



## Free-Range Kickin'

It takes grit to transform a sun-baked field in Marfa, Texas, into a small village of vintage trailers and yurts. The heat, the dagger-sharp yucca, and the scarcity of hardware stores and skilled trade workers (Marfa has only one plumber, and he's the most popular guy in town) are enough to derail the building dreams of many. Then there is the seductive inertia of Marfa time, the slowing down that happens in the local culture of mid-day naps and porch sitting. Renowned as the late Donald Judd's modern art refuge, this tiny desert town may be an international outpost for artists and cool seekers, but it can also be a very hard place to get things done.

But that hasn't deterred Liz Lambert. Born and raised in West Texas, Lambert solidified her reputation as Austin's premier hotelier after turning the San José—a once squalid, crumbling motor hotel—into an icon of Austin style and a veritable cultural hub. It's not difficult to see the potential Lambert brings to Marfa, where she is pressing ahead with her newest venture, El Cosmico, a haven for Spartan and Vagabond trailers.

El Cosmico is not necessarily for solitary, indoor types; trailer buyers thus far have been people with

some communal spunk who want a few small comforts with their big desert skies. "There's going to be wind, dust, the errant spider," quips Lambert. "This is not a four-star hotel, but the trade-off is a blanket of stars at night. Anyone can get a second home, but one of the attractions of a place like this is you know that when you go to stay in your trailer, and it's 20 feet away from your neighbor's, you're kinda looking forward to seeing [them] and being thrown into the mix." El Cosmico is a classy hybrid between a standard hotel, where one feels removed from the land, and a communal campsite: Here you get the desert stars, community, and luxury linens, too.

As with the San José, Lambert has culled an all-star mix of collaborators, turning to Bob Harris of Lake/Flato Architects to conceive of the overall design, Jack Sanders of Austin's JWLKR Design Build Adventure to manage the project, and Christy Ten Eyck to head up landscape design. When it's completed, El Cosmico will be an oasis amid the cacti, with an 85-foot-diameter orb-shaped pool surrounded by low-lying walls that radiate out in Cosmo-like circles whose orbiting amenities include stored trailers, wood heated Dutchbuds, Nomad yurts ▶



Clockwise from top left: Until the outdoor showers are installed, dog Darryl bathes beneath the El Cosmico water-tank; Jack Sanders brands the water tank with the El Cosmico logo, designed by Austin artist Noel Waggener; an early site plan by Lake Flato; architect and land artist Ann Tucker paints the concentric rings of the El Cosmico design onto the land with Sanders.

by Ecoshack, a bar, a stage and dance area for parties, gardens, and art studios. Lambert calls it "a trans-Pecos kibbutz for the 21st century."

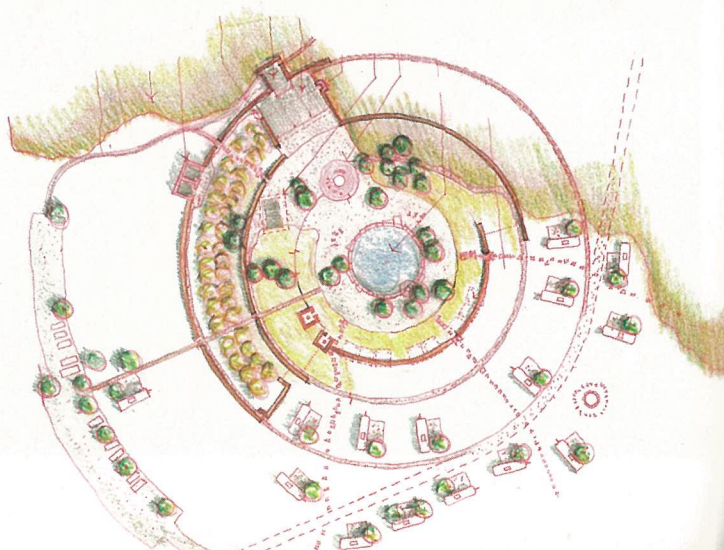
While the endorsement may smack of a bygone era of utopianism, El Cosmico's efforts to live lightly and conscientiously are many. Lambert is installing a wind turbine, and many trailers will have a photovoltaic panel; eventually the site will be fully powered by sun and wind. And because the El Cosmico team recognizes the dilemma of filling a swimming pool in an arid climate, they have scaled back the size of the pool and are opening it up to the public so that a little water can go a long way. Ten Eyck, an expert in sustainable desert landscaping, is designing an extensive water-harvesting system with large cisterns to recycle water. "The rain water may be enough to fill a pool, but it's hard to say yet," she comments. "You'd be surprised; we do get some real gullywashers out there."

But sustainability is more than green technology and careful design. Incremental growth and simple human elements play a key role in making a good project last. "I want El Cosmico to be sustainable on all levels," Lambert says. "I didn't want to go deeply into debt doing

it; I wanted it to find its own way over the years. That's why I love the idea of people investing in the village of El Cosmico, so immediately you have people who give it life and become part of it." Because the trailer owners are financially committed, El Cosmico has a built-in long-term community: a simple, but essential, part of the plan.

El Cosmico is an atypical project for Lake/Flato, the much-in-demand, much-lauded San Antonio-based firm, but Harris is dedicated to the cause: "It is a rare opportunity to do something different," he explains. "El Cosmico is rooted in Texas vernacular and a model for touching the ground lightly. I've worked with Liz before and I have a great affinity for her and for the fun we have together. Because Marfa is so isolated, you are inevitably connected to not only the landscape but to the people as well. It's pure...to me, there's an honesty about it."

Project manager Jack Sanders is equally invested, so much so that he's set up camp in a Spartan on the Cosmico grounds. He is the project's on-location solutions man as well as its resident philosopher. A former instructor at the Auburn University Rural Studio in Alabama and protégé of the late Samuel "Sambo" Mockbee, he stresses the importance of process, ►





Lambert's interiors—part desert vernacular, part Jack Kerouac—are framed by the smooth birch walls of the Spartans and Vagabonds (top left). Liz Lambert (top right), devoted to restoring 1950s Spartan and Vagabond trailers, shows off one of her best specimens. Jack Sanders soaks in a Dutchbub (bottom right).

of engaging with the land and the people involved. "The way that I was mentored, [the building process] is about joy," he explains one night by an El Cosmico fire pit, his face smudged, a cold beer in hand. "At the Rural Studio, building something is about lifting the spirit, and that's evident in the process as much as the final product."

Sanders and Lambert have recruited a coterie of talents to fire the spirit of El Cosmico. Land artist Jarrod Beck worked with Sanders in the beginning stages to scratch out the design to scale, making a sketch upon the site's hard earth. Using a Bobcat loader as his paintbrush, Sanders drew concentric circles onto the land, framing them with painted poles to define the space. Wedding art with construction, Sanders and Beck used cattle panels and rebar to fashion mock-up trailers, positioning them according to the Lake/Flato site plan. The mock-ups let the technicians know where to put utilities and gave everyone a sense of the scale and relationship between the trailers. Other artists who have worked on the project include Stephen Ross, a University of Texas architecture lecturer who brought a class out to build on site; Noel Waggener, the printmaker behind the El Cosmico graph-

ics; and Butch Anthony, an Alabama artist. "I don't mean this in a light manner," Lambert comments, "but it is a playground for all of us, a laboratory where we can work problems out and experiment with things."

For Lambert, no Marfa quirks will keep El Cosmico from happening, especially when there are beautiful Spartan trailers to renovate. Lambert has a long-held love affair with the 1950s Spartan and Vagabond trailers and their yachtlike birch interiors. Lambert and her design team locate the best specimens, treat them to her unique modern renovation in Austin, and then haul them westward, where each will be styled with a porch, an outdoor shower, and a view of the low, craggy desert mountains just north of Mexico.

El Cosmico will grow at its own pace. After the first phase of trailers and pool are in place, the yurts will be set up and available for nightly stays, with a Spartan "hotel office" by the entrance. Art studios, which will come later, will be available to rent to anyone. "This project is always going to be about the process," Lambert says. "I'm not going to wake up one day and [have it] be done. It will always be a work in progress. So we might as well enjoy it." ►



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