

Desert

The Best of the Coachella Valley

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MAGAZINE

DESIGNING WOMAN: PAULA OBLEN

IS PEREZ ROAD THE
DESERT SOHO?

SOME MORE
ROADSIDE ATTRACTIONS

A KRISSEL JEWEL COMES
ON THE MARKET

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The Great Escape

Perch is neither fish nor fowl. It is neither a surreptitious STR nor a luxury boutique hotel. And, yet, it manages to be the best of both.

**Story by Kent Black
Property photographs by Dane Deaner;
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It's a perfect desert day in midwinter. A few high clouds filter the sun and one might put on the lightest of sweaters, if only as an affectation.

Designer Paula Oblen takes her visitors on a tour of a stunning property near Palm Desert. Slightly to the north and east is the exclusive Bighorn community, while further east is The Reserve Club. An occasional car can be seen speeding up or down Highway 74 and if one squints, El Paseo can be glimpsed in the distance. In fact, from the hilltop property, which is appropriately named Perch, there is a sweeping view of much of the Coachella Valley.

Interestingly, Perch is not located in one of Palm Desert's gated enclaves. There are no golf courses weaving through carefully sculpted desert gardens nor fitness centers or gated checkpoints manned by security guards.

Perch is located in a unique no-man's-land. Its exclusivity lies in the fact that few people have heard of it and even fewer know how to get there. One of the only ways in is to take a right at the mobile home park, then follow the road, take a sharp right, and go up the hill. Clear?

"What is so interesting about where we're standing is that the Cahuilla Hills is unincorporated Riverside County," says Oblen, an energetic and articulate Indianan who arrived in the desert two years ago by way of Florida and San Clemente. "That means that even though we're adjacent to Bighorn, you're not subject to short-term rental restrictions. You have the opportunity to build these large, luxury vacation homes and still have the opportunity to operate them as if they were little boutique hotels."

It's a startling concept, as if these few desert hillside acres suddenly declared themselves Switzerland, immune from the oceans of bureaucracy churning on the Valley floor beneath. At a time when housing is at a premium and developers are eyeing agricultural land beyond Thermal for future neighborhoods and gated communities, it's rather astounding to stand amidst the relatively underdeveloped Cahuilla Hills situated right at the Valley's midpoint, where mega-mansions neighbor two-bedroom ranch homes and the hillsides are dotted with everything in between. There's a kind of refreshing anarchy and freedom at play in the Cahuilla Hills – an ephemeral quality that once existed from one end of the Valley to the other, but has now been walled and gated away.

Despite her short sojourn thus far in the desert, Cahuilla Hills has become the designer's favored palette. She still lived in southern Orange County when Travlr Vacation Homes tapped her to transform a nearby hilltop mansion called Summit. "I would come out on a Monday [from San Clemente]



and I would stay," Oblen recalls. "I would sleep on an airbed because there was nothing here. I really immersed myself into the process at the Summit property. And that's how I started working with Travl'r." (Travl'r, a premier property management company, owns many of its properties but also manages properties for other owners.)

A couple of years ago, when interior designer and *Queer Eye* star Bobby Berk found a nearby Spanish Neo-Colonial compound desperately in need of a top-to-bottom renovation (he discovered the property while lounging in Summit's pool), he teamed up with Oblen to realize his vision. "I met Paula after staying at a vacation property she designed," Berk says. "It was clear we share a similar design aesthetic and vibe."

"The elephant question in the room is always: Why would a designer hire a designer?" laughs Oblen. "Well, he's busy. He has a famous brand. We connected through Travl'r and developed a great rapport and collaboration. We even have a new project we're doing here in the Cahuilla Hills called Casa Mallorca."

Oblen says that one of the easiest ways to sum up her approach to vacation home design is experiential. "What's so important in the luxury vacation rental space is travelers seeking those lifestyle experiences. It's important in branded approach to design emotional touchpoints. Everybody's worried about 'Let's create that space. That's a beautiful pillow; that's a beautiful piece.' But, when you're dealing with travelers who are seeking experiences ... they really want to feel the story behind it."

If there ever was a property that screamed 'backstory!' it is Perch.

Perch is the sixth property Oblen has done in the Cahuilla Hills and might be the oddest.

Built in 1977 when this area was the Wild West of Palm Desert, the home (and the only man-made structure on the property before Oblen and her crews got to work) was a large geodesic dome. At 3,300 square feet, the dome is an impressive bit of engineering and construction, but the rest



Paula Oblen in the middle of the grand tour; above, the view from the bed in the satellite dome.

of the property was barren and undeveloped. Oblen says the owners were not particularly interested in interior design, either. "When I first visited, I saw that the owner's bed stuck out in the middle of the floor."

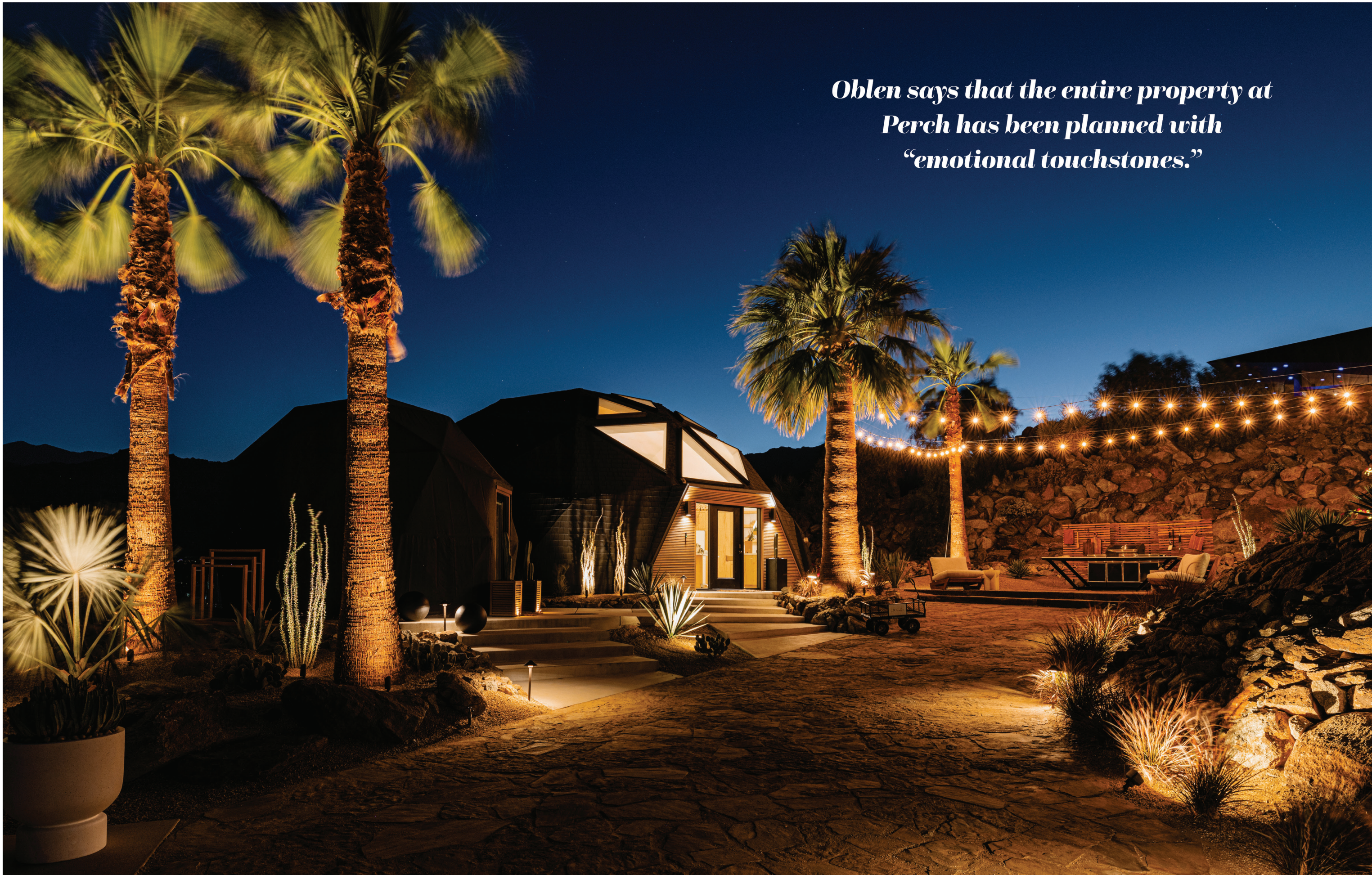
On a leisurely walk around the property, Oblen explained the transformation of the property piece by piece with the pride of someone who personally chose and placed each rock on the land, no matter the size and weight.

At the entrance to the property is a sloping car park that's large enough for a half-dozen guests and accessorized with "Perch" branded wagons for transporting luggage and children. Though one's eye is immediately drawn to the two charcoal-colored domes at the opposite end of the property, Oblen introduces her guests to the surprising number of



Clockwise, Travl'r's Jen Wampole said the dome looked like "a golf ball" when they first saw it; it's hard to believe Palm Desert is a stone's throw away; it's like there is an invisible concierge at Perch.





Oblen says that the entire property at Perch has been planned with “emotional touchstones.”



carefully curated settings ... what she refers to as “emotional touchstones” and “Instagrammable moments.”

Immediately to the left of the parking area is an immaculate pickleball court – a feature common enough to any luxury rental property these days, except that this pickleball court is nestled in a stadium-like bowl, surrounded on two sides by a small hillside of immense boulders that provide not only privacy and wind protection but also a beautiful and dramatic backdrop. Immediately adjacent to the pickleball court are four immense hammocks supported by individually laid posts – what Oblen calls “the hammock garden.” Again, description falls short of the impact and placement of the hammocks. Lying in one of them, you can look out over the Cahuilla Hills and the Santa Rosa Mountains further east. A nearby fire pit provides similar views of the imposing hill of boulders close to the end and the hills and mountains to the east.

Dominating the center of the property is a 45' by 16' pool with a spa at the end closest to the dome house. Curiously, the house is set slightly above ground. Oblen says the pool's above-ground design was suggested by Travl'r's owners, Jen and Spencer Wampole. The ledge of the pool is the perfect height for seating, thus facilitating lounging and sitting around the pool during parties. Overlooking the pool is an outdoor dining area. Oblen wanted to give the open-air dining room “a tropical feeling,” so she imported ocotillo branches to create a flat, textured roof over the dining table. In back of the dining area (and bordering the north side

Upon entering the property, guests download an app to their phones that gives them the ability to turn on the jacuzzi, the fountain, the area lights, and, in fact, almost everything on the property.

of the property) is a hillside of boulders that shelter the property and give it an intensely private feeling. While it feels as if all of these “touchstones” were simply and cleverly placed by Oblen in the perfect spots amongst this rugged garden, she has to laugh. “We kept thinking, ‘We’ve got rocks for days. We don’t need to bring in more rocks.’ But, the thing is, when you start taking rocks away, then you end up with holes. In the end, we had to bring in more rocks in order to fill in areas. The guys who did the work did an amazing job.”

The macro of the outdoor spaces is impressive enough, but what really makes Perch a unique experience is the thought that went into all of the experiences a guest might have. As the saying goes, it’s the little things. Upon entering the property, guests download an app to their phones that gives them the ability to turn on the jacuzzi, the fountain, and the area lights ... in fact, almost everything on the property. It’s a guest’s electronic valet. If you happen to be relaxing by the firepit one evening and it gets a little chilly, you can reach out to a nearby basket and fetch a blanket. Every pathway, the placement of every tuft of pampa grass, and the grouping of chairs is intended, as Oblen says, “to take away any guesswork on the part of our guests.”

Perch is not so much the ultimate, elevated Airbnb as it is a small, private boutique hotel ... absent a concierge, bell captain, housekeeper, pool attendant, or any other staff. Instead, what Oblen and Travl'r managed to do is create an intimate destination where almost any need by guests is met by an invisible staff. Oblen’s own obsession with upscale amenities and service came during a trip with



her husband, Steve, to Anguilla in 2010. “We were sitting there among all these wonderful things and we both said, ‘I want to bring these things home with us ... We can’t be the only ones who feel this way.’ That’s how our corporation, Hotelements, was created.” As the website says, it is about “crafting a unique property identity.”

Nowhere is that identity seen more than the remodeled geodesic dome. Jen Wampole says that when they first saw the geodesic dome, “It looked like a giant golf ball on the hillside.” She says they knew they could do wonders with the structure and “swooped in and bought it” when it came on the market. After working with Oblen on Summit, the Wampoles put their vision for the property in her hands.

Among the more striking decisions Oblen made was to paint the structure charcoal black. (She also added a satellite geodesic dome next to the larger structure that is large enough for a queen-sized bed and a small bathroom, sans shower.) Rather than stand out in a negative way, the color (replicated in other elements around the property) compliments the brown hues of the desert environment while giving the entire compound a contemporary feel.

The interior is an extraordinary contrast with white and shades of tan dominating throughout. It’s such a clean, simple, and elegant interior that one feels obliged to remove not only shoes but also possibly every other article of clothing.

The dimensions of the interior are deceiving. From the outside, it looks like it might be the size of a huge hippie yurt, but the main room is a spacious open-plan kitchen and living

room. The kitchen is gourmet-level, with a center island that could easily accommodate a party of lubricated onlookers as the designated chef mans the stovetop.

A ladder leads up to a loft space large enough to lead a yoga class. (There are, in fact, yoga mats laid out in the loft.) This space does not count as one massive bedroom. So, where did Oblen hide the other four bedrooms and three bathrooms?

Not immediately visible from other points on the property, Oblen added an addition on the side of the dome, opposite the entrance. Off the main space are doors leading to the four bedrooms. Though it is snug, she managed to carve out enough space for each to contain a queen bed and full-sized bathroom. Because each bedroom has its own exit onto a private patio, the rooms feel spacious. Each room has a great view across the hills, which gives it a feeling of floating above the land beneath it. There are lovely details in each of the rooms, such as small triangular window elements from the dome’s panels that let in additional light.

As Oblen promised, Perch is nearly an unending weave of visual storytelling and emotional touchstones. It absolutely begs for guests to create unforgettable experiences.

“I think one of the amazing things about the property is the sense of discovery people have when they get here,” she says. “We’re already receiving reviews where people are saying, ‘The exploration; we just keep discovering things.’ That’s been really cool.”