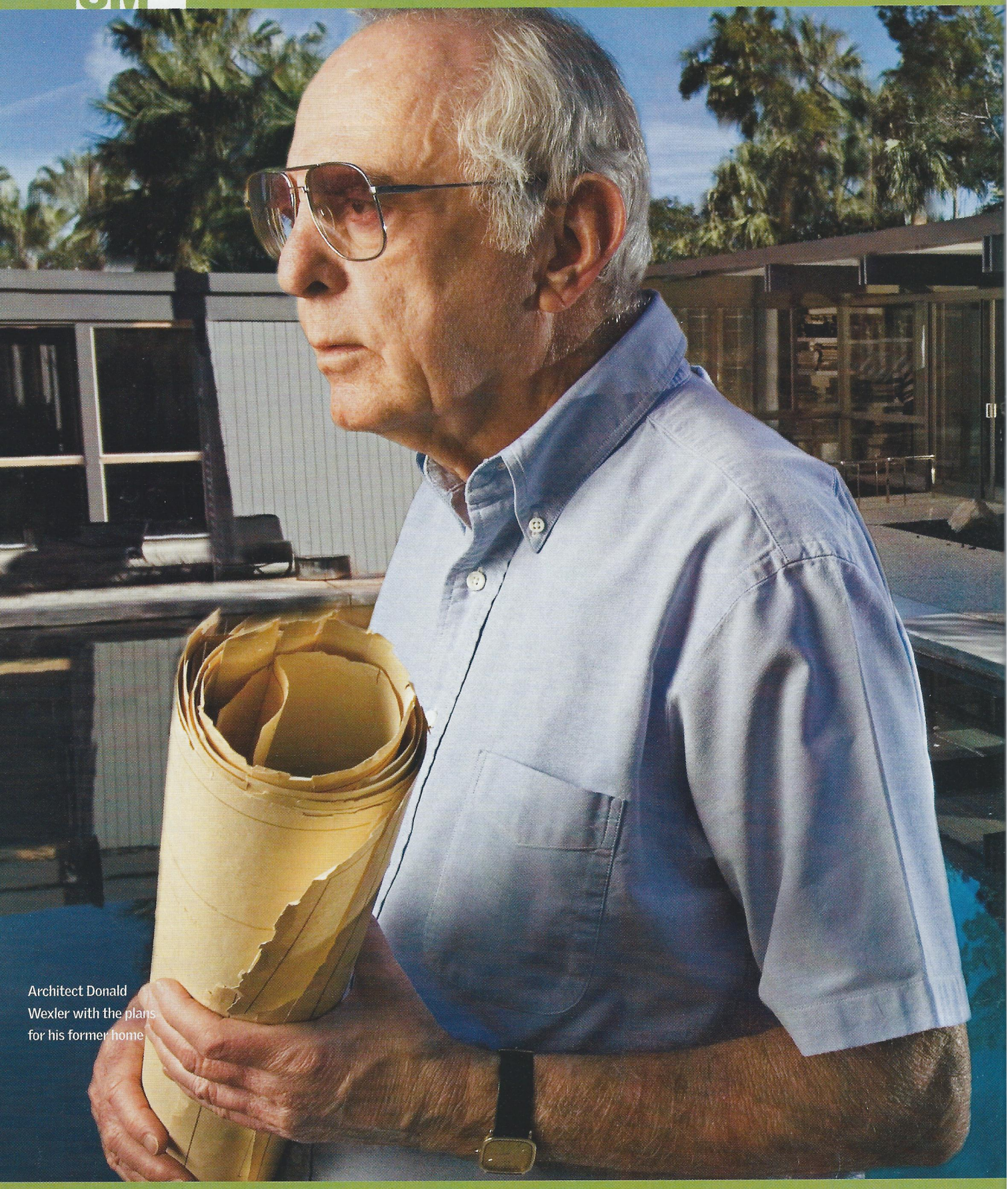
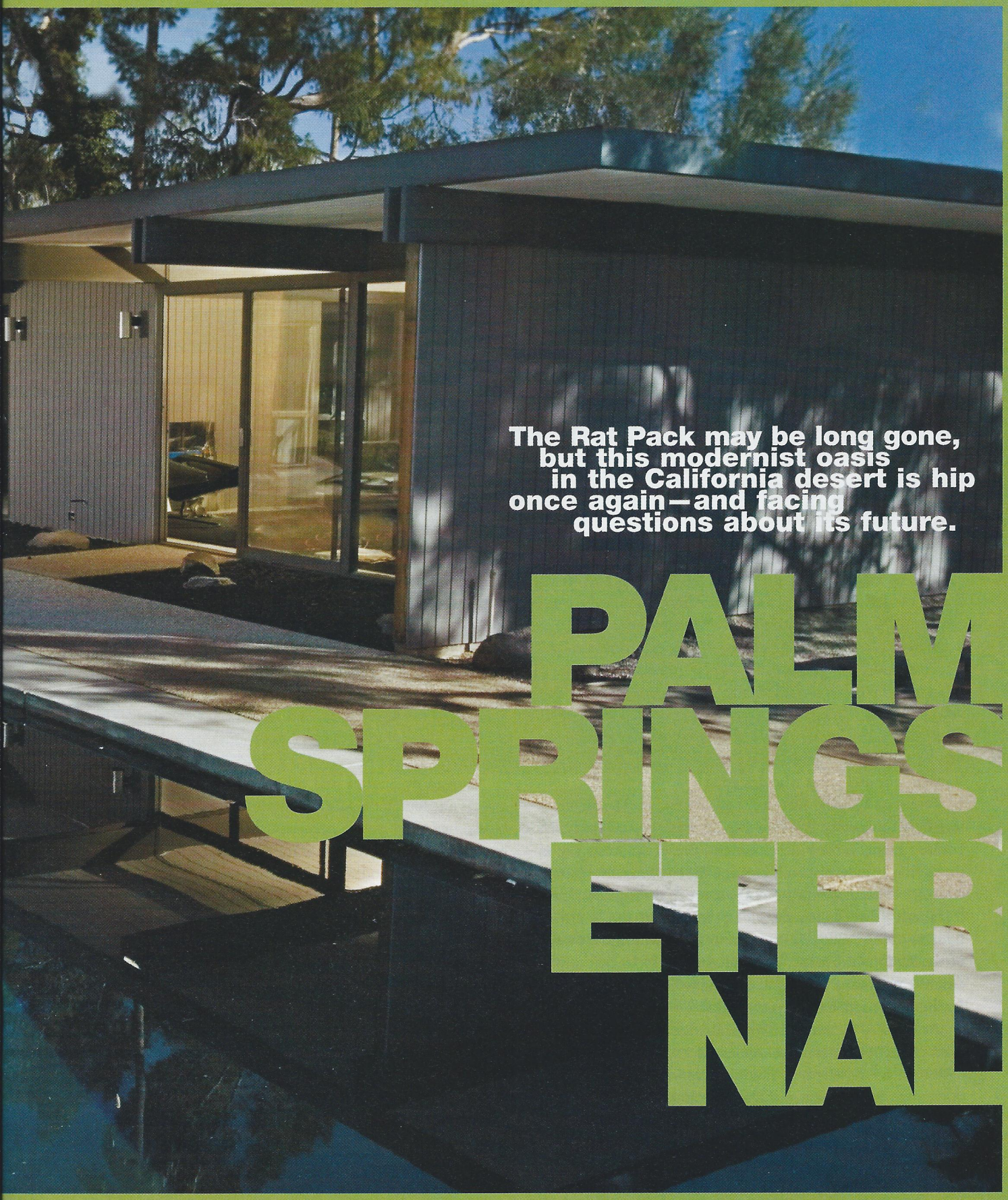


Architect Donald Wexler with the plans for his former home

BY ERIC WILLS PHOTOGRAPHY BY THOMAS ALLEMAN



The Rat Pack may be long gone, but this modernist oasis in the California desert is hip once again—and facing questions about its future.

PALM SPRINGS ETERNAL

In June 1950, after graduating from architecture school at the University of Minnesota, Donald Wexler walked into the Los Angeles office of Richard Neutra and asked him for a job. It was an excuse to meet a man he greatly admired, the architect of such celebrated buildings as the Kaufmann House in Palm Springs, Calif. To Wexler's surprise, Neutra did offer him a job, and the younger architect moved to California and soon landed in Palm Springs, where for the past half-century he has designed dozens of buildings.

Under a warm desert sun in mid-February, a crowd gathered on a sidewalk in Palm Springs to honor Wexler as the newest member of the city's Walk of Stars. Wexler, 82, dressed neatly in a blue suit, listened as speaker after speaker paid him tribute. How his airport brought the jet age to Palm Springs. How his experimental steel-and-glass houses are, like Wexler himself, modest on the outside with unwavering integrity and strength on the inside. How Wexler proves that humility and great architecture *can* be mentioned in the same sentence.

The ceremony marked the start of Palm Springs' third annual Modernism Week, a series of exhibits, tours, and parties celebrating the city's wealth of modernist architecture. About a hundred miles east of Los Angeles, Palm Springs first attracted international attention in the 1920s and '30s, when business moguls and Hollywood stars vacationed there, drawn by the warm weather and seclusion. The city's boom coincided with the heyday of midcentury design, and today, Palm Springs is a modernist enclave whose celebrities include figures like Wexler—the architects who designed it.

I came to Modernism Week to see both how the architecture here took shape and how the city has managed its rediscovered hipness. New development, preservationists say, is threatening modernist buildings and the city's historic character. "Our cultural identity is tied to some of these places," says Elizabeth Edwards Harris, vice president of the board of trustees of the California Preservation Foundation and owner of the Kaufmann House. "You can only go so far before you diminish your visual identity to the point where people say Palm Springs isn't modernist anymore."

By chance, Wexler's star was embedded in the sidewalk in front of the Wessman Development Corp. Its president, John Wessman, has raised preservationists' ire with his proposals for downtown development, including a project that would obscure his own office building, a modernist landmark. Wessman argues that he's bringing much-needed economic growth to Palm Springs; preservationists respond that prosperity need not entail demolishing or diminishing buildings that have come to embody the spirit and history of the city.

As Wexler posed for pictures amid a throng of well-wishers, Wessman employees inside their offices were hard at work. Those on either side of the building's glass walls held very different views about the path progress should take.

In May 1947, Frank Sinatra, wearing a sailor's cap and eating an ice cream cone, walked into the office of a local architect named E. Stewart Williams and asked him to draw up plans for a Georgian-style house, to be built by Christmas. Williams agreed, but he also sketched plans for a modernist house he thought would better fit the desert landscape. Sinatra chose the second design and in this small way contributed to the rise of modernist architecture in Palm Springs.

Buoyed by Sinatra and other stars who built vacation homes and lounged poolside (martinis in hand), Palm Springs blossomed in the postwar era. Consider the context: the influence of Hollywood, the rise of the car culture in California, the news of Sputnik and start of the space race. Local and international architects alike, with influences that ranged from the high-minded, restrained styles of Europe to the whimsical Googie architecture of California, designed fancy retreats, modest houses, and commercial and public buildings. The city emerged—in a desert valley bounded by mountain ranges, the most prominent being the San Jacinto to the west—as a shimmering reflection of an optimisitic age.

The boom didn't last. Palm Springs suffered through years of decline starting in the 1970s, becoming a kind of geezerville for retirees where preservation happened by neglect. But then in the 1990s, designers and artists from Los Angeles, attracted by sleek design, began buying and renovating modernist buildings, and Palm Springs was reborn as a retro-chic hipster's

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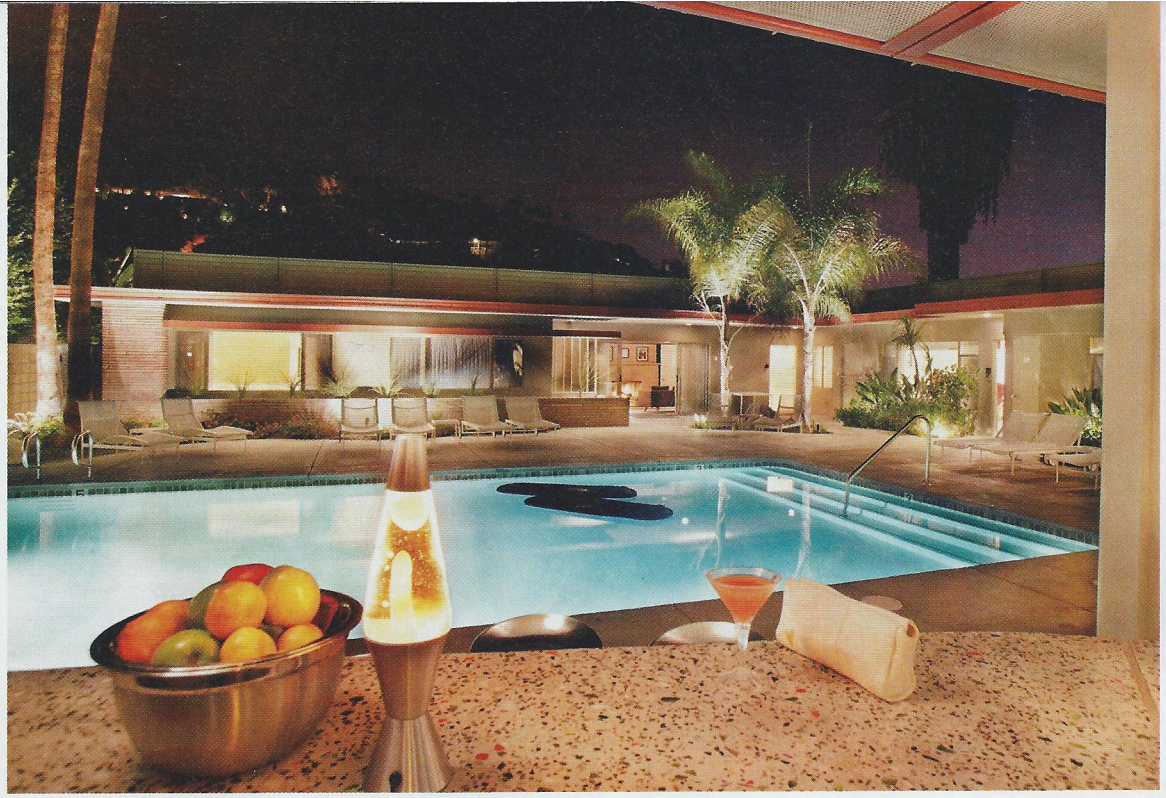
Wexler designed seven experimental steel houses made with prefabricated panels. This model features a folded roof.

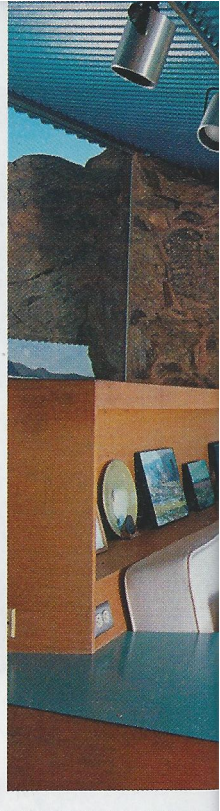
paradise. The Orbit In, located in the historic tennis club neighborhood, was part of the revitalization. Constructed in 1957 by a designer and builder named Herbert Burns, the nine-room inn had suffered decades of neglect when Christy Eugenis, a native of Portland, Ore., purchased it in 1999 and restored it.

At this desert getaway, a Jetsonesque sign greets guests, Orbitinis are served at a boomerang-shaped bar, and the décor is dominated by the midcentury designs of Charles and Ray Eames, Eero Saarinen, and Isamu Noguchi. When I check in, I am handed keys to the Bertoia Den, which pays homage to Harry Bertoia's iconic furniture, such as a red high-back lounge chair, and includes the original kitchenette with a push-button fridge. Poolside, I can see why Palm Springs became hip again: The nostalgia and minimalist aesthetic here conspire to ease the complications of modern-day life.

From the pool, I also see a curious sliver of a house peeking out from the mountainside above the inn. This, I learn, is Frey House II, architect Albert Frey's second home in Palm Springs, completed in 1964. Frey, born in Switzerland, trained in the Beaux-Arts tradition. He spent 10 months in Paris working for Le Corbusier (helping design the Villa Savoye, an exemplar of the International Style in Poissy, France) before coming to America in 1930. Frey may have had a very serious, high modernist background, but his style evolved a great deal in his new desert surroundings.

The next morning, I stand with a tour group in the living room of Frey House II and learn that the architect took five years to select the site and a year to measure the movement of





the sun using a 10-foot pole. After reviewing his plans, City Hall called the design "crazy" before grudgingly giving its approval. The result is a delicate glass-and-steel box in a boulder-strewn landscape.

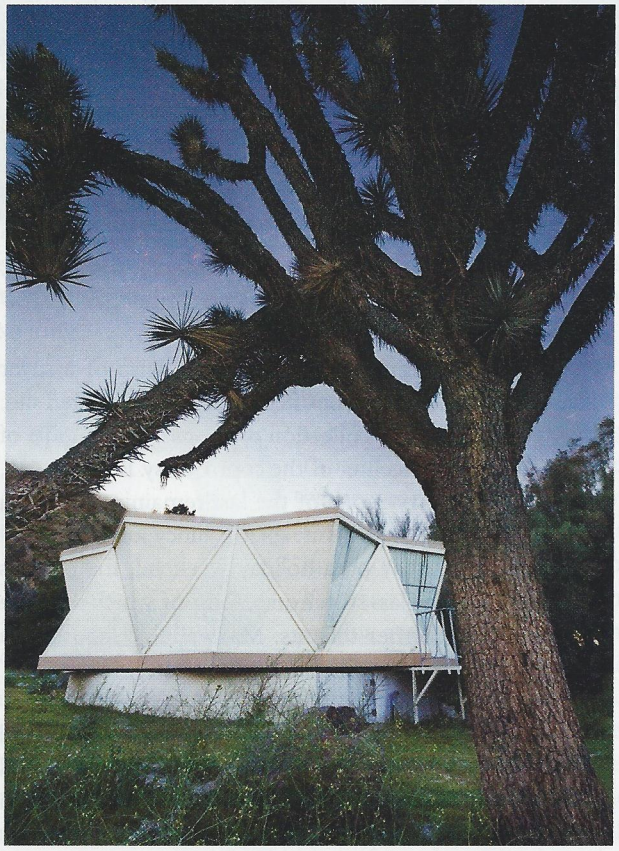
The house contains many of the features of desert modernism, a style influenced by the natural environment, 120-degree summer afternoons, and the leisure-conscious California lifestyle: the flat corrugated-aluminum roof, the overhangs perfectly measured to block the summer sun, the sliding glass doors that help blur the distinction between interior and exterior. Frey was keenly conscious of nature, choosing the color of his curtains to match the yellow *Encilia* flowers that bloom each spring in the desert. He even incorporated a boulder into the design; it protrudes into the house as a divider between the bedroom and living room, a piece of the outside world standing in marvelous contrast to the glass wall wrapped around it, as well as to the steel beams.

Frey House II doesn't appear dated, and its 700 square feet seem spacious (a later addition, a guest bedroom, measures another 300 square feet)—a refreshing reminder that life did not always resemble our age of massive houses and three-car garages. Yet this isn't an austere or a cold place. This is a place I want to live in.

"So much of traditional architecture was built to impress you," Frey said in an interview shortly before his death in 1998. Buildings were designed as symbols of political power or wealth. But as Frey said, "It's the people who are inside who are important." Though Le Corbusier was his mentor, Frey didn't consider himself a strict, formal modernist. "No," he said, "you have to have your fantasy going, too."

The more Modernism Week events I attend—the Palm Springs Art Museum's exhibit of Julius Shulman's photographs, for instance, or the bazaar of furniture and art populated by an impossibly cosmopolitan and stylish crowd—the more the pioneering spirit here becomes evident. One afternoon I find myself in a silver Mustang convertible, Bill Butler at the wheel. Butler is the former president of an advertising agency in New York, a straight talker who seems pretty practical. But then he confesses that he purchased the house he's taking me to see on a whim, before ever stepping inside.

ABOVE: BASIL CHILDERS, LEFT; DAVID GLOMB, RIGHT



Clockwise from top left: View from the boomerang bar at the Orbit In; Frey House II, built around a boulder, has splendid views of downtown; the carousel-like house, where the Beatles supposedly partied, was designed to turn slowly during the day so occupants avoided the sun's glare—today, the house spins rapidly, thanks to a new motor.

We arrive in a tiny community called Snow Creek, about 10 miles north of Palm Springs, and there it is. *It* looks like a 1960s sci-fi movie prop that was abandoned in the desert. The house is round and small, made of glass and aluminum panels painted off-white. The entire structure can rotate 130 degrees around a center post like a kind of merry-go-round. When it was constructed in 1961, a newspaper headline proclaimed: *Man Builds Carousel House*. Butler settles on this definition: "This is to architecture what outsider art is to art. It's outsider architecture."

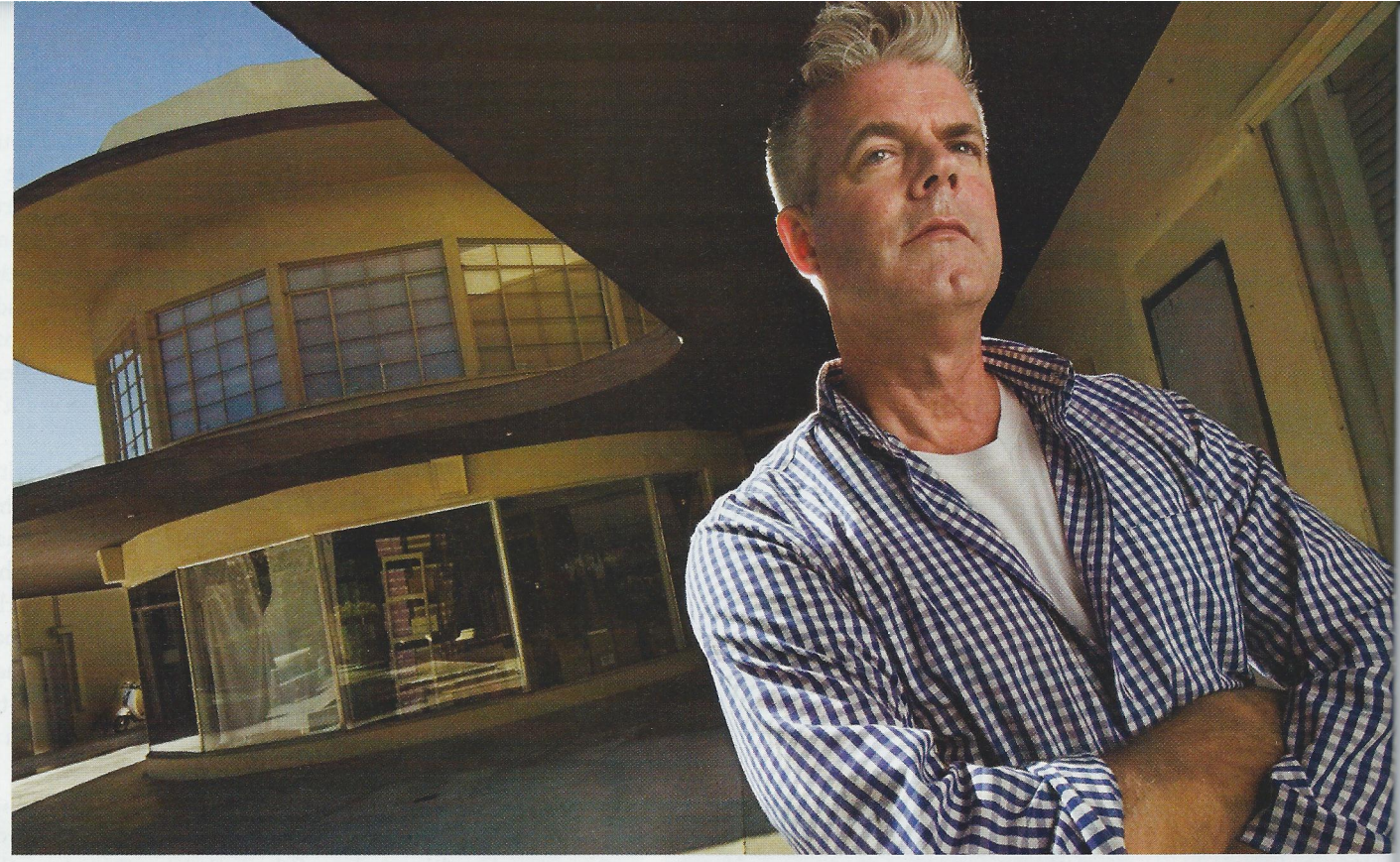
Floyd D'Angelo of the Aluminum Skylight and Specialty Corp. designed the house to turn slowly during the day—the movement powered by a photoelectric cell on the roof—so that the occupants never had to stare directly into the glare of the sun. The idea didn't catch on: The house sat vacant for nearly three decades before Butler restored it, revealing the original light blue paint on the interior and installing a new motor that spins the house—fast. It's a giddy 15-second ride, I learn, to stand inside and see the desert moving as the house does a quarter-rotation.

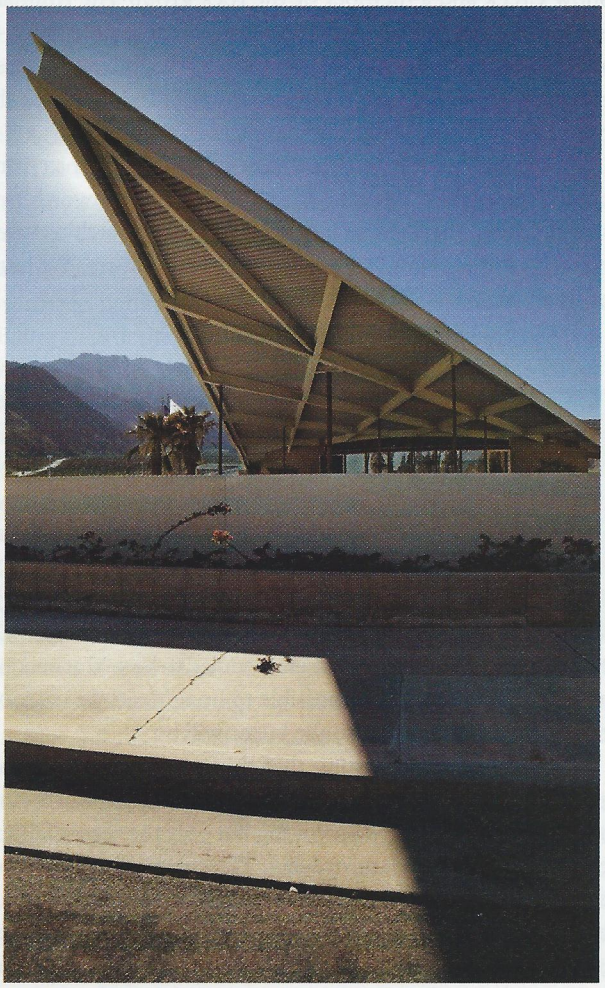
Local legend has it that the Beatles were on tour in Los Angeles in 1965 and came out to see Eric Burdon, a resident of Snow Creek and a member of the rock group The Animals. Supposedly, the Beatles spent a few days partying in the house—a selling point for Butler. He even named the four, sage-green carpeted stools near the fireplace (cleverly designed into the house's center post) after the members of the band.

We stand outside, the north face of Mt. San Jacinto rising behind us, and I ask Butler why this structure is worth preserving. "You'd never say this was a great piece of architecture," he says. "But you would argue that this is a great creative burst of imagination. And *that* needs to be saved."

Butler is typical of Palm Springs preservationists, a tight-knit group that came together in 1998 to save Frey's Tramway gas station (now the city's visitors center) from demolition. Naturally, there have been failures: In 2002, Neutra's Maslon House was bought at auction and razed overnight. On May 13, the Kaufmann House is scheduled to be sold at auction, and though it is nearly impossible to imagine its destruction, concern lingers about who the buyer will be.

"People find it shocking that this is the mecca of modernism, and that we have preservation woes," says Palm Springs tour guide Robert Imber, invoking not only the recent failures but also the current controversies. The concern is about more than just the buildings themselves. Architects here tended to build low and incorporate the desert landscape into their designs. Replacing too many buildings with unsympathetic contemporary designs, or cramming too much new development





William Kopelk, president of the Palm Springs Preservation Foundation, at the threatened Town and Country Center; the soaring canopy of the old Tramway gas station (left)

around them, risks altering the character of Palm Springs. And that, say preservationists, puts at risk the tourism revenue the modernist revival has generated.

Imber, wearing a Panama hat and a wisp of a silver goatee, gives me a tour one afternoon of a threatened site: Town and Country, a collection of shops in the middle of downtown, the epicenter of the controversy. Built in 1948, Town and Country is one of the last remaining works in Palm Springs by noted architects A. Quincy Jones and Paul R. Williams. Midday on a holiday weekend, the plaza is empty. So are the glass storefronts, some of which still have the names of former tenants: Maxwell Security, Titian Blonde. "It's a forsaken, forgotten place as the town booms," says Imber.

Developer Wessman has proposed razing Town and Country to construct a 10-building complex that would include a hotel, office space, stores, and residences—a plan that would also incorporate the site of the Desert Fashion Plaza, a vacant mall across the street. Town and Country would be torn down in part to make way for a road that would be a "view corridor" between the Spa Resort Casino to the east and the Palm Springs Art Museum to the west.

As part of Modernism Week, the Palm Springs Preservation Foundation solicited plans to redevelop the downtown area. Doug Hudson, a Palm Springs architect, sub-

mitted a design that would save most of Town and Country for adaptive use, shifting the proposed road to a new location. "The question is, Can we find a way to convince the city and hopefully Wessman that the property can be integrated into the overall master plan?" says Peter Moruzzi, chair of the Palm Springs Modern Committee.

Wessman has also proposed a four-story structure that would wrap around two sides of his 1960 office building, the former Santa Fe Savings and Loan, designed by E. Stewart Williams. "To cocoon this beautiful free-standing, almost Grecian temple-like structure in some horrible contemporary and inappropriate design," says Moruzzi, "would destroy the setting."

Michael Braun, vice president of the Wessman Development Corp., declined to comment for this story. In previous interviews, he and Wessman have argued that they are bringing economic development and tax dollars to Palm Springs, as well as retailers who can compete with malls in surrounding cities. They point to a previous master plan, never implemented, that Williams helped draft for downtown Palm Springs in the 1960s. It included buildings as tall as six stories. Density, they say, was part of the plan all along.

Opponents to Wessman's plans respond that there is a place for density, and that progress and preservation aren't mutually exclusive. "We're not against growth, we're pro-intelligent growth," says William Kopelk, president of the Palm Springs Preservation Foundation. "We just want these structures to be saved," he says. "The way to approach this is to maintain the village atmosphere that this place has had for so long."

On the last day of my trip I meet the star of Modernism Week, Donald Wexler, at his old home, which was recently purchased by Daniel Giles, a former fashion industry executive from San Francisco. Workers are hammering away, putting the finishing touches on a restoration and renovation, as Wexler sits under a grapefruit tree on the patio and tells me how he built the house. It was spring 1956 and his wife, Lynn, was pregnant and due in September. A doctor told Wexler that he had two choices: Get Lynn out of Palm Springs for the summer or get her into an air-conditioned house. Wexler took out a loan, made drawings and got them approved, and within three months had built the house—a simple post-and-beam structure—around a three-ton air-conditioner ("a monster," he says, that has since been replaced). The house cost less than $15,000 and at 1,200 square feet was so big that the Wexlers put a Ping-Pong table in the living room for the first two years.

Wexler considers that era the golden age of architecture in Palm Springs. "We had no fear," he says, his voice rising. "We played around with tilt-up and post-tension and prestretched and every type of construction there was. Nobody was worried about, 'Are we going to be sued?' Or, 'We've got to cover our fanny.'"

Indicative of that spirit were the experimental steel-and-glass houses—cheap and easy to assemble—he designed for developer Bob Alexander. With funding from U.S. Steel, they built seven models in 1962, starting at $13,000, on the north side of Palm Springs. In the end, bureaucratic snags and the rising price of steel derailed the project, and those seven houses—the only ones built—stand as reminders of a revolution that could have been.

Palm Springs changed when national firms began getting projects in the 1970s, Wexler says, bringing in out-of-towners wearing ties and carrying briefcases. Then, in 1993, Jim Moore, creative director of *GQ* magazine, bought one of the steel houses—rundown, much like the surrounding neighborhood—and did a complete restoration. "It was a time warp; it was amazing," says Wexler. "It was the house exactly as it had been 40 years ago. The best thing about it is that the whole neighborhood has changed."

The revival has attracted people like Daniel Giles, who says he bought Wexler's house because "it's good design, and it also has a soul. You can't keep tearing down and building new."

Giles says he pored over the original plans with Wexler because he didn't want to ruin the integrity of the house. But he did want to leave his own imprint: a new paint color, tweaks to the floor plan. It's an approach that might make some purists a tad uneasy, given that Palm Springs has seen so many exacting restorations that take into account every last sliding-door handle. Giles says his changes—such as adding a window in a former bedroom (now his office) that offers a view of the pool—are sympathetic to Wexler's vision. Wexler himself admits no qualms: "I am just delighted that someone cares enough to do these things. I know some architects, they object to people changing anything in their homes. I just feel if someone lives in it, they have to be comfortable in it."

Before he leaves, Wexler, slowed a little by time but as busy as ever, stands by the pool, where his sons learned to swim. "I really enjoyed living here," he says, his gaze a little distant. "I didn't realize it at the time, but I enjoyed living here." He looks at his watch and realizes it's time to go, and Giles walks him to his car—the older architect leaving his work to the new generation tasked with preserving it.

Palm Springs was named a Distinctive Destination by the National Trust for Historic Preservation in 2006. For a handy guide to some of our favorite sites in the famed desert city, visit PreservationNation.org/magazine.