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Modernism's New Face

William Kopelk, the newly minted chairman of Modernism Week, brings high passion to his position.

BY CAROLYN HORWITZ



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■ For a person who, at one time, pronounced Richard Neutra's name as "Nootra," William Kopelk has come far in the world of mid-century modernism.

As the newly minted chairman of the board for Modernism Week, the landscape architect, interior designer, and zealous preservationist returns to the helm of the festival he co-founded in 2005. He's working closely with Chris Mobley, the former chairman who has taken on the full-time role of CEO. While Mobley oversees strategy, events, and sponsorships, Kopelk serves as the public face of Modernism Week and presides over board meetings, policymaking, and other directives.

Kopelk got his start as a landscape architect on the East Coast before moving to Palm Springs in 1996 to help friends Beth and Brent Harris restore the Kaufmann House, designed 50 years earlier by Richard Neutra. For him, it was the beginning of a decades-long love affair with desert style and preservation; for the rest of the world, it sparked a newfound appreciation and renaissance for the architecture of Palm Springs.

"I really feel that it was the restoration of the Kaufmann house that began all that, that really started everyone's awareness," Kopelk says. "There was a whole thing on the horizon that was going to revive Palm Springs."

It's the opposite end of the climatic scale from where he started as landscape architect for Harvard University. From there, he went to work as a landscape architect for Walter Gropius' Cambridge, Massachusetts-based firm The Architects Collaborative (TAC). "That was a wonderful education in terms of International Style modernism," he says.

It also turned out to be a lesson in geopolitics. "We were doing a lot of work for a man by the name of Saddam Hussein," Kopelk notes dryly. "It was the time when oil money could buy architects to come over and redo the Middle East."

When the Iraq-Iran war broke out, TAC went under because, Kopelk says, 85 percent of its contracts were with Hussein. "The ironic thing is that years later I moved to Palm Springs, where the zone was the same, and the plant palette and climate were the same."

In between was New York, where he did corporate interiors and had his own Gramercy Park apartment featured in the Home sec-

Kopelk's love affair with the desert started at the top when he helped friends Beth and Brent Harris restore Neutra's Kaufmann House.



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tion of *The New York Times*. For Kopelk, it was a time of inspiration, as he was influenced by creative people from various disciplines. “New York in the ’80s was really something to be a part of,” he recalls. He says he hung out with fashion editors and even worked as a house model for Calvin Klein. (The significance of fashion and what it says about the wearer were instilled in Kopelk in those New York years. Wardrobe is an important consideration when he’s on display during Modernism Week; these days, he favors Mr. Turk, Hugo Boss, and Tom Ford.)

Beth Harris had been a friend since his Cambridge days, and when she restored the Kaufmann House, Kopelk came to help her with the project by Marmol Radziner, including designing one of the gardens.

He ended up staying in town and becoming president of the Palm Springs Preservation Foundation. In 2000, he established his landscape and interiors firm InsideOutside, whose Palm Springs projects include houses designed by Donald Wexler, William Krisel, and Steven Ehrlich (for completion in 2018);

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the J.W. Robinson Department Store; and the Ace, Horizon, Hideaway, and Saguaro hotels.

Along with Stewart Weiner, the former editor-in-chief of *Palm Springs Life*, Kopelk created Modernism Week in 2005 as an interim event between the Palm Springs Modernism Show & Sale and the architectural symposium at the Palm Springs Art Museum. “It seemed to us that the same people were going to the first weekend as the second,” Kopelk recalls, “so maybe we should do something in Palm Springs to fill that week in between.”

That first year there were six events, including home tours and a lecture by furniture designer Charles Hollis Jones. Now, Modernism Week, which spans 11 days each February,

features more than 300 events that bring \$35 million to the Palm Springs economy. Kopelk has been on the board since the beginning.

CEO Mobley stresses Kopelk’s skills as an ambassador for the event. “He [not only] has a real desire to understand not only local preservation and modernism efforts, but he’s getting involved at a state level, and he travels quite a bit to other cities,” Mobley says. “His passion for preservation makes him a great leader. He’s a really good communicator, he’s objective, and he has the respect of our board.”

Sponsors, too, play a critical role. Mike Hetherman, president and CEO of Willis, which reps major sponsors Corian, Zodiac, and other building suppliers, is looking to bus in architects and designers from L.A. and San Diego and “create a VIP experience for them,” he says. Meanwhile, he’s pleased with the new leadership and is “happy they have a permanent CEO driving strategy.”

Both Kopelk and Mobley say they are driven by a desire to maintain the level of quality of the events and to develop new content, especially in light of growing attendance and repeat visitors. Attendance in 2016 was 77,500; this year, it soared to 97,000.

“Every year our challenge is to create new and different events, because more than 50 percent of people who come to Modernism Week come back the next year, and some come back 10 years in a row. We always try to think outside the box,” Mobley says. “We try to keep our content fresh so that people can see something different every year.”

That begins each October with the Fall Preview, which serves to pique the public’s interest for the main event in February. This year’s Preview, Oct. 19–22, has been expanded for the first time from three days to four and beyond Palm Springs with home and neighborhood tours in Palm Desert, Indian Wells, and Rancho Mirage. *Sunset* magazine is hosting an “Idea House” in the Chino Canyon development and there will be tours of the Kirk Douglas residence, designed by Wexler, and the Frank Sinatra Twin Palms estate by E. Stewart Williams. The latter architect’s daughter-in-law Sidney Williams, a longtime proponent of preservation, will receive a star on the Palm Springs Walk of Stars.

Kopelk sees Modernism Week as an opportunity to create an informed culture





around the city's design sensibility. "There are things we can increase our role, our voice in. Addressing our mission statement: to celebrate and foster the appreciation of midcentury modern architecture, as well as contemporary thinking, by encouraging education, preservation, and sustainable modern living. I always like to think of different ways of doing that."

His dream "get" for next year's lecture series is British-Ghanaian architect David Adjaye, who designed the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C. That might seem far

removed from the Palm Springs style lauded by Modernism Week, but for Kopelk there are distinct parallels.

"Good design is timeless and classic, so no matter when you look at it and revisit it, it's good design," he says. "That's what we promote, and that's what we celebrate."

Which is not to say that there aren't buildings in Palm Springs that make him die a little inside. "I have a sarcastic sense of humor," he says. "And I wanted for a while to do a bus tour of bad architecture. Once you know me well, you know what buildings I would put on that tour."

The former Harvard landscape architect's passion for design is evidenced by his eclectic reading material.