

MID-CENTURY PALM

MECCA SPRINGS

BY CHRISTINA BOHNSTENGEL





Above: House of Tomorrow, also known as the Elvis Honeymoon Hideaway; **Previous spread:** View of the Dinah Shore Estate.

In February 2017, an estimated 97,000 guests attended nearly 300 events over 11 days in Palm Springs, California. The occasion luring lovers of aesthetics to the desert: Modernism Week, a biannual celebration of mid-century architecture and design. In its 12th year, attendance was up 25 percent over 2016. And in October 2017, an extra day was added to the preview event, due to such high demand.

All are indicators of the revival of the mid-century modern style, which Merriam-Webster defines as “clean lines, organic and streamlined forms, and lack of embellishment.” It’s Charles Eames chairs and Frank Lloyd Wright homes. And in Palm Springs, it comes glammed up with an undeniable Old Hollywood vibe. Think Rat Pack, *Mad Men*, and James Bond—*Diamonds Are Forever* featured a famous scene filmed at the Palm Springs Elrod House, designed by John Lautner in 1968. The same Lautner later collaborated with Bob and Dolores Hope on their circular dream home that has become a mountainside landmark.

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The party in the desert really got swinging after the end of World War II, with the population nearly tripling. A new middle class had emerged, and along with it, new money and the new concept of leisure time. And as movie stars of the 50s and 60s continued celebrating Palm Springs as the “It” getaway for Hollywood elite, names like Neutra, Williams, Wexler, and Frey—some of the original mid-century modern architectural and design giants—shared the spotlight, becoming just as popular and in demand as the celebrities who commissioned them.

It was an experimental time of creative exploration shared amongst eclectic groups. A distinctive architectural style emerged marking the era with flat planes, rising angular roofs, open floor plans, and giant walls of glass that merged outdoors with indoors. And with the movie studios just 100 miles away, stars like Cary Grant, Bing Crosby, Dean Martin, and Frank Sinatra helped define not only that architectural style, but the Palm Springs’ lifestyle as well.

The Twin Palms Estate, brainchild of master architect E. Stewart Williams, was home to Frank Sinatra from 1948 to 1957. And the legendary grand piano-shaped swimming pool, home to many cocktail parties. “Legend has it that when a flag with the symbol of Jack Daniels appeared between the two palm trees for which the estate was named, it was a sign that the singer’s bar was open for its famous neighbors,” Modernism Week CEO J. Chris Mobley told us. The famous estate even made a cameo in Joan Crawford’s 1950 film *The Damned Don’t Cry*, a personal favor Sinatra owed. The project was a first for both the singer and the architect: Sinatra’s first commissioned home and Stewart’s first project with his new family firm.

Down the road, the Kirk Douglas Residence started as a spec house commissioned by R. S. Howard, heir to the Seabiscuit racing fortune. Donald Wexler, of the Wexler steel houses fame, designed the home, which Douglas purchased for his family in 1957. “It was a terrific place to live; we had so many friends who were neighbors—Dean Martin, Sidney Sheldon lived next door, and Dinah Shore’s house was behind us,” Joel Douglas—son of Kirk, younger brother of Michael—said recently in *Palm Springs Life*. “We had tennis parties every Sunday.” The patriarch actor famously wallpapered the tennis pavilion in movie posters of his career, now considered vintage treasures.



Above: The Raymond Loewy House by Albert Frey; Below: The Kauffman Desert House by Richard Neutra.





Above: Dining table in the cliffside Frey II House; **Top right:** One of Donald Wexler's famed steel houses.

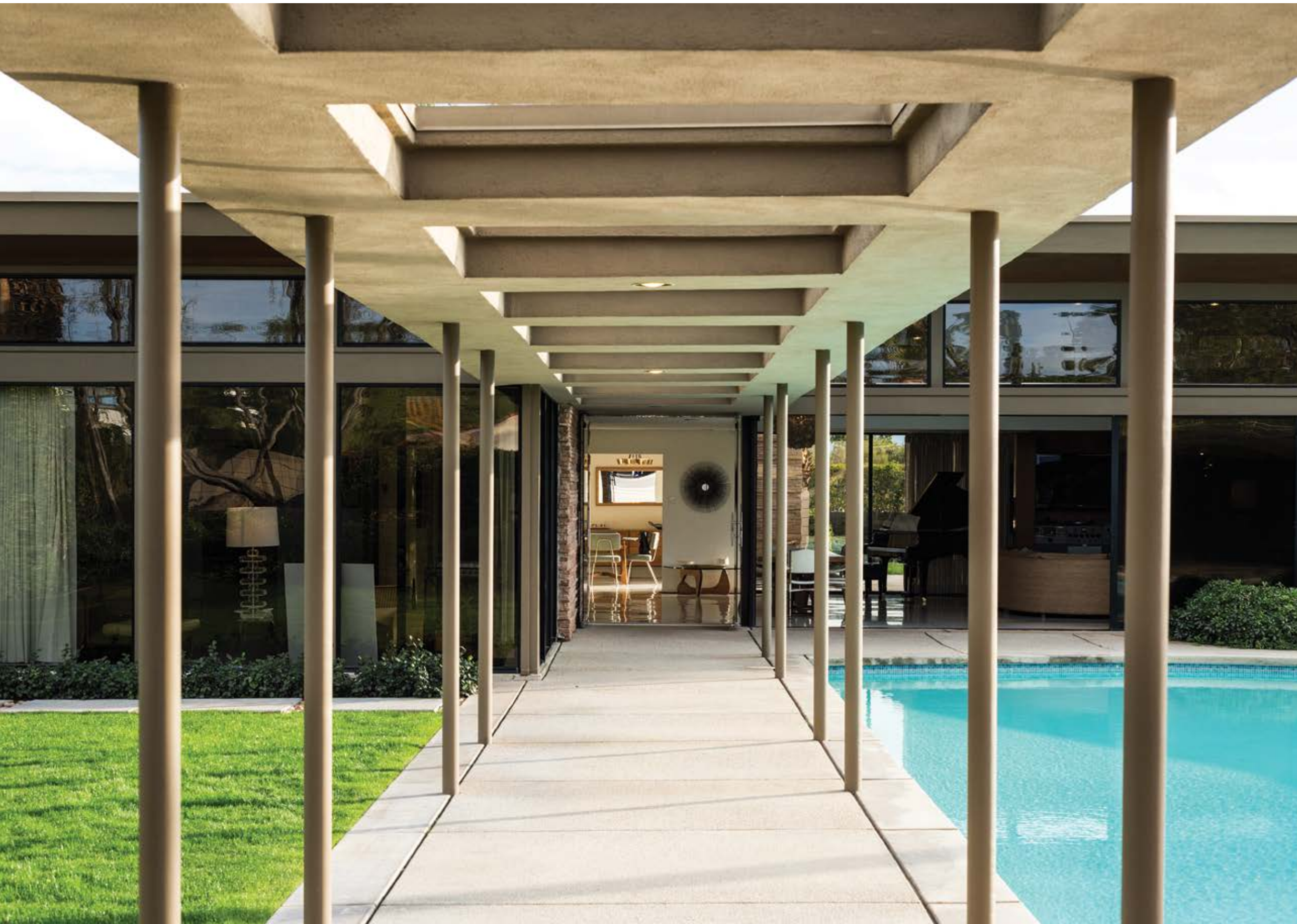


Father-and-son team, George and Robert Alexander, were architecture pioneers in Palm Springs. They sold one of their last homes to Dean Martin before tragically dying in a charter plane crash with their wives in 1965. Just five years earlier, Robert Alexander had commissioned William Krisel to design the legendary House of Tomorrow. The roof is repeatedly described as “batwing-style” and it juts out over a floor plan consisting of three circular levels. It’s a home that has generated buzz as of late due to a swanky fund-raiser that became a hot ticket in town. The Elvis Honeymoon Hideaway Cocktail Party was a nod to 1966, when the King of Rock and Roll leased the House of Tomorrow for a year, later honeymooning there with Priscilla in 1967.

Also of note, the Kauffman House has been described as one of the best examples of desert modernism. Designed by master architect Richard Neutra on commission by department store magnate Edgar J. Kaufmann, “the five bedrooms and baths are organized in a cross shape with the living spaces at the center. The four axes create a series of outdoor spaces around the property...” describes Dan Howarth for *Dezeen*.

And across the street sits the Raymond Loewy House by mid-century master Albert Frey. Loewy was a design legend in his own right, having been called “the man who designed everything,” and “the man who made the 20th century beautiful.” His work includes everything from the silhouette of the Coke bottle to the locomotive to the Lucky Strikes cigarette pack. For this design legend, the master architect created a desert villa with a low-slung pavilion. Initially conceived of as a 1947 bachelor pad, Frey transformed it into a showplace for Loewy’s work. It’s been called a demure house of small size but generous impact. The waist-deep pool extended into the living room, which, when the wall of glass slid open, made it feel like living outdoors. Also a frequent cocktail party venue, actor William Powell famously fell in the pool, yet stood back up with cocktail still intact, to which Loewy reacted by jumping in and calling for another round of drinks.

While Albert Frey was busy designing masterpieces for the masters, he was also creating his own creative space. The Frey II House (1964) is an 800-square-foot, steel-framed, glass-walled landmark perched on a Palm Springs hillside. At the time it was built, it was at the highest elevation of any residence in the city, according to the Palm Springs Art Museum.



Left: Frank Sinatra's former home by E. Stewart Williams, designed with the legendary grand piano-shaped swimming pool; **Right:** Target's mid-century modern collection, Project 62.



While the superstar residences provide a tapestry of Palm Springs in the mid 20th century, today, the downtown commercial and municipal buildings also emit that glow of the era: E. Stewart Williams' building that is now home to Chase Bank; Frey's Tramway gas station with its iconic "flying wedge" canopy, now the Visitors Center; City Hall; and even the local Catholic church.

Right now, there is growing visibility and popularity of the style, which Mobley attributes to a visual ease and simplicity that draws people in. "For the Baby Boomer generation, [it] offers a step back in time, conjuring up memories of a simpler life and fun times as a child. For those who visited Palm Springs in their youth, it can be a very nostalgic place," he said.

He added though, that there is also a new freshness to mid-century modern, with many new designers and home decor companies promoting modern product lines. Big box retailer Target is getting in on the action with its in-house furniture collection. Project 62—named for 1962, a pinnacle year in design as well as the retailer's start in Minnesota—marries mid-century modern silhouettes tailored with accent pieces for today's target buyer: the millennial set.

"Younger generations are likely more interested in the lifestyle and fashion associated with modernism, including simple, clean designs and minimalist surroundings."

As for today's Palm Springs, Mobley says, "Desert Modernism—chic and timeless, representing simplified, minimalist design with an emphasis on an indoor-outdoor lifestyle—appeals to a new group of enthusiasts who have put the area on the map for cultural tourism as well as fun in the sun." X