

# Donald Wexler Home Honored

## Late architect's original residence in Palm Springs headed for double historic status

BY ADRIENE BIONDO | NOVEMBER 12, 2021 | EICHLER NETWORK CA-MODERN MAGAZINE



The former residence of master architect Donald Wexler (above) may have missed being included in *Art & Architecture* magazine's famous Case Study House program, but the 1955 house (pictured above from 1958) is finally being honored 65 years later with a double dose of historic status that follows a renewal project. All vintage photos: courtesy Gary Wexler

Though late master architect Donald Wexler is best known for the seven landmark mid-century modern steel homes he built with the Alexander Construction Company in Palm Springs, his own unique, self-designed residence there also recently reached center stage, preserved and protected with double historic status.

"This house demonstrates how design works today, 50 years later," said the late architectural photographer Julius Shulman in 2006. "It's magnificent...it works beautifully."

Shulman also remarked at the time that he found it unfortunate that the Wexler residence—built in 1955 on East Verbena Drive in the Ruth Hardy Park neighborhood of Palm Springs—had not originally been included in *Art & Architecture* magazine's famous Case Study House program, which ran from 1945 until 1966.

After Wexler's wife, Marilyn, died in the late 1980s, Wexler continued living in the house until 1993, when he sold it to a landscape architect and moved to a condo in Deepwell Ranch. The house went through a couple of other owners, and some modifications were made. In 2015, Joseph Mantello purchased the home, joined later by partner Paul Marlow.



Living room, circa 1958.

"The latest owners decided they wanted to have the house included in the local [historic] registry," explains Steven Keylon, Vice President of the Palm Springs Preservation Foundation.

Historian Peter Moruzzi completed a National Register bid in 2019, a multiple property nomination of Wexler designs that included the Wexler residence. Two years later, Keylon began authoring a local historic-designation nomination for the Wexler residence.

"Qualifying at a local level offers tighter protections that would preserve not only the spirit of the design but its original features," says Keylon. "And if a subsequent owner wanted to do something insensitive, then we could raise any issues for review."



The Wexler residence under construction, 1954.

Local designation also allows homeowners to enlist the benefits of the Mills Act Program, a contract that offers property tax relief in exchange for restoration, rehabilitation, and maintenance of their historic properties.

Keylon began research of the property in spring 2021, submitting his draft to Ken Lyon, Preservation Officer for the City of Palm Springs. After setting up site visits for the



Board, Lyon wrote up a recommendation from the City. The Historic Site Preservation Board unanimously approved the Class 1 Resource Nomination in October. Next it goes before the City Council.



Architect Donald Wexler, circa 1950s.



Marilynn and Donald Wexler in front of their new home, circa 1955.

Wexler, who originally had apprenticed for two years with architect Richard Neutra after college graduation in 1950, then joined the office of architect William Cody, an influential architect of Palm Springs' desert modern style. It was there that Wexler met Richard Harrison, his future partner, who had been working as a draftsman.

In 1953, Wexler opened his own office and married Marilyn Dawn Maidman. The couple rented an apartment in the Warm Sands area of Palm Springs, but after Marilyn became pregnant, Wexler bought a vacant land parcel, which he designed and finished by the time their first son was born.

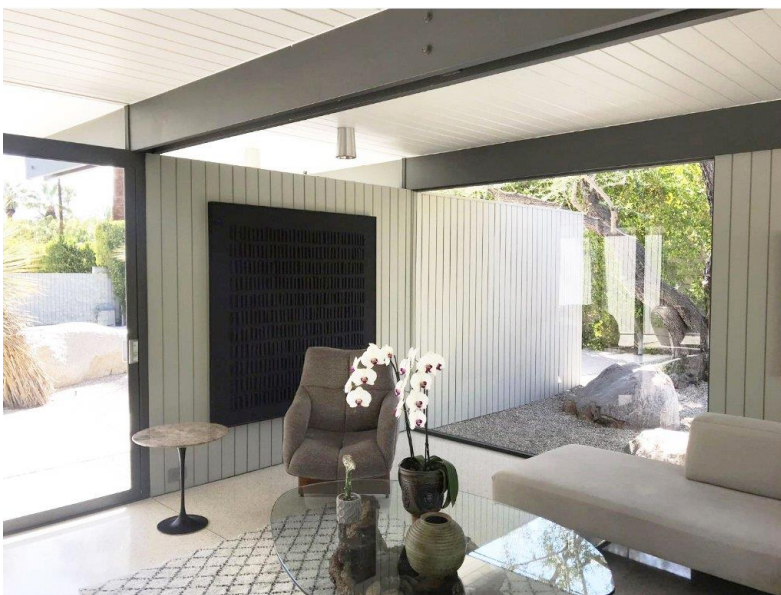
"Wexler designed the home knowing that more than likely it would expand over time," Keylon points out. "And the post-and-beam architecture allowed for that, since none of the interior beams were load-bearing."



Rear of the former Wexler residence today. Photo: Steven Keylon

According to Wexler's son Gary, his father liked to use new products, and "that's why he got interested in steel," Gary stated in the nomination. Also, in the Wexler residence, "all the walls were clad in [what was then] a brand-new material called Texture One-Eleven, now known as T1-11." Made from Douglas fir, T1-11's distinct spacing and lines resulted in a sleek, modern look.

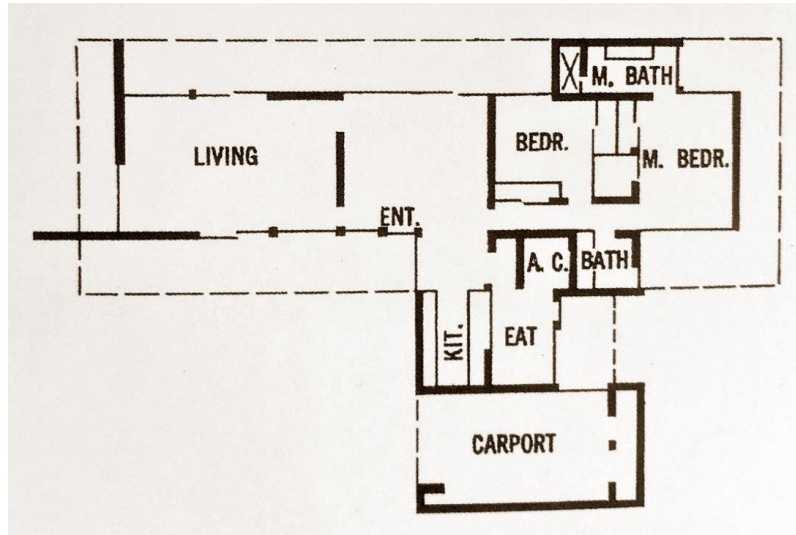
One of the home's owners who followed Wexler began restoring and rehabilitating the house in 2008. "What's interesting and important about this," says Keylon, "is that they brought in Lance O'Donnell, who had apprenticed with Wexler and knew Wexler's style well, a fine architect himself. He and Wexler then collaborated on the restoration of the house."



Living room area of the former Wexler residence today. Photo: Steven Keylon

For that project, Wexler, who passed away in 2015, was able to unify everything, hide ductwork underground, and pour terrazzo floors throughout. He hired Tony Dalu to design the interior and exterior landscape, with a plan that respected the desert and consisted of decomposed granite, which at the time was an unusual material choice.

"Changes for the renewal project were overseen by Wexler, so it shows his hand and represents his work," Keylon adds. "It's amazing to have the same architect come back 50 years later and collaborate on such a project." The Palm Springs City Council's final vote on the Wexler residence's Class 1 nomination is expected in the next few months.



The floor plan as designed, 1954. Note the entry opens onto a large den, with adjacent living room.