



Swanky Banks

Not so long ago, banks were the symbols of stability in a community. Back in the mid-20th century that confidence was echoed in imaginative new architecture for banking institutions, notably those located in Palm Springs.

The revelatory nature of the design of the Town and Country Center, completed in 1948, inspired the designers of other commercial buildings to reach new creative heights. The Center's Bank of America building with its folded concrete façade pierced by vertical glazing made a thoroughly modern architectural statement, setting a high bar for banks. Competitors took note.

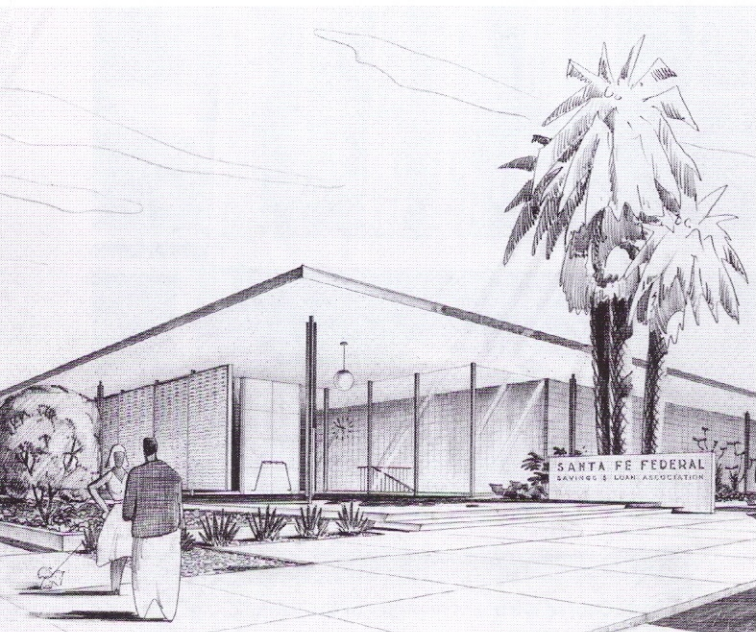
A decade after the completion of the seminal Town and Country Center, "Southwest Builder and Contractor" magazine proclaimed the Palm Springs headquarters of the City National Bank of Beverly Hills to be "one of the most dramatic structures to rise in Southern California." The unique triangular-shaped site at the intersection of Ramon Road and Palm Canyon Drive was brilliantly sited likewise with a triangular-shaped building that represented a new and specific idea in banking. Designed by Victor Gruen and Associates with an integration of parking and banking intended to make the bank visible and easily accessible to passing traffic. The rich adornment of blue glass mosaic tile and the organic curvilinear form suggest a Le Corbusier influence. The magazine called it "the most beautiful bank in America."



TOP: Twilight at the Victor Gruen and Associates City National Bank. ABOVE: Architectural aluminum provides beautiful solar control.



Interior lobby of City National with a drinking fountain positioned beside a handy scale for customers to weigh themselves.



E. Stewart Williams' rendering of the Santa Fe Federal Savings and Loan Association, now being repurposed as the Palm Springs Art Museum Architecture and Design Center, Edwards Harris Pavilion.

The interior was stunning in its simplicity, but lush in its use of materials like dark walnut cabinetry, marble counters, terrazzo floors and floor-to-ceiling glass louvered from the outside with fenestrated aluminum. The lounge area featured a drinking fountain and a built-in scale for customers.

In the decade that spanned between these standouts, other dramatic bank buildings went up along Palm Canyon Drive including two remarkably modern structures for Coachella Valley Savings and Loan designed by E. Stewart Williams. In 1956 came a glass pavilion constructed atop a rock-encrusted pedestal housing a downstairs vault. A sweeping staircase brought customers and bankers to the second floor with a soaring ceiling above. The east-facing windows of this large glass box were later encased by an aluminum brise soleil. And in 1961, Williams experimented with swaths of concrete draped around the exterior of a building surrounded with a shallow reflecting pool which won an award for his architectural firm Williams and Williams from the Portland Cement Company for the creative use of concrete.

A favorite of Williams' was his Santa Fe Federal Savings and Loan Association building at Baristo Road and Palm Canyon Drive. The 1960 floating pavilion seems suspended in space. Used were the same materials and principles now considered requisite in desert modernism: elegant lines, an abundance of glazing and solar control through aluminum louvers.

E. Steward Williams. Coachella Valley Savings
and Loan Association building, January 1959



The building is being repurposed as the Palm Springs Art Museum Architecture and Design Center, Edwards Harris Pavilion and upon its completion will welcome visitors who come to the valley in search of the mid-century architecture that survives here. A stroll down Palm Canyon Drive reveals a landscape dotted with these masterpieces.

—TRACY CONRAD

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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.