We arrived in Joshua Tree late at night, appreciating the vast sky full of bright stars while we looked forward to waking up to the desert landscape and a day of education and inspiration. The water district and land trust gardens were the perfect introduction to the plant diversity, wild animal habitat, and harmonious integration of humanity and the natural environment that we would see echoed at every site we visited throughout the tour.

The private homes and their owners were a wealth of ideas and knowledge, all remarkable for their use of a modest footprint and unique adaptations to the environment. Construction materials and techniques suited to the desert, and peaceful integration between buildings and native plants made each home feel like a natural part of the environment. As the whole State becomes more arid and we all rethink our use of natural resources, the ideas taking root in Joshua Tree have broad and urgent application elsewhere. Individual rainwater capture, use of sustainable building materials, and integration of native plants into the suburban landscape should be routine. A thoughtful analysis of how our buildings meld with the natural world would benefit construction planning at any level.

We left our last stop feeling satiated and full of ideas. As we drove down the remote road back to our motel, we turned a corner and happened on a bench under a Joshua tree, inviting us to stop as if it had been placed there just for us. On that bench in the desert with cold drinks and our dogs, we talked about swales and straw bale homes and water and life, and all the things the desert provides. It might show all of us the way forward.