



A Mid-Century Modern Muse

An architectural mecca, Palm Springs has much more to offer than a spectacular view by Melissa Silva

Mountains. In every pane of view, you see them — tall, majestic; they appear almost regal. It is being within the presence of such natural structures that you become immediately aware of the often-overlooked physical relationship between humans and nature. Simply put, humans are really quite small.

“A room with a view” holds no meaning here, as I didn’t require a room to witness a magnificent view; all that was required was for me to open my eyes. But it’s more than just a view; it’s an enticing experience.

Writer, lecturer and journalist George Wharton James must have felt the same, having recounted, “As we sat there in the shadow of the palms, knowing the great silent desert was just behind us, and the towering mountain peaks just ahead, we felt full of a strange, expectant awe as if some new, great, wonderful thing might happen at any moment.”

Those towering mountain peaks about which James wrote are located in the desert city of Palm Springs, Calif. Located on the western edge of the Coachella Valley in

Riverside County, the city at 487 feet above sea level is surrounded by mountains. To the north stand the Little San Bernardino Mountains; to the south, the Santa Rosa Mountains. To the west is the San Jacinto Mountains with its highest peak at a breathtaking 10,831 feet, making it the second-highest mountain range in all of Southern California. You might say the San Jacinto Mountains are the city’s original, and most predominant, form of architecture.

Though famed for its mountains, Palm Springs is also known for having one of the



Kaufmann House

world's largest concentrations of mid-century modern architecture. Having earned a spot on the National Trust for Historic Preservation's 2006 list of America's Dozen Distinctive Destinations for its architecture, Palm Springs was deemed a Preserve America city in 2009, and rightly so. It's been said that the geographic surroundings of the Coachella Valley served as inspiration for what is now known as "desert modernism," a design esthetic that emerged in the mid-20th century. Said to be influenced by life in the desert, especially the climate, desert modernism can often be recognized by its specific materials and style — glass, clean lines and modern construction techniques such as blurring the boundary between indoor and outdoor spaces (think high, floor-to-ceiling windows). Commonly regarded as informal elegance, the esthetic is believed to have stemmed from post-war technologies and resulted in an array of structures throughout Palm Springs, including those of a residential, commercial and cultural nature.

From the 1920s onward, reaching a peak in the 1950s and 1960s, Palm Springs has served as a haven for visionary modernist architects, namely — but not limited to — Richard Neutra, Albert Frey, John Lautner, and famed developers and builders George and Robert Alexander of the George Alexander Construction Company. More willing to take risks with design — largely

possible due to the city's pleasant climate — these architects used the enticing desert landscape as an inspiration and canvas upon which they designed sleek and informally elegant modern structures.

Today, such structures still stand in all their modernist glory, preyed upon by hungry-eyed, mid-century modern architecture aficionados around the world. The famed Annenberg winter estate, also known as Sunnylands, is one such beloved and esteemed structure.

The 25,000-square-foot house is an exemplary structure of mid-century modern design, exhibiting open space and large windows.

The estate, located on 200 acres of land in Rancho Mirage, just east of Palm Springs, has for nearly 50 years hosted renowned visitors ranging from world leaders such as U.S. presidents Dwight Eisenhower, Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan, Queen Elizabeth II and former British prime minister Margaret Thatcher, to renowned scientists, educators and innovative thinkers in the arts, business and media.

Described as "an oasis for reflection, quiet relaxation, unparalleled hospitality, and conversations on topics of national

and international importance," Sunnylands was designed by mid-century modern architecture pioneer A. Quincy Jones and built in 1966 by Ambassador Walter Annenberg — founder of *Seventeen* and *TV Guide*, among many other ventures — and his wife, Leonore Annenberg. The 25,000-square-foot house is an exemplary structure of mid-century modern design, exhibiting open space and large windows, achieving what desert modernism aimed to accomplish: Bringing the outdoor landscape in.

Situated adjacent to the estate is Sunnylands Center and Gardens, a new, 15-acre, LEED Gold addition, which was created in the same mid-century modern vein, with contemporary additions: Green technology and interior furnishings by Michael Smith, who decorated the Obamas' White House. Architects Frederick Fisher and Partners worked alongside exhibit designers Reich+Petch to produce a unified design that, as Tony Reich, principal at Reich+Petch, tells *Lifestyler*, "echo the attributes of mid-century modernism." "I met with Mrs. Annenberg, about a year before she died, and she was very, very excited about the project — they really wanted it to be their legacy," says Reich. With the estate being opened this month for public tours for the first time since its inception, such a legacy will ultimately be recognized, in both the home and centre.

Also playing host to renowned guests



Sunnylands Center and Gardens



Twin Palms



Sunnylands Historic Estate


— though of quite a different nature than those of Sunnylands — is Frank Sinatra's Twin Palms, the star's desert escape until 1957. Located in the Movie Colony of Palm Springs, and named after the two tall palms at the front of the house (at one point the tallest trees in the valley), Twin Palms is another prime example of mid-century modern architecture. Designed by E. Stewart Williams and built in 1947, Twin Palms was the architect's first residential commission. Although Ol' Blue Eyes was looking for an authentic Georgian-style mansion with all the dressings — a brink façade and column, to name a couple — Williams was successful in luring Sinatra towards a more "desert-appropriate" style instead, featuring long horizontal lines and building materials of a non-traditional nature.

Arguably one of the most renowned structures of mid-century modern architecture is the Kaufmann House by 20th-century modernism "pillar" Richard Neutra. The house was built in 1946 for the family of Edgar J. Kaufmann Sr., the man who commissioned Frank Lloyd Wright to design Fallingwater in Pennsylvania. Described by historian Esther McCoy as "horizontal planes resting on horizontal planes hover[ing] over transparent walls," the Kaufmann House is considered one of Neutra's greatest works. Featuring characteristic sliding glass walls and built using glass, steel and stone, it was

Kaufmann's until his death in 1955.

In 2008, the house was put up for auction. The owners had performed extensive and meticulous renovations, aiming to restore the iconic modernist property and encourage the public to consider architecture as a form of collectible art.

During the mid-20th century, Palm Springs was a playground for Hollywood's brightest stars: A quiet, temporary hideaway from the paparazzi-ridden Hills. Where the stars came to play, architects and builders came to design and build and today, people come to enjoy. The city has a knack for making visitors feel as though they've travelled back to that time, when Sinatra, reeling in the decadence of his new success, hosted the Rat Pack for an evening of indulgence at Twin Palms, while the Annenbergs discussed politics with President Eisenhower at Sunnylands.

And even then, while Alexander home after Alexander home was being built, the reliable mountains stood by in their stoic grace, playing witness to history being made below. And just as they stood tall to greet you upon your arrival, they bid you farewell as you leave. Like a post-script for Palm Springs, they somehow whisper, "We await your return." 

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