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Homes enhance natural surroundings

In building anywhere, there are certain factors always considered to determine the best placement of a building on its site: topography of the land; location of the natural vegetation; existing drainage patterns; the prevailing winds; access for utilities, construction vehicles; views and seasonal angles of the sun.

In the extremes of the desert, these factors are critical. For example:

- In the heat of the sun, windows need maximum protection from the sun. In the winter the sun's warmth is welcome.
- The sudden flow of water from a heavy rain seeks the freedom of a wash through natural drainage patterns. If these patterns are not considered and washes are blocked, flooding results.
- Land scarred by careless construction practices may never recover. The desert is fragile; we cannot count on rapid jungle growth or lush green forest to hide our mistakes.

Following are some suggestions for desert construction:

- As you go about building your home, work with the architect, designer or builder to make sure that the house is sited in the best possible relationship to washes, slopes, sun angles, your view, your neighbor's view and the existing vegetation.
- To approach an architect, designer or builder with a floor plan already complete is to start your desert building backwards. Let us explain: a client may know at the outset that four bedrooms, four baths, formal dining room, etc. are required, and the client may also know how the family will live in these rooms, but it is only after the factors listed in number one, above, are thoroughly considered (i.e. washes, slopes, sun angles, natural vegetation, views) that a floor plan can be developed — a plan that will best meet not only the needs of the client, but equally important, the demands of the desert.

- Try to get all communications to the site working off a single road. With careful planning, the

septic contractor, the building contractor, the utilities (if underground) and the eventual road to the house can all follow the same path.

- Plan your house to retain the maximum amount of natural vegetation. The majority of desert trees cannot be transplanted because of their tap root. Most desert trees are also very slow growing. Cactus — if not over five feet — can be stockpiled for future use. Rope off the actual site during construction to protect the vegetation from destruction.

- Don't disturb the natural washes. They are dry most of the time, but can become a torrent of water after heavy rains or in flash floods.

- The desert vegetation ranges up to about 15 feet in height overall. On flat lots with long vistas, one-story houses will protect your view and your neighbors.

- When planning your home, consider turning it toward a partially enclosed courtyard or patio that is separated from the existing desert. Leave it open to the prevailing breeze for ventilation, since enclosed courtyards can become hotboxes. This outdoor "living room" can then become an oasis where water is used for fountains and plants.

Most importantly, plan your building to fit the land! Don't make the mistakes inherent in trying to fit the desert to your building.

The preceding information was taken from the CCIA's book, *The Fragile Desert*. The book is designed to help people become more aware of our beautiful Sonoran Desert and to remind them of its fragility. Copies of the book are available at Carefree United Drug!

Reader questions, comments and contributions are invited. Write: "A Desert Place," in care of *The Black Mountain News*, P.O. Box 1569, Cave Creek, Ariz. 85331.