionist art (later donated to the Metropolitan Museum of Art), and take their place among America's most generous and enlightened philanthropists.

Sunnylands, where, for several decades, the Annenbergs entertained everybody who was anybody, summed up the appeal of the California region known for its heat and rugged beauty. The relatively benign climate gave designers unprecedented freedom (builders don't have to worry about central heating in this part of the world). Architects such as Richard Neutra, Albert Frey, John Lautner, and Donald Wexler produced innovative and dramatic houses that are only now receiving wider recognition.

Jones, a leading modernist designer, created a large, airy residence for the Annenbergs. One room flows effortlessly into another, or to

the grounds beyond. What first strikes visitors is the sense of openness and connection; that's standard for today's houses, but back then, people lived in dwellings carved up into many small spaces, usually dimly lit and disconnected. Jones chose materials—glass, steel, concrete, and lava stone—inspired by modernism's interest in transparency and nature.

Sunnylands' main space, an expansive living room big enough to contain a fountain, includes a number of gathering spaces, each organized around an arrangement of chairs, couches, and tables. Above all, the Annenbergs were social creatures; they hosted seven U.S. presidents—including Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, and Bill Clinton—as well as Queen Elizabeth II, Prince Philip, and an endless procession of celebrities. The Room of Memories, created by the couple themselves, is covered in photographs of the couple with a who's who of U.S. and world leaders, including the late Queen Mother (represented by a wall hung with her personal Christmas cards sent from 1972 to 2001) and former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. The house was designed with an understanding that it would be a social hub, a place of friendship and celebration. No surprise, then, that the main residence and the guesthouses that surround it can accommodate 22 guests.

In its new incarnation, Sunnylands (administered by the Annenberg Foundation Trust at Sunnylands) has been reconfigured around the extraordinarily elegant Sunnylands Center & Gardens, which opened to the public in March 2012. It features a gift shop and café, as well as a superb exhibit space that tells the story of the house and its owners. The distinctive 17,000-square-foot building sits at the end of a new road that extends west from Bob Hope Drive through a garden recently planted with cacti, succulents, and wildflowers that thrive in hot, dry, sandy soil. Among the 50 species found here are desert marigold, creosote bush, and Indian ricegrass.



Sunnylands, where, for several decades, the Annenbergs entertained everybody who was anybody, summed up the appeal of the California region known for its heat and rugged beauty.

The new garden stands in stark contrast to that installed by the Annenbergs. In the sixties, few gave much thought to the environment. Today, sensibilities have changed. Though Sunnylands occupies desert, a natural aquifer beneath the Coachella Valley provides all the water needed to irrigate the 200 acres (an underground irrigation system pumps water through the roots). About 50 per cent of the Center's electricity is generated by solar panels, and there is a system of pipes in place, ready to accept grey water as soon as the city of Rancho Mirage implements a water recycling system.

Indeed, as Solana Beach landscape architect James Burnett has been quoted as saying, "[Leonore] wanted Sunnylands to be more than lawns. [The Annenbergs] were a product of the sixties, and that's why the Center reflects a step forward. I think we spent a couple of years with Mrs. Annenberg, and it's important to note that she really got it that times have changed. The landscaping had to be more progressive and environmentally responsible."

"We didn't want this to become a shrine," explains Sunnylands' media and community relations manager, Mary Perry. "It's really about context, architecture, and the people who come to visit, and the importance of place."

The job of telling that story fell to distinguished Toronto architect and exhibit designer Tony Reich. "We had good American credentials," he recounts. (His firm, Reich + Petch, has worked in more than 20 countries in institutions as varied as the Royal Ontario Museum and the Smithsonian, and it has put together



PHOTOS: Walter and Leonore Annenberg's historic house at Sunnylands, in Rancho Mirage, California, was designed by A. Quincy Jones; the Room of Memories (left) and the atrium (above), displaying an original casting of *Eve* by

Sunnylands is “a story about contemporary American politics,” says Tony Reich of Reich + Petch. “It was designed as a place of entertainment—it’s another world.”

exhibitions that deal with subjects as diverse as dinosaurs and mammals, antique boats, and the Concorde supersonic jetliner.) “We got the job in 2007. It was an extraordinary project for us, an honour and a privilege. We had done a project for people who knew the Annenbergs. We were asked to come in and be the exhibition and interpretive designers for the visitors’ centre.”

The exhibition is divided into five sections, as detailed in the interactive media stations within the Center’s Gallery: Midcentury Modern Architecture, Timeless Art, Outside/Inside, Public Life/Private Retreat, and Desert Living. Reich’s contribution, housed in the Interactive Gallery, uses touch-screen kiosks, architectural drawings, archival photography, and text to explore and explain how the Annenbergs came to construct Sunnylands, and to teach about their art collection, architecture, and famous visitors. It is a fascinating tale, one that reveals as much about American politics as it does the lifestyles of the rich and famous.

Sunnylands is “a story about contemporary American politics,” says Reich. “It was designed as a place of entertainment—it’s another world. I was struck by how unusual it was in the sense of how contemporary it was. You couldn’t help but be impressed by the beauty of the land and the estate. The question we had to address was how to tell this story.”

Reich’s point is a good one; it’s easy to forget that mid-century modern now qualifies as heritage. It’s not that the Victorian architecture we love no longer needs protection, but that from a 21st-century perspective, buildings of the fifties and sixties must also be considered historical.

“We are a non-profit organization meant to serve the public good,” says Sunnylands Center & Gardens director Janice Lyle. “We’re a public institution, a retreat centre housed in a historic property. The Annenbergs built a 20th-century oasis that was inefficient from a resource point of view. After Mrs. Annenberg died in 2009, we became



responsible for the art collections, the furniture, the house, and the property. The Center teaches something about how people thought at that time.”

The Sunnylands Center itself was designed by Frederick Fisher & Partners of Los Angeles as a contemporary response to the original A. Quincy Jones house. The building fits in so well with the landscape, specifically Burnett’s nine-acre gardens, that it seems somehow inevitable. It has also been situated to take full advantage of the spectacular views of the rugged San Jacinto Mountains to the west; visitors can see through Fisher’s building, past a Giacometti sculpture, to the scenery beyond. The effect is magical; in a world filled with mediocre modernism, Sunnylands is a reminder that at its finest, the movement created a humanist architecture that was more about spaces than artifacts. Here are spaces that enable us to enjoy the grandeur of the landscape with the comfort of the great indoors.

The Annenbergs’ brilliance was to have conceived a retreat where it was impossible not to feel good. The connection with the site was so complete that one wanders in and out of spaces almost imperceptibly. That quality can still be experienced; the world the Annenbergs inhabited has vanished, but Sunnylands continues to exert its charms. Its meaning has changed, but the Sunnylands Center & Gardens brings the estate into the modern age with grace and elegance. Newly relevant, it will introduce new generations to an important era in U.S. and global history. It will also help them appreciate a bygone time when architecture was idealistic yet comfortable, even fun. That’s a lesson never too late to learn. ●



LEFT: The Great Hall in the Sunnylands Center, with interior design by Michael Smith. ABOVE: The striking *Bust of Diego on Stele III* (1958) by Alberto Giacometti, on display in the Center.

PHOTOS BY MARK DAVIDSON



Over 25 years, we have evolved our viewpoint about design to create extraordinary moments and opportunities for people to have experiences that change their understanding and perspective of the world they live in.

## **REICH+PETCH**

1867 Yonge Street Toronto, ON Canada M4S 1Y5  
TEL (416) 480 2020 FAX (416) 480 1881  
[www.reich-petch.com](http://www.reich-petch.com)  
[info@reich-petch.com](mailto:info@reich-petch.com)