

The New Modernists

Meet the fresh group of designers retooling Palm Springs' mid-century architecture for the 21st century

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As Palm Springs guide Robert Imber pulls his minivan into the driveway of the Kaufmann House, the mid-century modernist masterpiece designed by Richard Neutra and once owned by Barry Manilow, two Chicagoan sisters in the back — who each paid \$85 for the three-hour tour — pummel him with questions. When was it built? Who owns it now? How many bathrooms? Imber, a self-taught expert on modernism, rattles off the answers: 1946; the husband of a couple who are now divorced; five.

"I've never been busier in my life," the fedora-sporting guide says later over a martini at Trio, a restaurant housed in a former bank. "Yesterday, I had a couple from Finland and a family from England. My clients run the gamut from 18 to 80, from New Yorkers to New Zealanders, from architects to people who simply appreciate good design."

For 15 years, Imber has been hauling people around twice a day, six days a week, showcasing the work of Albert Frey, Donald Wexler, John Lautner and other modernist masters who transformed Palm Springs from a desert sanctuary for Hollywood jet-setters into a modern oasis for design enthusiasts. The pool-laden destination located 60-odd miles from the Pacific Ocean in the desert boasts the U.S.'s densest concentration of bold, angular modernist architecture.

Today, around 60,000 visitors converge on Palm Springs each February for Modernism Week, an event that started >

as a relatively modest furnishings and art show, and now brings in about \$22 million a year. “It’s the time of the year when everyone is Guccied and Puccied,” says Imber. “It’s truly outrageous.”

Palm Springs’ status as a modern design hub is a turnaround from the 1980s, when it was known as a sleepy retirement community overseen by then-mayor Sonny Bono, who infamously banned G-strings and pushed the rowdy Spring Breakers out. But times are changing, again. The popularity of the Coachella Valley Music & Arts Festival, as well as the openings of the glamorous Parker Palm Springs resort and the more hipster Ace Hotel, have brought pleasure seekers and a few celebrities back to the desert. Leonardo DiCaprio has now taken over the mantle from Liberace as Palm Springs’ most famous homeowner.

And with these new residents come new ideas. Several so-called “adaptive reuse” projects, for instance, have helped revitalize the city’s modernist structures. The Palm Springs Visitors Center North was once a gas station co-designed by Frey, while the Architecture and Design Center was a former bank created by architect E. Stewart Williams.

“There’s a hunger for what we have here,” says Sidney Williams, the retired curator of

architecture and design at the Palm Springs Art Museum, and Williams’ daughter-in-law. “I think people today, especially young people, are interested in sustainability, modest scale and beautiful designs that are economically feasible. We have all that here. We’ve had all that here.”

The city’s revival is also inspiring unparalleled new development in the walkable Downtown and Uptown Design Districts, including a \$400 million complex across from the Palm Springs Art Museum, set to open this year. The area will feature a 50,000-square-foot public park and a six-story Kimpton Hotel with the city’s first rooftop pool, as well as scads of retail space designed by Chris Pardo, the creative force behind such trendy local hot spots as the Bootlegger Tiki bar, Ernest Coffee and Arrive hotel.

“Palm Springs is truly the epicenter of modern design, but it still has to evolve if it wants to survive,” says Pardo during a pool-side break from work at the Arrive hotel. At the age of 37, he’s become the face of a generation carving out a place for itself among the city’s golf courses and tennis courts.

Here, we meet a few of the Palm Springs innovators with designs on moving modernism into the next century.



The Pool Guy

MATT NAYLOR

Matt Naylor practically has chlorine in his blood, having worked for his father’s pool-cleaning business as a boy. Now, as the owner of design firm Architectural Blue, he uses high-end materials like custom-cut tile and fiber-optic lighting to fashion modern waterscapes.

Naylor’s clients range from house flippers to hoteliers. While he’d prefer his pool designs to complement nature and the area’s existing architecture, he’s game for anything. He’s had grottos, secret rooms, places for suburban dwellers to really let down their hair. “Welcome to Palm Springs. You never know what you’ll find in someone’s backyard.”



The Trendsetter

CHRIS PARDO

Chris Pardo has made his mark in Palm Springs in less than four years, thanks to bold new construction projects like the chill 32-room Arrive hotel in the Uptown Design District. Despite moving to a city obsessed with preservation, the designer isn't interested in recreating the past. His design of Arrive blends traditional modern lines with industrial materials like Cor-Ten steel, which changes color in the desert sun depending on the time of day.

For the California-born designer, no project is too big, small or unconventional. He crafted the sleek 324-stall bathroom building on the grounds where the Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival is held, and recently transformed an old Pizza Hut into the stylish Draughtsman gastropub. "The city is moving in a new direction," he points out. "It's not realistic for it to be a time capsule forever." >



The Makeover Artists

**KEVIN KEMPER AND
HOWARD HAWKS**

For over a decade, partners Kevin Kemper and Howard Hawkes of H3K Design have been making mid-century-modern modern again by knocking down walls to create open floor plans. “The bathrooms and kitchens have to be re-imagined,” Kemper says. “The kitchens back then were tiny and more service-oriented. They were only used by the maid or the wife. Nowadays, everyone wants to be in the kitchen.”

As a pet project, the pair purchased and spent four years restoring the Swan House, a lavish, U-shaped party house built in 1960 by architect Jack McCallum. They’ve also opened a new showroom in downtown Palm Springs in a structure that they discovered was actually once the office for a brokerage firm, dating back to 1966. “The building was literally entombed,” says Hawkes. “You’d never know the history from looking at it from the outside.”

WHERE TO STAY

The hotels that have turned once-sleepy Palm Springs into a great place to lay your head

01

L’Horizon

With striking views of the San Jacinto Mountains, this bungalow retreat designed by William Cody in 1952 underwent a re-do last year by designer Steve Hermann and became the city’s poshest resort. lhorizonpalmsprings.com

02

Arrive

There’s a carefree tone at this boutique hotel where guests check in at the bar and are offered a cocktail. The vibe continues in 32 rooms spread across buildings with clerestory windows that face the pool. arrivehotels.com

03

The Parker

Design star Jonathan Adler has given his original desert-chic concept a complete makeover, including a seven-foot bronze banana sculpture on the main lawn that is ready-made for Instagram. theparkerpalmsprings.com

The Architect

LANCE O'DONNELL

While growing up in nearby Indio and Palm Desert, Lance O'Donnell didn't appreciate being surrounded by the work of such notable modern architects as Albert Frey and Donald Wexler, with whom O'Donnell collaborated, beginning in 2001, after Wexler closed his architecture practice. With an unwavering emphasis on eco-conscious modernism, he's now building a legacy of his own.

"I definitely wouldn't call myself a historicist," says O'Donnell, who currently lives in a platinum LEED-certified home he designed in the boulder-covered neighborhood of Little Tuscany.

"I'm not interested in recreating the past, but I am fascinated by understanding the principles that drove modernism, from fabrication processes to the freedom that steel, concrete

and glass can allow." Besides designing large custom homes, O'Donnell created the angular Tahquitz Canyon Visitor Center and is working on a new campus at the Annenberg Foundation's sprawling Sunnylands estate in nearby Rancho Mirage. "I'm so fortunate to be able to work in this community, where there is such reverence for both architecture and the building environment." **CL**

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