

A high desert house with a shed as sunblock

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Rumors flew around the Morongo Valley last December as a mysterious steel structure, visible from Highway 62, the main artery of the Mojave, rose on a 3,000-foot mountain.

Residents in the valley's scattering of bungalows and trailer homes assumed that a factory was going up, or possibly some kind of aviary for raising endangered California condors.

In fact, the structure was a prefabricated shed built by Hally Thacher, a sculptor, which now stands incongruously over a small stucco ranch house. The unassuming pitched-roof house, built in 1959 and not occupied for years, was remarkable only for its remoteness and for its spectacular views of this dusty high desert valley dotted with yucca plants 90 miles east of Los Angeles.

But Thacher saw a way to create a permanent art installation that would double as her home. By giving the house a superstructure, she transformed it into a sculpture for living. "I perceived it as a found object," she said.

The canopy of industrial metal provides plenty of desperately needed shade in the treeless landscape, and it tripled her living space to 3,000 square feet. Most important for her, though, it blurred the border between indoors and out.

When Thacher's friend Sandy Davis, a Manhattan caterer, visited last month, he burst into spontaneous applause on seeing the house. "We watched the sun go down and the harvest moon rise, and it was just perfect," he said. So perfect that Davis slept on the terrace, despite the chilly high-desert night, in a queen-size bed Thacher had placed there.

Thacher said she never tired of sitting out under the overhanging roof and watching the light change through the day from the brilliant reds of dawn to the subtlest pastels of dusk. In the evenings she gazes at the dome of stars. It is one thing to configure a home for indoor-outdoor living in, say, Marin Country, and quite another in the high desert, where summer temperatures rise to more than 100 degrees. At midday the light from outside reflects around her white walls with such intensity that Thacher is forced to wear dark glasses indoors. In the winter raging storms blow dust into every cranny, and landslides threaten even substantial residences. "One can never relax," Thacher said. "Well," she added, "it's kind of like on the streets of New York." While the "house port," as Thacher calls her place (she is applying for a trademark on the term in hopes of turning the idea into a business), cannot protect her altogether from the harsh desert elements, it helps deflect summer heat and winter rain.

She has installed curtains made from dropcloths that can be drawn around the entire house, creating a billowing white sanctuary. Putting up the shed, she said, was "like challenging this harsh landscape to a duel: 'OK, Desert, I will make it here.'"

Working with a renovation budget of \$40,000, Thacher added six double-wide doors, giving the place an airy, open atmosphere, and covered her long driveway with light-colored gravel from a nearby quarry. "I like its texture, its crunching sound and most of all its reflective quality," she said.

She softened her terrace by planting bougainvillea bushes and built a fountain of concrete and stucco. Its soft gurgle comes as a soothing surprise in the dusty landscape.

To create a seamless transition to the indoors, Thacher painted the floor the same dark red as her brick terrace.

She filled her bright white rooms with furniture of her own design, made from an industrial plywood that echoes the tawny color scheme of the surrounding landscape. She also hung sculpture made of yucca roots and tumbleweed entangled in webs of threads and ropes. (For information on furniture and sculpture please visit www.hallythacher.com) Before moving to the desert in 2002, Thacher lived in an apartment at Washington and Horatio Streets in the meatpacking district of Manhattan. She supported herself by working in a lumberyard while making her sculpture in a studio one floor above a meat locker.

When her rent doubled in 2000, to \$3,000, she moved to East Hampton, where she bought a house with an unkempt garden. At \$292,000, the house was considered a bargain, but she found the Hamptons social whirl off-putting and the damp Long Island winters demoralizing.

Having grown up in California, Thacher longed for someplace warm. Last year she decamped to Cathedral City, Calif., a town three miles from Palm Springs, where she bought a rundown 1950's bungalow for \$225,000. Its greatest virtue, she said, was a "certain Neutraesque elegance."

"The place reminded me of the Rat Pack," she added. "It looked like a hideaway they might have stayed at."

Thacher was visiting New York last year when a real-estate agent called to tell her about another California property on the market: a high desert perch with 10 acres and two unused buildings. She impulsively agreed to buy it sight unseen for \$265,000. (She sold the Cathedral City house for \$425,000.) When she inspected her acquisition some weeks later, she said, she suffered an extreme case of buyer's remorse. The two houses stood up a slope, above the highway and a huge billboard advertising a shabby motel. Up close they seemed to be in good condition, but almost irretrievably ugly. Worse, she learned that locals considered the houses a druggie hangout, known in particular as a place where crystal meth was produced.

Barely concealed beneath the stucco wall of what is now her bedroom she found a mural of a speeding Harley-Davidson motorcycle. "I thought this time I had really done myself in," she said.

Her only hope was the possibility of adding the kind of agricultural shed she had seen as a child growing up in Northern California. "I always had an affinity to industrial structures, especially in a natural environment," she said, "and I love the mixed feelings of openness and safety." On the Internet she found a prefab industrial shed normally used to keep hay dry, and bought it for \$11,000. A few days later the foreman of her five-member renovation crew called to say that the shed had arrived: an 18-wheel truck was at the foot of the mountain, and the driver was unloading 7,382 pounds of steel beams, some as long as 30 feet, beside the highway.

To assemble the canopy, her crew had to carry the beams up the mountain on an all-terrain forklift and then laboriously haul them with ropes up a scaffold. Meanwhile supporting pylons were rammed five

feet into the unsteady ground. When desert storms blew in, bringing winds of 50 miles an hour, work had to be suspended.

“It was like building the Pyramids,” Thacher said. The whole endeavor took a month, twice as long as she had anticipated.

In the 10 months she has lived in the high desert, her sheltered home (the second building will be a guest house) has helped her to cope with almost everything but the relentless wind.

“He’s my one enemy,” she said. “There are no mansions around here for a good reason.”

It is a punishing place to live, but it has its own lonely aesthetic that Thacher finds attractive. “It’s my favorite place to be,” she said, “and it’s the hardest place to be: the place on the edge.”