

DESIGN OASIS



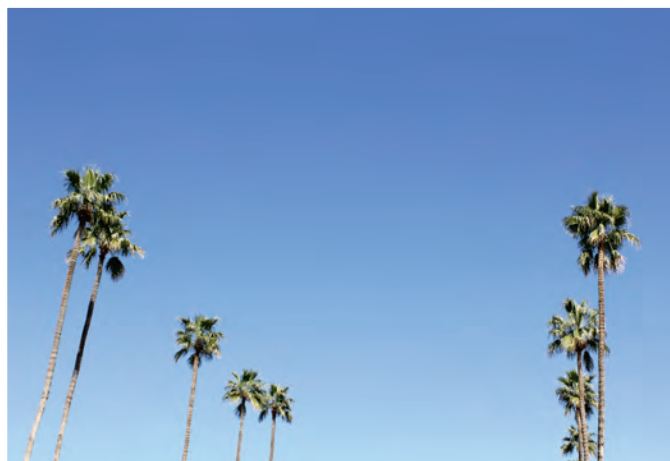
PLANT LIFE

Palm Springs is heaven for plant lovers. The presence of cacti and succulents is inescapable and their practicality – absorbing and storing large amounts of water – captures the resourcefulness of living in the California desert. The more recognizable varieties – saguaro and pencil cacti – dot roadways and sidewalks, while more extraordinary, lush and sometimes dangerous specimens can be found in nearby Joshua Tree National Park, where two desert ecosystems – the Mojave and the Colorado – come together. At Sunnylands, the mid-century modern estate, there are dizzying rows of the golden ball cactus. At Moorten Botanical Garden and Cactarium, the diversity of agave plants becomes immediately apparent. Endless potted specimens can be found accenting hidden courtyards downtown. At Frey House II, the second home that architect Albert Frey built for himself and donated to the Palm Spring Art Museum upon his death, a row of aloe defines a threshold between the rocky mountain terrain and the corrugated siding of the house.

Pictured: Joshua Tree National Park (top left); ball cacti at Sunnylands (top right); a poolside patio at Hermann Bungalows (centre); the exterior of Frey House II (bottom left); a greenhouse at Moorten Botanical Garden (bottom right).

Palm Springs is lush with visual cues that explain modernism's enduring mystique

PHOTO ESSAY BY **DEBORAH WANG**



EXTREME LANDSCAPES

Palm Springs is a land of extremes. There's the flatness of the desert, where the city lies, and the mountain ranges that frame it. It's naturally dry and artificially lush – raw and manicured. The vast blue sky is interrupted by skinny palms that feel, inconceivably, like they're floating. These dissimilar elements create jarring juxtapositions. That's one of the remarkable qualities of the Desert X art biennial in the Coachella Valley. The program of newly commissioned work brings large-scale pieces into the desert from March through early May. Its installations draw out the desert's barren qualities, expanding the vastness of the ground below and the sky above. At the Parker Palm Springs hotel, layers of contrast – grassy lawns bordered by a tangle of hedges, pocked with palm trees and a snowy mountain beyond – are part of the richness of its vast grounds. Outside architect Richard Neutra's Kaufmann house, the land is built-up with oversized cacti and boulders, forming a topography that camouflages its stature.

Pictured: A bedroom with a view of desert vegetation at the Kirk Douglas House (top left); the Kaufmann house (centre); Desert X installations by Rana Begum (bottom left) and Matt Johnson (bottom right).



GREAT WHITE

Palm Springs embraces white surfaces that reflect sun, keep buildings cool and add to the brilliance of the natural environment. Daylight bouncing off patterned breeze blocks, smooth walls, exposed beams, cantilevered roof slabs and shade structures results in long, hard shadows. At the Kirk Douglas house, ivory terrazzo floors and a painted-out ceiling sandwich its casual furniture groupings and views of the verdant yard. The effect distills the city's sense of modernism and how the mid-century style was adapted to homes built for desert life. Warm temperatures year-round allow for a constant connection to the outdoors through floor-to-ceiling windows but also ample overhangs and concrete screens that protect inhabitants from strong rays and prying eyes. White buildings create a backdrop for an explosion of prickly cacti, manicured lawns and palms of every species and size. At the Annenberg residence on the Sunnylands estate, a stoic white block wall backs a Harry Bertoia sculpture with the formal qualities and organic energy of these plants.

Pictured: Seating in the Kirk Douglas House (top left and bottom left); facades in Canyon View Estates (top right, middle left and bottom); a waffle ceiling (centre) and Bertoia sculpture (middle right) at Sunnylands; the Parker Palm Springs (bottom right).

PALM SPRINGS ETERNAL

Desert modernism's influence extends well beyond the Coachella Valley, in part because local homeowners are so eager to share their properties with the world

Frey House II is perched on the rocky base of the San Jacinto mountains above downtown Palm Springs. Completed in 1964 for its architect and owner, Albert Frey, it distills the tenets of desert modernism in only 800-square feet.

There's the embrace of indoor-outdoor living or, in the case of the Frey structure, the bear hug. Its expansive glass welcomes in views of the sprawling city below, as well as glimpses of its uphill neighbours, a herd of bighorn sheep. And the home is constructed around a massive chunk of granite that thrusts into the sleeping area. There are deep roof overhangs of corrugated metal to shield its open plan from midday sun and humble natural materials set against mid-century pops of yellow drapery and turquoise wall panels.

What the home also captures is an openness among the people of Palm Springs to invite architecture fans into the largest concentration of modernist properties in the United States. While the Frey house is now owned by the Palm Springs Art Museum, the city is filled with private and equally pedigreed residences that often welcome small group tours or, in the case of the city's annual Modernism Week, hundreds of design looky-loos. Considering that many of the city's homes were built to insulate their owners from the harsh desert environment and curious neighbours, such transparency illustrates the shift in how they're shared with the world beyond their breeze block walls.

"Most of the owners of these homes feel like they're custodians," says architect Diane Bald, who sits on the advisory board of USModernist and recently restored a 1954 house once owned by actor Kirk Douglas in Palm Springs's Old Las Palmas neighbourhood. Bald and her husband, Roots co-founder Michael Budman, began visiting the area in the late 1980s. When their interest in the Douglas house was piqued by news of the real estate listing in the New York Post, their first call was to family friend, actor Michael Douglas, Kirk's son. They wanted to make sure he wasn't interested in buying back his Donald Wexler-designed childhood home. He gave them his blessing. "I wouldn't say it was the purest modernist house," Bald says, citing walls that broke up sightlines and Italian mosaic tiles that had been painted over. "But it was the start of it."

Before taking on the Palm Springs project, Bald had restored a 1957 Malibu beach house designed by Los Angeles architect Craig Ellwood. Her meticulous work won an award from modern architecture non-profit Docomomo in 2020. "There, we were really pure in our restoration," she says, but in the Douglas house, Bald tweaked its floorplan, updated the kitchen, installed a terrazzo floor and achieved a heightened sense of light and flow. "You really feel the vibes when you walk in here. Everyone comments on it. It's just a very happy and bright living space," she says. During Modernism Week, Bald and Budman share it with up to 700 visitors. "As an owner of a home like this, I feel it's important for the public to see it because these are great pieces of architecture."

Since 2006, Modernism Week has been the main platform for snooping around the city's catalogue of

celebrity estates and mid-century neighbourhoods.

"It was a bunch of non-profits getting together – the Preservation Foundation, the Modern Committee, the art museum and a few others – and saying, 'what can we do? How do you raise money to do things?'" says Richard "Kip" Serafin, who was one of the early advocates for sustaining the city's unique style. "We would have cocktail parties at homes that people couldn't see. And then we decided from cocktail parties, you could go into tours."

Today, Serafin and his company, Locations 760, act as a gatekeeper to some of the city's more iconic properties, helping Louis Vuitton host its 2016 cruise collection at the John Lautner-designed Bob Hope estate or launching a BMW in the backyard of the Dinah Shore House, another Wexler property. "Today, it's grown tremendously," he says of Modernism Week.

The 2023 event in February hosted more than 100,000 design professionals, architecture buffs and tourists taking advantage of Palm Springs's open-door ethos. "What's happened over the years is some of the neighbourhoods have gotten all excited about it and see it as a good way to make money," Serafin says. These neighbourhood associations, such as Canyon View Estates, where director Olivia Wilde filmed her 2022 thriller *Don't Worry Darling*, use Modernism Week's proceeds to keep their cul-de-sacs looking picture perfect.

Desert modernism's influence on design owes a lot to the city's spirit of preservation but its future clout depends on whether its homeowners continue to open up these spaces. "When I first started coming here in the late 1990s, there was a small group of very passionate, dedicated fans of modernism – preservationists, people who were eager to get their hands on these houses, which were suffering, to make sure they were preserved and restored," says Trevor O'Donnell, who worked in entertainment marketing on Broadway before founding PS Architecture Tours. "Ten years ago, there were a lot of regular folks who very proudly bought and restored their homes and were very eager to open them and share their work. But these same houses are now selling for multiple millions of dollars to people who may not be as inclined to let a bunch of strangers tramp through their living room."

O'Donnell says the design future of Palm Springs also depends on it continuing to be a laboratory for new ideas and not a Disneyland of decades-old homes. He names Sean Lockyer, Lance O'Donnell, Susan Secoy Jensen and Ana Escalante as a few of the local contemporary architects helping to sensitively move its streetscapes forward. "The central ideals of modernism – the honesty, the purity, the lack of superfluous ornament, the form emerging out of function – they're all there [in their work]," he says.

The desert modernism style these homes amplify was never meant to be static. "The sign that we had done the right thing [in our restoration], is that I'm friends with Gary Wexler, who is Donald's son," Bald says. "He walked into the house and broke down in tears and said, 'oh my God, if my father could have seen this, he would have been so happy.' So this is how the house was meant to be."

– ANDREW SARDONE



In its open layout, the Frey House II incorporates built-in seating and an elevated dining bar set around a dramatic rock.

ON LOCATION

CHEEKY'S

This daytime spot is known for its bacon flight of applewood, celery salt and jalapeno flavoured slices. cheekysps.com.

HERMANN BUNGALOWS

A resort within the L'Horizon Resort and Spa, Hermann Bungalows offers handsome poolside suites with mid-century-inspired decor. **Stays from \$599 through** hermannbungalows.com.

MODERNISM WEEK

The winter event's organizers host another abbreviated program of tours, talks and parties from Oct. 19 to 22. modernismweek.com.

MR. LYONS STEAKHOUSE

Following a classic steakhouse feast, slip into Mr. Lyons' discrete bar, Seymour's, for an after-dinner craft cocktail. mryonsps.com.

PALM SPRINGS ART MUSEUM ARCHITECTURE AND DESIGN CENTER

Until July 2, this offshoot of the Palm Springs Art Museum exhibits American Framing, a remounting of the U.S. entry to the 2021 Venice Biennale of Architecture. psmuseum.org.

PARKER PALM SPRINGS

While the Insta-famous hotel's recently reopened restaurant, Mister Parker's, is this season's hottest reservation, overnight guests can also grab a drink at the Mini Bar and snag a spot around its roaring lobby fire. **Stays from \$599 through** parkerpalmsprings.com.

PS ARCHITECTURE TOURS

Trevor O'Donnell introduces groups to Palm Springs' design history and standout properties. **Two-and-a-half-hour tour, \$120 through** psarchitecturetours.com.

SUNNYLANDS

Visits to this Rancho Mirage estate highlight its historic visitors, from Queen Elizabeth to President Obama, as well as the collection of art and furniture of its late owners, publisher and philanthropist Walter Annenberg and wife Leonore. **Tours from \$26 through** sunnylands.org.

THE COLONY PALMS

The historic hotel's Colony Club restaurant is a chic spot for a midday meal on its poolside patio. colonypalms.com.

THE PALOMA RESORT

The Paloma's tapas restaurant, Sol y Sombra, serves a menu of paellas including seafood and vegetarian options. **Stays from \$299 through** thepalomaresort.com.