

From the Top Down

In the new desert architecture, style coexists with function and sustainability

BY ROBERT JULIAN



COURTESY SEAN LOCKYER/AR+D

You can learn much about Palm Springs architecture by simply driving around looking at rooftops. They hint of a story that begins in the early 20th century when red clay tiles crowned small adobe structures. By the 1920s, they surmounted more elaborate, Spanish Mediterranean-style stucco dwellings in the Old Las Palmas and Movie Colony neighborhoods. Midcentury, low-profile, overhanging roofs topped with gravel offered dramatic lines to juxtapose the rugged mountains and protected houses from extreme desert elements. Toward the end of the century, utilitarian foam and rectilinear solar panels proclaimed the triumph of function over style.

The progression is clear, but is it progress? Judging by the test of time, it is. In construction, materials matter. And sustainable construction methods provide more opportunities than restrictions, according to architect Lance O'Donnell. Practicing what he preaches, O'Donnell used green building technology to construct his personal residence in Palm Springs and earned it coveted LEED Platinum certification.

"We now have the window technology for floor-to-ceiling glass walls that allow us to experience the beauty of the desert," O'Donnell says. "And we can have them without huge energy bills or cantilevered roof structures. The midcentury modern houses with glass walls were seasonal residences, almost uninhabitable in the summer. Today's year-round residents want design that is also smart in its use of resources."

Many large-scale projects completed before the economic downturn reached into the past for their architectural details. The Ralph's-anchored shopping center at Ramon Road and Sunrise Way, The Springs at Ramon Road and Gene Autry Trail, and Gene Autry Plaza across from The Springs all rely on repetitions of midcentury design elements.

"These details have become a cliché," asserts architect Doug Hudson, a Palm Springs planning commissioner. "They

also diminish the value of Palm Springs' historic midcentury buildings, which deserve preservation and restoration.*

Nonprofits such as Palm Springs Preservation Foundation and Palm Springs Modernism Committee spearhead architectural preservation and restoration efforts. Palm Springs Art Museum's Architecture and Design Council sponsors exhibitions, lectures, and tours.

Architect and author Patrick McGrew, who is active in all three organizations, believes preservation, progressive design, and sustainable building practices are compatible goals.

"When you talk about sustainability in architecture, what could be more sustainable than rehabilitating and preserving our amazing catalog of existing, architecturally significant structures?" he asks. "There is no reason this cannot be done incorporating green building technology.*"

"Past is prologue," the saying goes. If this is true, clues to the direction of 21st century Palm Springs architecture might be found in its past. McGrew identifies the 1934 Kocher-Samson Building by A. Lawrence Kocher and Albert Frey (766 N. Palm Canyon Drive) as a paradigm for classic design.

"It was the first International Style building in the Coachella Valley," McGrew says. "The Kocher-Samson introduced European modernism to the desert. This important building deserves to be restored and officially designated as a historic structure.*"

Architect Hugh Kaptur, whose Palm Springs practice has passed the 50-year mark, laments the loss of Huddle Springs by William Cody. Owned by the Huddle restaurant chain, the building at South Palm Canyon Drive and Mesquite Avenue was demolished to make way for a project that was never built. "It was very [Frank Lloyd] Wrightian," Kaptur says, "and a perfect example of desert architecture.*"

Architect Sean Lockyer, part of a new generation of desert designers, admires Frey's Palm Springs residence (known as Frey 2). "It is a model for more sustainable, affordable small houses that utilize the beauty of their surroundings," he says. "It's a house that — through the richness of context, details, and materials — reads and lives like so much more.*"

Lockyer is collaborating with Solterra Development on a project they call "Ex-Box" in which a basic box design can be built on a typical infill lot, positioned to use available space, and rooms can be added as space and budgets allow. Lockyer also is working as architect and builder of the Ferguson Residence in Indian Wells using simple, modernist lines and sustainable design components throughout.

Good design has transformative and social power. Palm Springs' Uptown Design District offers a worthy example.

"Look at Koffi on the north end," O'Donnell says, referring to a popular coffeehouse with the large, open courtyard at The Corridor. "The architecture of that building isn't great, but the place is a success because of the welcoming central courtyard. It's packed all the time. People bring their dogs, enjoy a cup of coffee, and hang out with their friends. We need more spaces like that.*"

To Hudson, the future of the city's architecture is directly connected to preservation of existing buildings. "What we save and preserve is just as important as what we build," he says. One need only look at the success of Modernism Week as evidence, he suggests. "It drew thousands of visitors from all over the world. They came here to celebrate and experience our architectural history. We need to keep that momentum going in historic preservation and our new architecture.*"

The "how to" in this scenario seems elusive. In the 1950s, modernist design principles and materials were more universally accessible and understood. Donald Wexler, E. Stewart Williams, Albert Frey, John Porter Clark, William

Cody, and others adopted concepts of pioneers such as Le Corbusier, Frank Lloyd Wright, Mies van der Rohe, and Richard Neutra. Architects practicing in the desert today might do well by breaking from the past and envisioning a future in an era of "starchitects" such as Zaha Hadid, Frank Gehry, Daniel Libeskind, and Santiago Calatrava, whose complex structures resemble nothing from the past and defy adaptation on a small scale.

In residential design, local architects and developers enjoy greater success in the Coachella Valley than large national companies, whose corporate decision-making process typically results in less sophisticated design. Dennis Cunningham's Palm Springs Modern group, for example, stands out for the quality of its design and sensitivity to issues of density.

Hudson sees guidance coming from an unexpected place.

"We must look to the media," he says. "We need to keep national attention focused on Palm Springs, because over time it will force us to improve the way we build. That's why Modernism Week is so important. Not only is the world at large exposed to us, but also we get exposed to the larger world. Fortunately, we now have many sophisticated residents who came here from larger cities and who arrived with a broader perspective."