



# Palm Springs: The Future of Preservation

By KATHIE VON ANKUM

AS YOU TURN OFF THE INTERSTATE ONTO HIGHWAY 111, the Albert Frey and Robson C. Chambers-designed former Tramway Gas Station on your right is fair warning that you are about to enter a modernist time warp. Palm Springs, just a two-hour drive east of Los Angeles, boasts an informal count of about 575 architect-designed buildings in the mid-century modernist style—not including the twenty-four hundred tract houses and condominiums built by contractors George and Bob Alexander between 1955 and 1965. Mid-century modernism was in its heyday when throngs of people came rolling into town, celebrating postwar prosperity and the dawn of consumer culture. To create the infrastructure that would support the influx of weekenders and vacationers, city planners turned to the young architectural talent in town. Frey, William F. Cody, E. Stewart Williams, William Krisel, and Donald Wexler got to design almost everything: the city hall, buildings for the high school, the airport, shopping centers, banks, hotels, motels, gas stations, and of course, private houses.

That almost every significant municipal or commercial building in town was designed by one desert modernist or another can be a mixed blessing. Some fear Palm Springs could get permanently stuck in the twentieth century and are pushing for a new infrastructure that accommodates the demands of twenty-first-century living. As recently as 2012, the Wexler and Harrison-designed Palm Springs High School Administration

Building (1957) was demolished to make way for a new building to accommodate the school's performing arts program. In the opinion of local preservationists, the original structure would have been a perfect candidate for adaptive reuse. But, says Ron Marshall, former president of the Palm Springs Preservation Foundation (PSPF), municipal bureaucracies have a hard time changing course. "Once a city or school district is intent on demolishing a building, it's likely to be lost."

Privately owned buildings present a different challenge. Efforts to save the Chart House Restaurant (1978) in nearby Rancho Mirage had to be shelved after a suspicious electrical fire in the abandoned building destroyed this striking example of American organic modernism designed by Kendrick Bangs Kellogg. In downtown Palm Springs, the Town and Country Center, one of the first mixed-used developments in California, designed by Paul R. Williams and A. Quincy Jones in 1948, is showing signs of neglect while the PSPF continues its battle to garner Class One landmark protection for the building. Preservationists cite the structure as a top example of the international style, especially noteworthy for its pedestrian-friendly courtyard. But Town and Country also happens to sit right across the street from the new Desert Fashion Plaza being built to replace its mid-century modern predecessor, obstructing a potential traffic corridor that would make it into an easily accessible commercial hub. "It's really a question of how preservation

**Frank Sinatra's Twin Palms Estate, designed by E. Stewart Williams and built in 1947, has been a popular destination on Modernism Week house tours since 2011. Sinatra lived there from 1947 to 1953, while married to Ava Gardner.**

JAMES HAEFNER PHOTO/PALM SPRINGS PRESERVATION FOUNDATION

**Then and now: Even while under construction, Robson C. Chambers and Albert Frey's iconic Tramway Gas Station already demonstrated the perfect fit between the desert landscape and mid-century modern design.**

**The Kendrick Bangs Kellogg-designed Charthouse Restaurant in Rancho Mirage (destroyed) is just one of several mid-century modern structures in the area that suffered from recent and suspiciously timed fires. Its low, scalloped and laminated roof and incredibly deep eaves gave the building the appearance of a giant sea creature washed up on some ancient shore.**

**A double-decker bus provides architectural city tours during Modernism Week.**

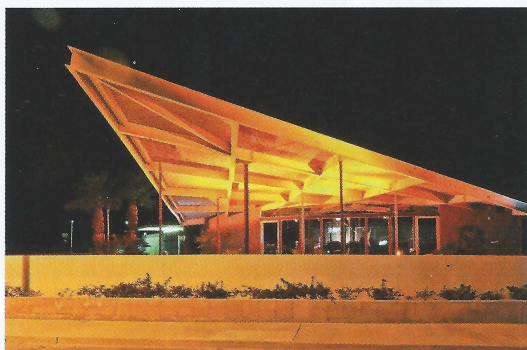
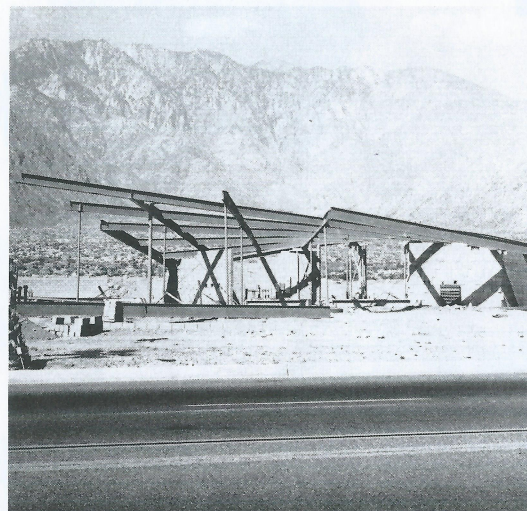
fits into urban planning," says Chris Menrad, realtor for a residential development firm and president of the Palm Springs Modernism Committee. "Town and Country Center should be an integral part of how that plan works," he reasons, especially since the city has levied a 1 percent increase in local sales taxes to help finance the new mall project.

That Palm Springs' modernist past is worth preserving and protecting is a somewhat recent sentiment. Even now that Modernism Week, an eleven-day-long annual event launched in 2006 to celebrate the mid-century modern lifestyle and its architecture, attracts forty thousand visitors, the city's list of Class One buildings continues to be dominated by Desert Spanish-style landmarks. The J. W. Robinson Department Store building, which won the American Institute of Architects' First Honor Award when completed in 1958, only achieved landmark status last January. And Frank Sinatra's Twin Palms Estate, a major attraction on the Modernism Week agenda, was declared a Class One site only in 2011. For the longest time Palm Springs and its neighbors were acting like the folks who put their Eames chairs out in a yard sale, not realizing that they have become collectibles.

It's almost as if only the turn to the twenty-first century has made it acceptable for mid-century modernism to become historicized and protected. When the Albert Frey-designed Fire Station Number 1 on Indian Canyon was facing demolition in 1999, vintage furniture dealers and other modernism aficionados came together to found the Palm Springs Modernism Committee. The Palm Springs Modernism Show and Sale at the Convention Center, itself a modernist building de-



signed by William Pereira in 1974, started the following year, bringing together dealers of mid-century furniture, art, and design, and providing the anchor for Modernism Week. A new generation of leaders at PSPF turned the organization into another strong advocacy group for modernism, spearheading the creation of historical districts, like the Sunmor Estates (with streets like Playmor and Livemor reminders that Palm Springs has always billed itself as the leisure capital of America) or the Movie



Colony, where Hollywood stars like Marilyn Monroe, Cary Grant, and Dinah Shore worked on their tans. A growing series of publications about the life and work of "desert modernist" architects is part of its effort to educate both residents and visitors about the historical and architectural significance of the Coachella Valley's modernist past.

While a comprehensive survey of all modernist buildings in the area is still lacking, private homebuyers are starting to realize that keeping the original structure of an ar-



TOP: PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY/ALL RIGHTS RESERVED CENTER: DAVID A. LEE PHOTO/MODERNISM WEEK  
RIGHT: PATRICK MCGREW PHOTO/PALM SPRINGS PRESERVATION FOUNDATION BOTTOM: DAVID A. LEE PHOTO/MODERNISM WEEK



Designed by renowned modernist architectural firm Luckman and Pereira, the former J. W. Robinson Department Store building only achieved landmark status in 2013.

The Town and Country Center (still standing, top right) and Desert Fashion Plaza (just razed, bottom right) epitomize the ongoing battle between developers and preservationists over a vital and viable downtown: Can economic growth be reconciled with conservation?

chitect-designed house increases its value. And as the butterfly roofs and kidney-shaped pools of mid-century bungalows are drawing more thirty-something hipsters and their dollars into town, city council meetings have become a friendlier place for preservationists. Nostalgia for the days of two-martini lunches, happy homemakers, and the perceived safety and sense of community of the homogeneous neighborhoods of the 1950s has been a powerful motivator for modernist preservation. PSPF has been able to finance itself through annual events like the Retro Martini Party and Leisure Life Weekend. The Palm Springs Visitor Center, housed in the Tramway Gas Station at the entrance to town, now sells Trina Turk-designed modernism T-shirts (she is not only a part-time Palm Springs resident but, with her husband, the owner of the iconic Ship of the Desert house, designed in 1936 by architects Adrian Wilson and Erle Webster) in muddy browns and avocado greens.

As vintage furniture dealers begin to run out of well-priced inventory from local pickers and estate sales, more and more shops selling new furniture and design in the modernist vein are springing up along Indian Canyon and Palm Canyon Drives. And the tackiness of the Palm Springs Modernism Committee's Salton Sea ashtray, available on its website, rivals that of the original lava lamps of the era.

To escape the fate of becoming a modernist Colonial Williamsburg or Disneyland, and remain a vital and au-

thentic community, however, the city needs to make sure not to dwell too much on the past, but learn from it. "We need to continue the legacy of modernism by pushing the ecological envelope," says Lance O'Donnell, whose firm o2 Architecture collaborated with Donald Wexler on plans for eco-modern houses in the early 2000s. Rather than submit to the pressures of developers, city planners need to create incentives so Palm Springs can once again become a laboratory for great contemporary architecture—combining the democratic simplicity and aesthetic sensibility of the past with the technological know-how of the present. The growing windturbine farms that dot the desert landscape at the entrance of town are a hopeful sign that visitors to Palm Springs will soon be able to travel in both directions: back to the fifties, and into the future.

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