

Old architecture keeps Palm Springs modern

PALM SPRINGS, CALIF.—The past may be a foreign country, but it's one that's still inhabited.

We're well beyond the point where the 1950s and '60s have become historic eras in their own right, though they seem uncomfortably recent. Anyone who lived through those tumultuous decades might be amazed to hear people talking about them as if they represent some special moment in history, some magical interlude when for the last time, perhaps, the future beckoned in all its technological glory.

But maybe not.

We know better now, but we knew better then, too. It was the time when Rachel Carson, Jane Jacobs and Betty Freidan — housewives all — first reintroduced a dose of reality to the way we see things. It was also when U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower first warned of the "military-industrial complex," even as the West waged cold war against the Soviet Union.

But then there's Palm Springs, a California town of 48,000 where the '50s and '60s are only now coming into their own. Though many unfortunate buildings have appeared in the intervening years, the relics of that seminal postwar period speak of a unique confluence of money, architecture and glamour that burned brightly during its brief heyday.

These mid-century modern structures — mostly private houses — take us back to a time when the promise of the Modern Movement seemed guaranteed. Architects such as Richard Neutra, Albert Frey, Donald Wexler, John Lautner and E. Stewart Williams arrived with impeccable intellectual credentials and found a willing audience for their revolutionary work.

Frey, a Swiss architect, actually spent time in Le Corbusier's Paris atelier before immigrating to the U.S. in 1928. Vienna-born Neutra, who arrived in America in 1923, worked with Erich Mendelsohn in Berlin.

Perhaps it was California climate, or the laissez-faire attitudes that prevailed, but they put aside the dogmatism of their beginnings and produced some of the most remarkable — and joyful — architecture ever seen.

It helped to be rich — it always does — but the significance of their work goes beyond their clients' wealth and fame. The 1947 house Neutra designed for Edgar Kaufmann, the Pittsburgh department-store magnate who earlier hired Frank Lloyd Wright to do Fallingwater, remains one of the great modern residences.

Conceived as a series of horizontal planes, the building envisions the house not as Le Corbusier would have it, a machine for living in, but rather a procession of spaces that move effortlessly and comfortably between indoors and out.

Held up by steel beams, these structures contained large open spaces and had windows for walls. The casualness of American life was reflected in the architecture; the rigid hierarchy of traditional housing gave way to a human-scaled flow of rooms and a sense of connection, interior and exterior.

Even the humble gas station was turned into something extraordinary; Frey's 1963 Tramway Gas Station, now the Palm Springs visitors centre, is actually an excuse for one of the most striking roofs ever seen in such a structure. Technically it is a hyperbolic paraboloid: Think of an enormous triangular roof that soars up and out as it reaches a point that marks the entrance to the town.

The most enigmatic house of all, built by Bob Hope in 1979, is a vast clam shell structure that remains almost unknown. It sits at the top of another dead-end street in a gated community. A sign on the road warns visitors of an "Armed Response."

That's the other side of Palm Springs; it is a community that lives in a state of chronic paranoia. It's also a community hard hit by the recession. Where else would you find a Rolls-Royce on sale for \$11,000 (U.S.)?

Then there's the nagging issue of the desert: to see these lush green



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gardens in the heart of dryness makes one shake one's head. But

back then, in the '50s and '60s, almost no one thought about such things. Even today, only few do. Palm Springs carries on as if its location in the Coachella Valley ran high in fresh water.

Mid-century modernism doesn't excuse the wastefulness, but it does help us understand what earlier generations saw in this arid landscape, why they found it so compelling. That hasn't changed, but then, neither has the desert.



PALM SPRINGS BUREAU OF TOURISM

The Tramway Gas Station became a landmark of mid-century modernism. Designed by architects Albert Frey and Robson Chambers in 1963, the building is now the visitors centre for Palm Springs, Calif.

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