

# Path of Glory

**The Wexler & Harrison-designed Kirk Douglas Residence undergoes a thoughtful renovation by friends of the family.**

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**Designed in 1954 by Donald Wexler and Richard Harrison, the Kirk Douglas Residence sits on three-quarters of an acre in Palm Springs' storied Old Las Palmas neighborhood.**  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAN CHAVKIN

Michael Budman was thumbing through the day's edition of *New York Post* when he learned of the sale. "Own Kirk Douglas' former Palm Springs pad for \$3.4M," the Page Six headline read.

It was April 23, 2016, a sunny Saturday in Malibu. The Roots Canada co-founder and his wife, architect Diane Bald, were relishing a quiet moment at their Craig Ellwood-designed beach house, a rental overlooking the serene Pacific, whose waves outstretch from the back deck farther than the eyes can see.

Budman's brother, Jim, an artist and a regular collaborator of Diane's who has an art studio in Venice, had popped over for a visit.

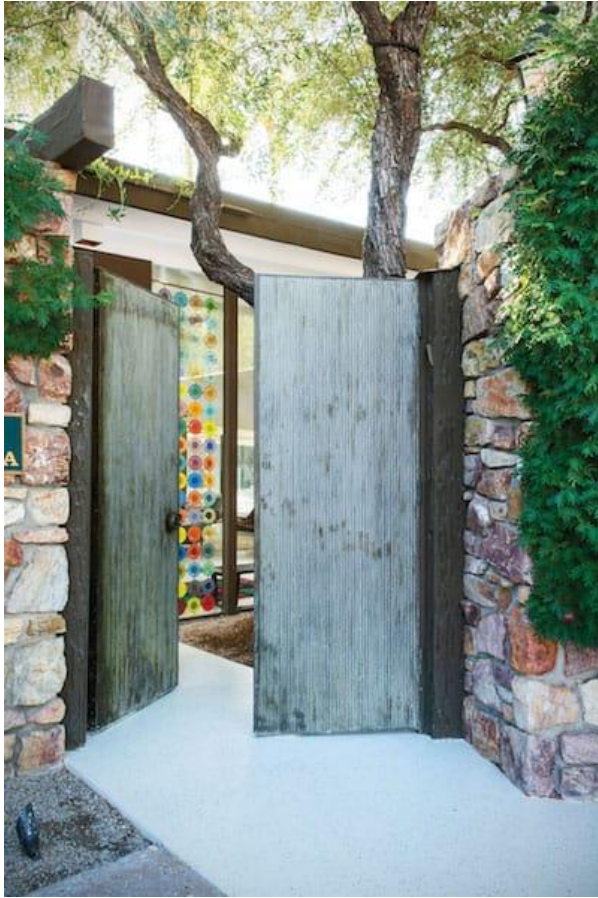
“We’re always joking that it’s such a rag newspaper,” Diane says in hindsight, with particular reference to the gossip column. But they read it anyway. After all, the couple runs in a social circle that sometimes surfaces in pop culture news, and Page Six routinely supplies a good laugh.

In this case, it yielded another house.

“Well,” Budman said to his cohorts in Malibu, “why don’t we take a ride down to Palm Springs and see what it’s all about?”



**A recovered 1960s sofa and a pair of reissued Hans J. Wegner shell chairs take center stage.**



Their interest was less in the location than it was the former resident's name. The Toronto natives consider Kirk's eldest son, Michael Douglas, a dear friend. Did he know it had come to market? Would he care to buy it? They phoned the screen star before making any moves.

"That's incredible," Douglas enthused. He had no interest in buying but encouraged their pursuit. "It's a great area. I think you'll love it. Go ahead."

So, Jim Budman tracked down the listing agent, Jim Schwietz of Bennion Deville Homes.

"We told him who we were, that we were good friends with Michael Douglas," Diane recalls. "He was thrilled because he wanted it to go into the right hands."





Floor-to-ceiling sliders open the living area to the pool, pavilion, and palms.

Designed in 1954 by Donald Wexler and Richard Harrison, the horizontally stressed post-and-beam house sits on three-quarters of an acre in Palm Springs' storied Old Las Palmas neighborhood. The Douglasses moved here in the late 1950s and became the talk of the town; they used it regularly as a vacation home until '99. Five bedrooms and eight bathrooms stretch across 4,000 square feet (including dual master suites, known as "Kirk's Room" and "Anne's Room"). Expansive walls of glass look out toward a K-shaped pool and, beyond that, the famed tennis pavilion installed by the Douglasses in 1976. (The pavilion remains largely untouched and still features an impressive collage of Kirk Douglas film posters that covers the walls and ceiling.)

There was no hesitation. Budman put in an offer.

On Mother's Day, they received word of acceptance.

"It was so exciting," Douglas recalls of first hearing the news. An East Coast kid, the actor (who currently stars in *The Kominsky Method* on Netflix) spent a lot of time on holiday in Palm Springs with his dad; stepmother, Anne Buydens; and brothers.



The banquette is a Diane Bald signature that she includes in most dining spaces. “It’s always a great place to gather,” she says.



A minimalist palette pops against bright white walls and Arborite waterfall counters.

“I have great memories of growing up there. That was the first time I met Liberace and Dean Martin. It was a close neighborhood of people who’d all been there for a long time: Moss Hart and Kitty Carlisle lived on one side, Dinah Shore and George Montgomery right behind ... We used to go down to the dude ranch to go horseback riding with my father. We called ourselves the Desert Rats.”

“I think everybody who walks into that house feels a vibe,” Diane says. “It has this old energy, and it’s a very happy house. You feel like great things happened there.”

More than the Douglas connection, Diane, as an architect, has an affinity for restoring midcentury craftsmanship. She recognized the Wexler & Harrison design as a structure that merited preservation. “I like to see legacies live on,” she affirms. “This is an important piece of architecture. We wanted to restore it as best we could and, at the same time, make it work for how we live — being cognizant of how Donald Wexler would have seen the house.”

A few key updates transformed the main living area into the type of bright, indoor-outdoor space that people expect of present-day Palm Springs. What good are glass walls looking out to a pool and tennis pavilion if they’re only visible after you enter the place? To create a sightline from the front door through to the yard, they removed a privacy wall in the entryway. In updating the electrical, they opened up the ceiling beams to let in more light from above. Underfoot, they said goodbye to dark Saltillo tiles, replacing the flooring with sleek terrazzo throughout that extends to the exterior and expands the existing outdoor gathering space.

The kitchen had previously been remodeled in a way that neither fit with the structural intention nor Diane and Michael’s lifestyle. An avid home cook, Diane wanted to modernize the equipment while remaining sensitive to the architecture. But first, she needed to know what Wexler would have to say about such change. The lauded architect passed in 2015; however, in restoring the house, the couple consulted with Gary Wexler, his son.

“I was flattered to be involved,” Gary shares. “My dad made it clear to me over the years that whenever clients wanted to update, it was a positive thing. If the current technologies were available then, my dad would have used them. It’s all about good design, and if the architect takes into account the aesthetics of the original architecture to seamlessly incorporate the new with the old, it’s beneficial to the life of the house.”



**In the “Bunk Room,” where Michael Douglas often played as a boy, a coastal scene by Walter Alexander Bailey hangs over a vintage Paul McCobb chair and a T.H. Robsjohn-Gibbings dresser that Jim Budman bought at a Billings auction in Los Angeles.**





They outfitted the kitchen with top-of-the-line Monogram stainless steel appliances, including a 30-inch double oven that can be remotely controlled from a smart device and an electric hearth oven that imitates the classic wood-fired style, equally great for a Neapolitan pizza or salmon. The custom refrigerator door designed by Jim Tyler, an architect who worked with Ellwood in the '60s, is the pièce de résistance. Tyler's mid-mod motif picks up on the choice pops of turmeric yellow and geometric shapes that Diane incorporated in her plans, but not on purpose. "I had designed the kitchen already, and he had not seen the wall of colorblocking that I'd done," she says. The only parameter they agreed to was a palette. "It was so synchronistic, that it was just a perfect addition to the kitchen."

The biggest surprise came in the foyer, where Diane and her brother-in-law Jim exposed a signature Wexler feature that had been hidden away by layers of paint.

"I got some nail polish remover and just took off a little corner," Diane says. "It was so exciting to unveil because we had no idea if there was going to be a pattern or what to expect. It was like opening up a gift."

"They discovered this very rich gold mosaic tile that covered two walls," Gary explains of his favorite aspect of the restoration. "It's probably the exact tile my father used at his office, which he built. I think he also used it at the Dinah Shore house."





**Kirk's movie posters cover the walls of the tennis pavilion, where a plaque that Anne had made remains in place to highlight "Special House Guests, 1954–1999." The list includes Natalie Wood, Robert Kennedy, Henry Kissinger, and Ladybird Johnson.**

Working with Jim, Diane pulled in period furnishings and artwork. Many of the items were already in the family.

Now nearing completion, the restoration has rolled out in phases, with the kitchen being the most recent reveal during Modernism Week in February 2020. Next, Diane intends to build an outdoor shower off one of the bedrooms (dubbed the "Katharine Hepburn Guest Room" because it's where the star stayed whenever she visited). They're also planting a rosemary garden in the same area that will lead to the citrus trees lining the east end of the yard, which have been there as long as Michael Douglas can remember.

Douglas and his wife, Catherine Zeta-Jones, were the first guests to receive an invite. (Diane kept them away initially to finish the first phase of renovation and get the house staged.) They came for a long weekend in October 2016 and attended the Desert Trip music festival.

“It was probably about 50 or 60 years since I’d been in the house,” Douglas says. Though his family owned it until ’99, his visits diminished once his own career took off. “To see it and to be able to remember all the different aspects of each room and the experiences — some of the parties that they had there, and the great tennis matches that I got to watch. I remember these beautiful nights where the temperature drops. And that silence through the mountains.”

Though Kirk and Anne themselves could not visit because they were no longer traveling, Douglas used an iPad to dial them up on FaceTime.

“He took the camera into the pavilion, and Kirk goes, ‘Wow, I was a really big star!’ We all had a big laugh,” Diane says.

In December 2019, she and Budman visited Kirk and Anne in Los Angeles to share news of the site’s nomination by the local preservation board for Class 1 historic status. The nomination occurred a few months prior, but Diane wanted to give word in person considering Anne had told her, “Those were the happiest years of our lives in that house.” Kirk celebrated his 103rd birthday that month. Then on January 9, 2020, Palm Springs City Council voted unanimously to approve the application — a 55-page document written by board advisory member Susan Secoy Jensen that took two years to prepare — making the Kirk Douglas Residence the 118th property to be recognized by the board.

Kirk died a month later.

Class 1 is the highest of three designation levels. With this honorific comes eligibility for a reduction in property taxes along with substantial owner responsibility. It’s expected that, as an identified city landmark, the site will be upkept and, in some cases, improved for the sake of civic beauty and economic benefit. That’s a given for Diane.



**A mid-century Salterini patio set creates a conversation space by the K-shaped pool.**

A plaque now hangs proudly on the stone pillar to the left of the downsloping driveway. It acknowledges the home's Hollywood history and representational desert modern style.

“Some women collect jewelry,” Diane remarks. “I collect architecture.” She isn't being showy. She's being honest. The couple calls Toronto home. They ended up buying that Ellwood beach house in Malibu, which has also undergone a Bald/Budman restoration. There's the estate in Palm Springs and then two cottages at a provincial park in Ontario, Canada. They spent a good deal of their summer at the latter location.

“Algonquin Park,” Budman specifies. “One of God's beautiful places, where both of us went to summer camp back in the day.”

“Now, we own a summer camp there,” Diane says. “We've come full circle.”

With 2020 gatherings canceled, Diane upgraded the grounds. Camp Tamakwa has 70 cabins. (Diane has also renovated a cabin for Michael Douglas.)

“I’m never without a project,” she says with a laugh.

“She is a pro at what she does,” Gary Wexler says. “And her involvement here in Palm Springs is very fortunate for the city. It’s very fortunate for the Wexler family.”

The area around the Kirk Douglas Residence at 515 West Via Lola has been built up in recent years, but the silence that Douglas so fondly remembers lingers. That’s one thing Diane most looks forward to when she comes to town. After their rushed departure to Canada when the pandemic hit post-Modernism Week and the craze of 2020, the quietude of this setting feels a little bit sweeter. Thanksgiving marked the couple’s grand return to the desert and first opportunity to enjoy the space. The family — including their two adult children: daughter, Alex, and son, Mathew — has frequently spent time in Los Angeles and many a vacation in Palm Springs. None expected they’d someday own a home here — let alone Kirk Douglas’ former pad — and now they can’t picture it any other way.

“Every time we come, I start getting excited when we get to Highway 111,” Diane says. “There’s something about coming down Via Lola with the view of the mountains. It makes my heart soar.”





**A photograph of the home's pool after a storm by Jim Budman and a geometric Douglas Coupland painting bring color to the breakfast nook. The banquette, chairs, and nearby wet bar façade were re-covered in Roots leather.**