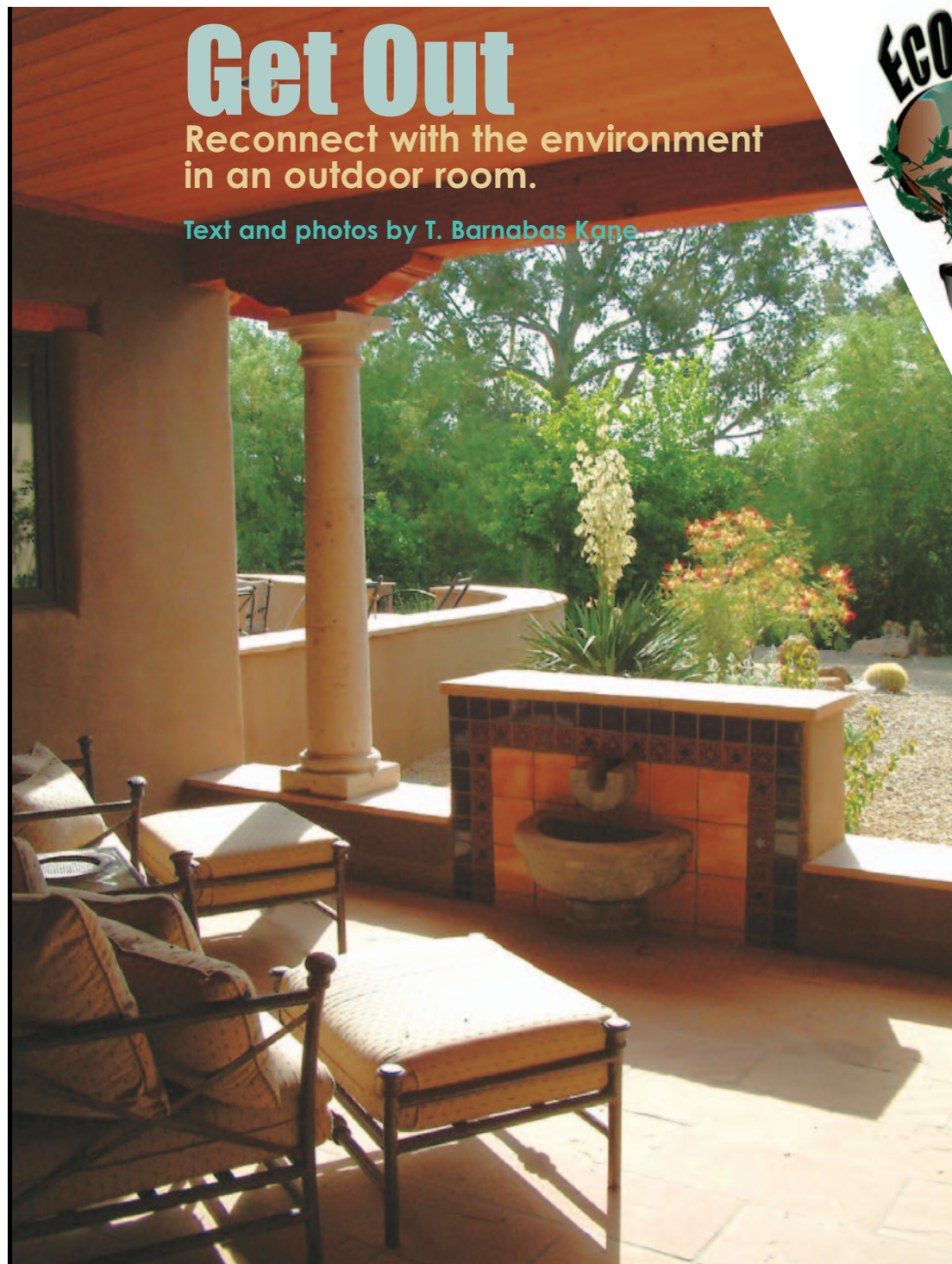


Get Out

Reconnect with the environment in an outdoor room.

Text and photos by T. Barnabas Kane



The pages of *EcoZene* are routinely filled with information about how homes and landscapes can harmonize with the environment. But what about homeowners? Northern Arizona is blessed with one of the best year-round climates in the country. Why not design houses and properties to take advantage of it? There are many ways to turn a simple *casa* into a virtual *hacienda* by turning an empty or underused outdoor space into an outdoor room.



THE EVOLUTION OF THE PORCH

In the good old days, porches served as outdoor rooms. On new houses, porches are often windswept afterthoughts with poor finishes and no sensible connections to the house. Most are too narrow for function. Decks and patios similarly do not get used because of poor location and design.

Creating a useful outdoor room isn't as tough or expensive as you might think. There are a few decisions to make right away. Outdoor rooms are sometimes detached structures such as gazebos or teahouses. If the yard allows for building a completely separate space, consider it. If not, attach an outdoor room to the existing house.

GETTING STARTED

Remember, it's all about comfort and convenience. Start by figuring out where the room should go. Find a place between two wings where two walls come together at a 90 degree angle. To create visual connection, locate the room off an existing glass door or add one later.

East and west orientations will shade the house from excessive solar gain in mornings and afternoons. South orientation is okay for all-round use but – depending on window and door layout – may block beneficial solar gain from warming living spaces in winter. Face the room north as a last resort. The only time this works is during the hottest heat of summer. Otherwise, the room blocks light and stays cool. If north is the only option, a heat source and skylight are necessary, or the room must be roofless.

Summertime shade in Arizona's sun-belt climate is important for keeping outdoor rooms comfortable and cutting the sun's blinding glare. The single



most important component in achieving this is the lid. Lids can be sloping, porch-like roofs or wooden arbor structures (like ramadas) at least nine feet above the floor. Orient the room so it is filled with indirect light. The roof type and length of overhang will impact how the room can be used and furnished.

Walls create volume in the space. Up to three sides are needed to create an outdoor room. Any more, and you've created an addition or garden house. Walls can be masonry, wood, plants, metal or pretty much anything, as long as they create an opaque screen. Wall height can vary from floor-to-ceiling to low, sitting walls. It's best if at least one is full height.

MAKE YOURSELF COMFORTABLE

Like rooms indoors, outdoor rooms should be comfortably furnished. Paint the exterior a different, rich color to set it off from the rest of the house. This is a room, so the floor needs to be smooth and easy on the feet. Splinters, sharp gravel or toe-stubbing surfaces will create a subconscious resistance to the space. Well-finished wood, polished concrete,

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ceramic tile or smooth-jointed flagstone paving are barefoot friendly surfaces. Add throw rugs or carpet if the room's protected from weather.

Accessories that can take the weather will give the room a unique decor and character. Hang durable artwork and create visual interest in corners with sculpture. Fill decorative urns with freeze-resistant container plants suitable for the microclimate. A fireplace provides the feel of an indoor living room, warmth through the winter and a visual focal point. Low level, indirect lighting and ceiling fans are optional. A small, self-contained water feature will create good background noise to flow through the house.

Views aren't as important as one might think because outdoor rooms are most successful as inward-facing, intimate spaces. The view from inside a house is coveted because it connects residents to the outdoors. The outdoor space achieves this, so focus more on how it feels to be there.

Just think of all the things you could do in an outdoor space and get to it! 

EcoZene is a collaboration between Northern AZ Zene magazine and leading Northern Arizona architects and landscape professionals. T. Barnabas Kane is a second-generation landscape architect based in Prescott who may be reached at tbk@cablone.net. For information about becoming an EcoZene sponsor, call 928-443-9112.