

Louise's Pantry was adjacent to La Plaza, completed in 1936, the biggest resort complex built in the U.S. up to that point during the Depression.



Abundance of petunias planted in the interior courtyard garden of the Town & Country Center.

From Soulful to Sexy

BY TRACY CONRAD

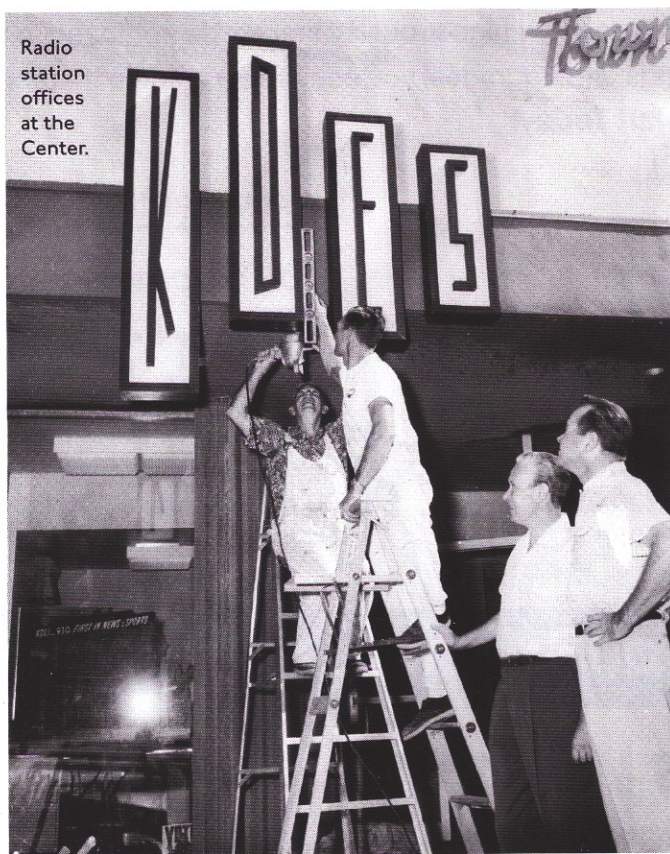
How the Town & Country Center helped shape the area's modern architecture movement

In the early dawn of the mid-20th century, it was apparent that World War II had transformed everything, and desert architecture reflected the change in sentiment.

EARLY INFLUENCE

Soldiers coming home from the war came to see the architecture of early California, with its tile roofs and stucco, as old-fashioned and instead sought out sleek atomic-age design. The exuberance and optimism that followed winning the war was translated into the architectural landscape. In the desert, industrial materials, glass and an indoor-outdoor sensibility became vogue for residential living and the same evolution followed in commercial buildings. But their influence came from an earlier time.

Architect Harry Williams, originally from Dayton, Ohio, and best known for designing the National Cash Register building there, had been brought to the desert in 1934 by Julia Carnell whose enormous wealth was thanks to her stake in NCR. She commissioned Williams to build the La Plaza center in Palm Springs. Completed in 1936, it was the biggest resort complex built in the U.S. up to that point during the Depression.



Radio station offices at the Center.

PHOTOS/COURTESY TRACY CONRAD

Situated down the street from the Desert Inn, and considered very far out of town, the Spanish-style two-story building housed shop girls on the upper floors and a variety of stores in which they worked on the street level below. Adjacent to La Plaza and built in the same style was Louise's Pantry boasting a basement kitchen with dumbwaiters for ferrying up the food and sending the dirty dishes back down. Also in the mix were a car dealer, bus station and candy shop.

After the war, Harry's son E. Stewart Williams settled in to practice architecture in Palm Springs. Stew would also design many buildings of note and go on to fame as one of the important architects of the period. It was at this post-war time though when he witnessed his father's revolutionary mixed-use idea from the prior decade picked up by his contemporaries, Paul R. Williams and A. Quincy Jones, and used across the street from the Desert Inn.

MODERN SENSIBILITY

Paul R. Williams was the first African-American architect licensed west of the Rockies and was famously known for sitting across the table from his clients and drawing his ideas upside down. This tour-de-force, a demonstration of his spatial and sketching skills, was developed during a time when wealthy, white clients might have felt uncomfortable sitting next to him. In 1961, he would design the iconic theme building for the restaurant at the Los Angeles International Airport that defined West Coast exuberance.

A. Quincy Jones, upon his discharge from the Navy in 1945, headed home to Los Angeles to establish his architecture practice. Lured to the desert by unique opportunities, he and Paul Williams collaborated on several projects including an addition to the Palm Springs Tennis Club in 1947. Jones would go on to be dean of the School of Architecture at University of Southern California and in 1966 design Walter and Leonore Annenberg's Sunnylands estate in Rancho Mirage.

THE CENTER

In 1946 a permit was issued for the site across the street from the Desert Inn, on the east side of Palm Canyon Drive spanning all the way to Indian Canyon Drive. Originally simply called "The Center," the group of buildings would connect the two streets through an interior courtyard upon their completion in 1948. With its clean lines, a flat roof and glass walls, The Center was a nod to the International style with a sweeping curvilinear overhang on its west side. The upper floor, accessed by a dramatic exterior staircase, gave the illusion of being suspended in mid-air. Perched at the top of this ramp was a tony restaurant designed by A. Quincy Jones and Paul R. Williams. Surrounded in glass and open to the gorgeous view of the mountains, it came to be known as the Town & Country Restaurant. Adjacent to the restaurant were modest apartments and the building also included offices, a newspaper, a radio station, a fancy dress shop, and an assortment of novelty stores.



This very rare photograph shows the view looking south from The Center courtyard.



ABOVE: Architect O.E.L. Graves rendering for the Town & Country Center's, Kelley's Furniture Company.



RIGHT: Palm Canyon facade of The Center with Bank of America, March 1950.

Soon the entire complex would be known as the Town & Country Center. Facing Palm Canyon was the Bank of America, a standout building with vertical folded concrete elements and glazed openings. The Indian Canyon façade was handsome, simple and thoroughly modern in its intersecting cornices and irregular shape.

A. Quincy Jones and Paul R. Williams were by this time already prominent and prosperous architects, having completed many projects in Los Angeles. The Town & Country added to their renown, being an instant hit among those in the most fashionable circles of post-WWII Palm Springs, and was included in the 1951 book, *Shopping Centers, Design and Operation*.

The buildings of the Town & Country Center embodied the post-war spirit and contrasted sharply with the past. Newly wealthy and optimistic visitors to the desert appreciated the modern sensibility and sought to live and shop in such buildings, creating more work for architects in this realm. The soulfulness of early California was supplanted by the sexiness of modern architecture, which would become synonymous with Palm Springs itself.

►► DETAILS

Tracy Conrad is a board member of the Palm Springs Historical Society and also of the Palm Springs Preservation Foundation. She has served on the Historic Site Preservation Board and the Planning Commission of the city of Palm Springs.