



# THE URBAN BRICOLEUR

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Ernest's Garden  
Photographs by Dannis Keeley

For years I have walked the trails and footpaths of Laurel Canyon, and in my hiking I have grown to know the people who live in these hills. Many are like me—hippies who moved here in their twenties and are now well into middle age. The older people, though (the ones over seventy), are my favorites, for they are a breed unto their own. And there are a lot of them. They've been here for years and years, as many as fifty years in some instances. What makes them unique as an older group is that all of them are real bohemians, more bohemian than their forty- or fifty-something counterparts. They must be, because, in the mid-1960s and early 1970s, any forty-year-old who wasn't inherently eccentric fled. The man who lived in the house I now occupy up and moved when the band Iron Butterfly moved in across the street. "That," said my predecessor, "was the last straw." But before and during those summers of love, there was a settled community here that found the influx of dope-smoking, long-haired panhandlers a refreshing change. And so they stayed.

There is one particular man in this group whose company I regularly seek out, Ernest Rosenthal. I first met Ernest fourteen years ago. My dog, a puppy then, demanded an extraordinary amount of exercise, and in an effort to tire her I wandered farther and farther down the dirt roads, letting the four-legged lunatic cover ten miles to my every one. Late one afternoon I decided to push it, to continue even further, Chaco racing before me. And so I rounded the sharp curve. Before me I saw more hillside covered in chaparral, and a barn-red house out on a promontory with its bay window overlooking Kirkwood Canyon. Then the road narrowed and disappeared into a dark tunnel of arching eucalyptus trees, unkempt, ragged, and rangy. I was curious and kept going.

Chaco, ahead of me by two hundred feet, darted into the shadowy cave only to scramble back into the daylight moments later, eyebrows drawn. My steps slowed. Cautiously I moved into this netherworld.

As my eyes slowly adjusted to the darkness I saw above me huge yellow flowers entwined with the eucalyptus branches. *Copa di oro*, last week's buds, shriveled and rotting, pungent and sweet, dying and blooming, covered the ground before me. Goose bumps multiplied down the sides of my body as I continued on.

To my left I saw a driveway going up to a house that must have been on the bluff beyond. To my right, through thick foliage held at bay by disparate sections of fence (picket, grape stake, dog-eared), I could barely make out a clearing of sorts, with traces of narrow paths, some ceramic pots hanging from tree branches, a trellis perhaps? Intrigued, I reached out, spread some branches, and tried to see more.

"Excuse me?"

I jumped and turned. Before me stood a small, wiry man with thinning gray hair brushed up and away from his face, a gray beard drawn precisely along his jawline, carefully trimmed and well kept. He had a *real* nose, one with character and size, and blue eyes that did not leave my face. His tattered clothes hugged his compact and tight body—a strong chest, arms delineated by muscle. He had a kerchief tied around his neck, and on his feet were boots, each laced shut with a length of wire.

"Oh, hi," I said, embarrassed and feeling like a snoop.

"Can I help you?"

I pointed to the wall of bushes. "It's beautiful down there."

"It's spring," he replied.



Chaco, seeing a squirrel dart down a tree, grazed the man's knee as she dashed forward. After apologizing, I started off after my dog.

"My name is Ernest Rosenthal," he said to my back.

I turned and told him my name.

That night my dog slept the whole night through without once waking me up and so the new walk became a favorite one. It must have been on my third or fourth trip into the shadows before I again ran into Ernest. This time he was digging away at the earth near the roadway, using a handy, well-worn, short-handled pick he called a piton, a tool used in rock climbing. It would be years before I heard about his youth in Austria, between the world wars when he had climbed in the Alps. On this particular day, Ernest did not have time to linger. He needed to prepare the earth for an Australian tree fern he'd found along the roadside. It must have blown out of a pickup truck, he said, before focusing back on his task.

I kept taking that same walk. With each passing I became more familiar with the lay of the land near Ernest's place. It seemed that his property spanned both flanks of a hill, one side towering over Kirkwood Canyon and the other over Laurel Canyon. From a certain vantage point I could glimpse the roof of the house, small and snuggled in against the hill.



One Friday afternoon, Ernest popped out of the bushes as Chaco and I passed by. "My wisteria is blooming," he said, and then he invited me into the garden to see. After slipping a leash on the unaccommodating Chaco and tying her to a post, I followed Ernest through the gate.

He started down a narrow set of stairs and I stumbled after him, trying hard to keep up with this man who must have been more than twice my age, and certainly half my size. He paused on a landing and I came to a stop at his side. The rich smell of dirt filled the cool, clear air. I felt Ernest watching me as I took it in—the house to my right, all rough-hewn wood and glass, and before me an oasis, lush with greens of every hue, trees, vines, and shrubs. From the road I had only seen the canopy.

"The wisteria is over here," he said, scampering off and down to the left.

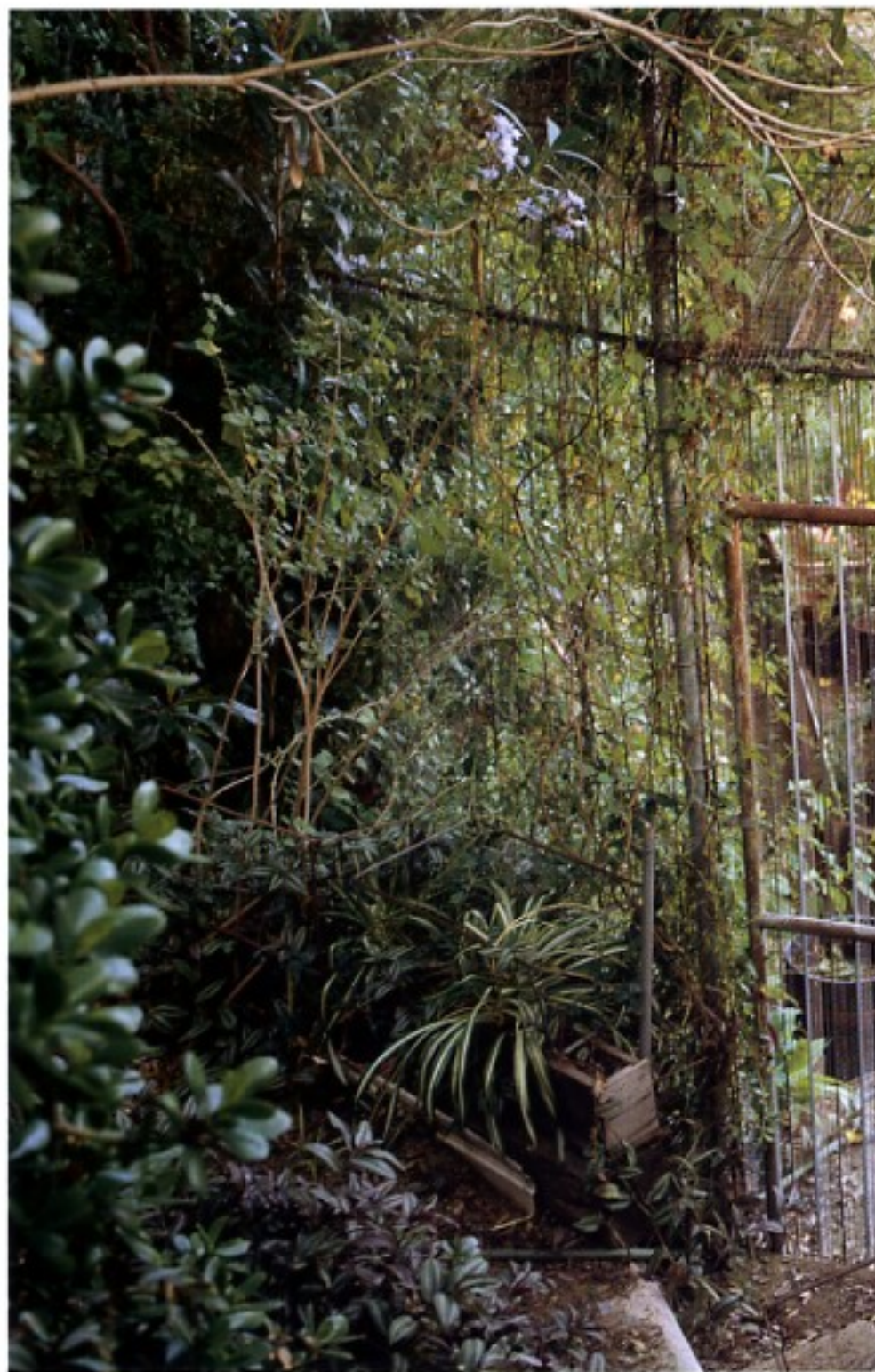
I took in as much as I could while at the same time careening after my host, fearing that if I broke visual contact with him I would be forever lost in a maze of intersecting paths and stairways. Everything I saw folded back in on itself, grew up and back down, creating a sense of one continuous piece, although in reality what wasn't flora was an odd assortment of metal, stones, and wood: tire rims, car ramps, rebar, galvanized pipe, sheet metal, milk crates, brick, cement blocks, boulders, chipboard, and masonite, all seeming actually to rise













from the ground, as much a part of the landscape as the blue gums and citriodoras, the golden bamboo, and the acacias (purple leaf, mesquit, and pearl).

Ernest disappeared around a bend. I sped up my pace but stopped when my eyes found him again. He was standing in a small clearing, head back, youthful in his tan leggings and tight, dark green T-shirt, both of which looked like he had snagged them out of the children's bin at the Goodwill. But his face is what really caught me, angel-like wonder, reveling in the satisfaction of what is, a connection made. Ernest was peering up at a skyful of blooming wisteria, stems heavy, bunches of blue hanging down from an arbor, fat bumblebees diving in.

Since that first evening under the wisteria, Ernest and I have been friends. I take anyone I know who's willing to walk as far as Ernest's gate and ask Ernest if he has the time to share his delight. He always does. Often when I walk by in the evening, Chaco no longer running ahead but now at my side, her graying muzzle held high in the breeze, Ernest will invite me in to see something special, perhaps an addition to his labyrinth (more terraced hillside thanks to some cast-off railroad ties he's found) or a particularly beautiful plant. Ernest always has something new, something blooming, or a spectacular creation. (This year it was a huge aviarylike structure—chicken wire stretched over vast rebar arches and held in place with wire brackets, stuck into six five-yard-long cement-footed lengths of galvanized pipe two inches in diameter. In this outdoor dome Ernest grows vegetables, bounty now safe from the deer, raccoons, and possums, from the scrub jays and mockingbirds.)

Over the years I have spotted Ernest here and there loading the bed of his minitruck with discarded materials. He isn't particular about his found stuff—anything from old roof rafters to scrap metal of every sort, body parts from cars, refrigerators, washing machines, barbecues. He picks up anything that might possibly be used to shape and maintain the two steep hillsides that reflect his vision—a magical other place where he, and anyone who visits, can lose themselves, can give themselves over to the marvel of it all.

But what attracts me to Ernest the most, more than any one event or action, is what I learn from the experience of him. Ernest stays engaged. In the twenty years since he retired from teaching at a state university, Ernest has unleashed his imagination on a mountaintop. He has the spirit every day to step outside his back door and find within himself a landscape that demands expression.

Last week I happened upon Ernest on the northeast corner of his property, his kerchief tied around his now bald pate. He was installing an elaborate wrought-iron gate. He found it, he told me, in a dumpster outside a house that was being remodeled. Despite the fact

that it would open onto nothing, onto a steep and disappearing hillside I told him how beautiful I thought the gate was. He agreed.

"And after the cement dries," he continued, "once it's in place, I'll have to make something worthy of it out here." He waved his piton into the void. He laughed and pulled a battered level from the pocket of his oversized gangbanger denim shorts.

I left him holding the level against the vertical upright, knowing that in a month or two or three, I will pass by this same spot and now be invited to follow my friend down a set of stairs made from, perhaps, lengths of car ramp or logs from a fallen eucalyptus tree. These stairs will lead to a path or two, wandering through a patch of Canary Island broom and basket of gold, or cornflowers and blue marguerites.

Ernest participates. He surrounds himself in this project that knows no end, where there is always room for him to express himself. Here there is no boundary, because Ernest is the urban bricoleur.









