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Know Your Neighbors: Meet Steven Keylon, a Landscape Historian Who Found a Home—With History—in Palm Springs

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The Herbert Burns-designed home owned by Steven Keylon and John De La Rosa.

“Mid-century modern” refers to a collection of architectural designs and styles built from the early 1940s to around 1970. What they all share, according to Elaine Stiles, an architectural historian, is “an emphasis on lifestyle, a new way of modern living centered around family and home. ... This was the era of the patio.”

Those of us who grew up in post-war Southern California don’t always realize the impact of mid-century modern homes, while people from other parts of the country often have no frame of reference for what we take for granted: low-slung homes with lots of floor-to-ceiling windows and exposed beams, as well as open-space floor plans, and indoor-outdoor orientations.

Steven Keylon lives in a Herbert Burns-designed mid-century modern house in the Deepwell Estates neighborhood of Palm Springs. He and his partner, John De La Rosa, a metal sculptor, came to the desert about a year ago from Los Angeles. (The couple is pictured to the right.)

“I was always interested in art, design and music,” says Keylon, a landscape historian. “About 25 years ago, I got engaged with interior design and decorative arts. Then I got involved in architecture, working to get Baldwin Hills Village (in Los Angeles) declared a national historic landmark. I moved on to historical landscaping in California, studying landscape architects and the use of native plantings. When I focus on something, I don’t stop until I know everything!”

Keylon, 51, was born and raised in Sacramento. He has written and lectured about Southern California’s cultural landscapes while working part-time at a bank for the past 28 years. In addition to numerous published works and awards, he is currently a board member at-large with the Palm Springs Preservation Foundation, as well as the president of the California Garden and Landscape History Society.

Ask Keylon about what mid-century modernism is, and you get a brief history lesson: “It includes the influence of 20th century modern art, the Art Deco styles of the 1920s, and the recti-linear buildings of the German Bauhaus movement, plus the desire to use new materials in an honest way. It was an outgrowth of the cowboy/frontier flat-roofed ranch-house style. It’s meant to bring indoor and outdoor together—a site-specific rational use of space,

designed for how people were really living. For example, they didn't need formal dining rooms anymore. What made Burns and the others who built in Palm Springs so distinctive is that they designed to harmonize with the desert.

"I had read about Herbert Burns," Keylon says. "He was a kind of charismatic chameleon. He had been an engineer in World War I, studied electrical engineering afterwards, became a stock broker, survived a crash as a shuttle pilot in World War II—his wife was also a pilot—and after the war, he was an architectural and interior designer. He moved to Palm Springs in 1946. His signature is very evident when you know what to look for. I knew he had built six or seven hotels in the Tennis Club neighborhood, but I didn't realize he had done private homes."

While researching a book on Burns, Keylon discovered that Burns had been married with two children—and that he had, for some reason, changed his name. "One clue led to another," he says. "I found a son and some other family members, so I reached out to them."

I learned about Keylon while I was visiting a friend in Los Angeles; that's when I heard Sharon Varnes talk about a recent phone call she'd received from him. "I couldn't believe it," she said, "when I got a call that this guy was writing a book about the architect, Herbert Burns. Herbert Burns was my grandfather, whom I never even knew!"

I decided to close the circle and meet Steven Keylon myself. Talk about a small world.

"We're trying to restore our house to its original condition," says Keylon. "We've contacted past owners and found pictures of what the house originally looked like, including not only the indoor paint colors, but even the furniture styles." He proudly shows off his kidney-bean-shaped light-wood tables—which reminded me of where I grew up in Los Angeles.

"Every year, the Preservation Foundation focuses on different styles," says Keylon, "so since I live in one of his houses, I decided to suggest we focus on Burns and his projects for the programs next March."

"John and I had come down to the desert many times, but when we found the Burns house, we basically decided to move here. We've been together for more than 20 years, and the best thing about living here is it's always such a feeling of relief to come off Interstate 10 into Palm Springs. And I get to come home to a Burns house."

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