



Meet the MODERNS

FASCINATED BY THE AREA'S MIDCENTURY ARCHITECTURE,
PHOTOGRAPHER JAMES SCHNEPF SET OUT TO MEET PEOPLE WHO LIVE IN THE PAST

Text by Matthew Link

A**FTER BUYING A CONDOMINIUM** a couple years ago at Sandpiper, the midcentury modern community in Palm Desert designed by William Krisel, photographer James Schnepf started becoming obsessed with the architectural style and the lifestyle associated with it.

"The pull of the place was strong enough to photograph it, which for me is the best way to feel and understand a person or a place," Schnepf says. "I now have a collection of images not only of the architecture and landscape of the desert, but also, most importantly, the people behind the unique desert lifestyle."

Schnepf, who travels here from his Wisconsin home several times a year, has since photographed dozens of local residents and their midcentury digs for *The Palm Springs Project*, an initiative he intends to parlay into a book.

"The time is right to readdress the Palm Springs lifestyle in a people-driven way, which will be unique to the run-of-the-mill books showing page after page of house pictures void of any human feel," Schnepf says. "As wonderful as the architecture is in Palm Springs, I have found the people behind that architecture to really be the intriguing story."

On the following pages, Schnepf offers a glimpse into a selection of midcentury modern houses and their bright, fascinating inhabitants.

RON & BARBARA MARSHALL

PALM SPRINGS PRESERVATION FOUNDATION BOARD PRESIDENT (RON MARSHALL)

"Being East Coast flatlanders, we still find the desert and all of its aspects remarkable and the mountain vistas stunning. While others find the heat oppressive, we still consider temperatures like 117 degrees and up quite the novelty! We first visited Palm Springs in February 2005 to attend the Modernism Show; and when we decided to retire a year later, we searched for a place where we could enjoy midcentury architecture in a neighborhood environment. We bought a modest 1958 ranch designed by the architectural firm of Palmer & Krisel and built by the Alexander Construction Company. It retains its original floor plan and round pool. While one can buy a midcentury house almost anywhere in the country, being in a neighborhood of midcentury houses is more of a rarity. There is an enthusiastic group of individuals in the city who are dedicated to the preservation of this historic architecture and who understand its long-term economic benefits."





WILLIAM KRISEL

ARCHITECT

"Palm Springs is special for the climate; the ecology; the topography; and, most important of all, the community spirit and its energy. The people of Palm Springs are so marvelous. They truly understand and appreciate my architecture. We speak the same language, and they have made my design a symbol of Palm Springs. I truly appreciate all of the recognition that I have received. I only come to Palm Springs about three times a year now. I am 86 years old and my dear wife, Corinne, will be 80 in January. We love coming for Modernism Week, and I love staying at the Horizon Hotel by Bill Cody. Palm Springs has its own vibe, and one has to be aware of it."

JIM ISERMANN

ARTIST AND PROFESSOR OF ART AT UC RIVERSIDE

"I started coming here in the early 1990s to thrift shop. Palm Springs was kind of a modern ruin. I fell in love with the architecture; and in 1997, I bought a prefab home designed by Donald Wexler. It's an all-light-gauge galvanized steel house built in 1962. I spent the next two years restoring it. This is my 15th year in the house, and I never get tired of it. Its simplicity continues to inspire me. I am an artist, and my house features my work. The flower paintings in the living room are from 1985, and the yellow vacuum-form wall panels are a prototype for a commissioned work I designed a couple years ago for Stanford University. Carol Vena-Mondt and I designed the red sofa and orange chairs. I can simply say I feel at home in Palm Springs."





MELVYN HABER

OWNER, MELVYN'S RESTAURANT AT INGLESIDE INN

"I first came to Palm Springs in 1974, and I instantly fell in love with it. There's a certain magic about it – a village atmosphere. The views of the mountains are spectacular. You just look outside at this tranquility and serenity, and you are totally at peace. It's a writer's paradise. That's why the likes of Sidney Sheldon and Harold Robbins came out here. It's so conducive to writing. Even I wrote two books here [Bedtime Stories of the Legendary Ingleside Inn in Palm Springs and Palm Springs a la Carte: The Colorful World of the Caviar Crowd at Their Favorite Desert Hideaway]. I've learned three words to describe Palm Springs: quality of life. Coming from New York City, where just walking four blocks is like a chore or like a fight, I always find it funny how people here get annoyed if they can't park in front of a store they are going to or if they get caught at a traffic light. I'll say it again: It's a marvelous atmosphere, and it's magic."

JEAN FARRAR

YOGA INSTRUCTOR

"The desert is very conducive to exercise and meditation. I believe this destination is a haven for destressing, and it has always been a refuge where people rejuvenate and draw from the convergence of the natural phenomenon of the healing mineral waters and the scenic terrain. I was the first one to teach yoga in the [Coachella Valley] when I first came here in the 1950s. I worked with Charles Farrell at The Racquet Club and taught yoga, health, and meditation to people like Greta Garbo, Mae West, Jimmy Durante, Dinah Shore, the Marx brothers, Marion Davies, and many others. I helped show them the spiritual energy here. My longtime companion, modernist architect Albert Frey, taught me to think of one's home as a sacred place. He brought his love of the outdoors into his architecture, so his clients could feel what he was feeling. He was a genius. As you peer out one of his windows and onto the desert, you discover a soul in nature and in the birds and in the wildlife and in the landscape. It's like it says in [a contemporary version of] the Bible: 'I look up to the mountains; does my strength come from mountains?' I look up [at the San Jacinto Mountains] and feel a presence. Whoever this presence is, God or a higher power, I believe in it."





J.R. ROBERTS

**PALM SPRINGS PLANNING COMMISSIONER,
VICE PRESIDENT OF PALM SPRINGS MODERN COMMITTEE**

"Palm Springs started as a vacation home, and then it was what I describe to others as 'a slippery slope' in that, if you spend enough time here, you fall in love with it. As the former mayor of Sausalito, I gave up a very full life in the Bay Area in 2001 without once looking back. I was hooked. My 1953 home, known as the Edris House, was designed by the pioneer architect E. Stewart Williams. I always dreamed of owning this house. I really did think that moving here would be a quieter life, but I have found myself very involved in the community. I found it compelling that I made closer friends here in two years than I made in the 12 years I lived in the Bay Area. Palm Springs is a special place, and I feel honored to be a permanent resident here. There's some kind of special energy going on between the mountain ranges here. I must be under Palms Springs' spell. I imagine the [Native Americans] could define it in better terms."

JOAN GAND

MUSICIAN

"The turning point for me and my husband, Gary, was when we took Robert Imber's tour of midcentury architecture during Palm Springs Modernism Week. We already had a midcentury home in Chicago and collect modernist furniture and music. We ended up buying a 1958 Swiss Miss-style Alexander home in Vista Las Palmas, and we made this vacation home a fantasy of the life we missed out on, both of us being too young in the 1950s and '60s. Once you start living in it, of course, you have to look the part too. We wear the midcentury fashions and drive a vintage 1964 Thunderbird. Gary plays the guitar and I play the organ, so we also started performing midcentury music in Palm Springs. The midcentury era just has such an excitement about it, an optimism — imagining The Jetsons-type lifestyle that was coming. It's fun; it's uplifting. It's hard to be sad or in a bad mood when you're surrounded by it all. And Palm Springs, with its beauty and serenity, exudes that. When our friends come to visit, they feel it immediately. They tell us, 'Oh, this is what you were talking about!'" 🌟

