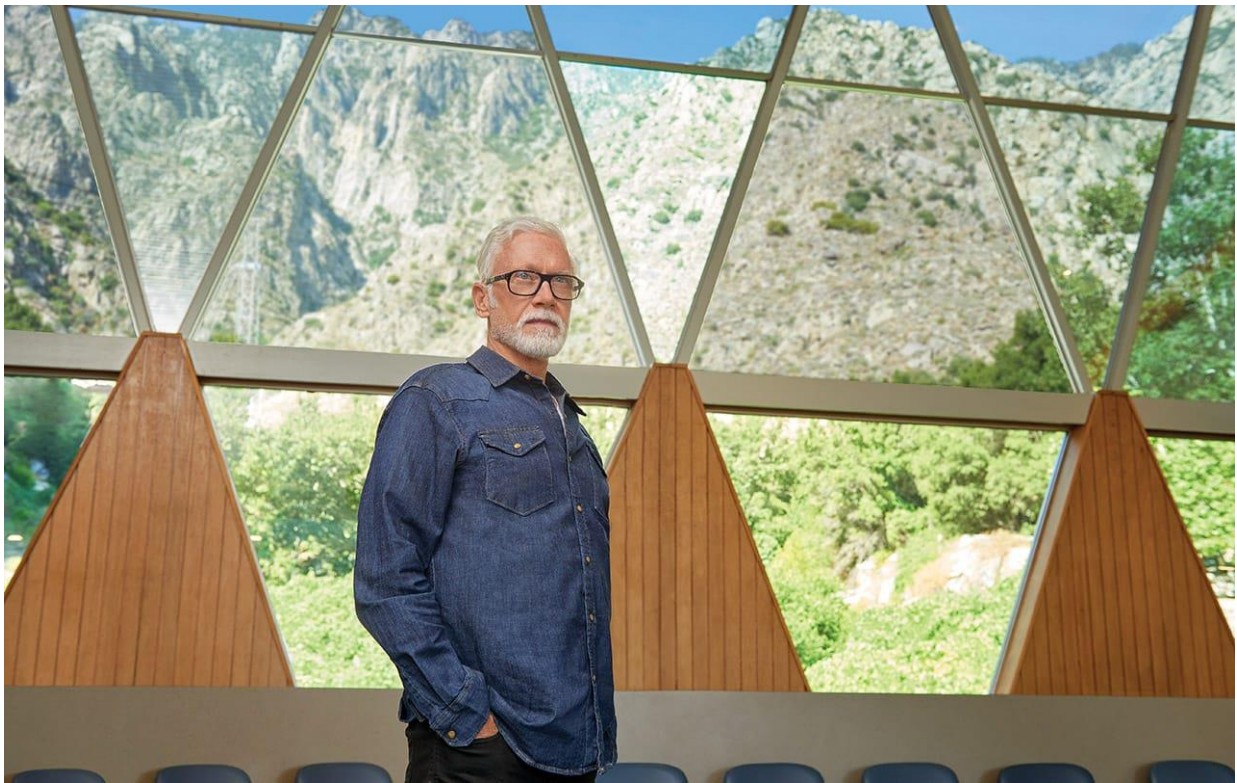


Brad Dunning Honored for Curating Albert Frey Architecture Retrospective

The Palm Springs Modern Committee will recognize Dunning at the 2024 Architectural Preservation Awards at the Palm Springs Art Museum.

Palm Springs Life | October 3, 2024

Story by Ronald Ahrens



Brad Dunning stands inside Palm Springs Aerial Tramway's Valley Station, completed in 1963 and designed by Albert Frey in collaboration with Robson Chambers and John Porter Clark.

PHOTO BY ANDREW ECCLES

In 1990, Brad Dunning came across a book review of *Albert Frey, Architect*, by Joseph Rosa. He studied the pictures and thought, *I've got to find out more about this*. Dunning lived in Los Angeles then. He wrote a letter to Frey in Palm Springs, and two days later, the phone rang. In his Swiss-German accent, the Master introduced himself and said, "I

want to thank you for your nice letter, and if you'd like to come up, I'd love to show you the house."

Thirty-four years later, Dunning showed Frey to the world in the retrospective *Albert Frey: Inventive Modernist* at the Palm Springs Art Museum Architecture and Design Center, Edwards Harris Pavilion. The exhibition closed in August after eight busy months and more than 15,000 visitors.

"Brad was one of the earliest people to be promoting modernism in the desert," says Courtney Newman, president of the Palm Springs Modern Committee. "He's an amazing designer, and his exhibit was so thorough and complete, like everything he does."

Dunning previously presented *The Modern Chair* at the Architecture and Design Center, so it was natural for Louis Grachos, the former director and chief executive of the art museum, to tap him for the Frey exhibition.

"I wish I could do the director's cut and a larger version," Dunning says. Still, its elements included everything from Frey's license plate, which reads "ALUMI," a nod to a material he loved, to architectural scale models of Frey structures by Bijan Fahimian, photos by Julius Shulman, and one of Frey's signature suspended table





Vignettes from *Albert Frey: Inventive Modernist* at the Architecture and Design Center.

PHOTOS BY GUILLAUME GOUREAU, COURTESY PALM SPRINGS ART MUSEUM

Besides having been personally acquainted with Frey, Dunning had written about him and accumulated a vast knowledge of the architect. Further research in the Architecture and Design Center's own archives and at the University of California, Santa Barbara, supported the exhibition. For the early papers, he went to Williamsburg, Virginia, where Frey's first American employer, A. Lawrence Kocher, undertook restoration projects at the end of his career.

Frey artifacts came from Dunning's collection as well as other private sources. The curator edited a companion book on Frey, also titled *Albert Frey: Inventive Modernist*, and promoted the exhibition in events such as a Modernism Week symposium.

In a sense, Dunning has been curating since he was 10 years old, living in a suburb of Memphis and keeping a scrapbook of what he calls "well-defined" examples of architecture. He arrived in Hollywood at age 17 and was very involved in the punk music scene. He went on to write about design for *The New York Times*, *Vanity Fair*, and *Vogue*, which led

to a design-critic role at *GQ* in the 1990s. In the mid-'90s, he settled in Palm Springs and landed important projects as a designer, including advising Palm Springs Art Museum on the restoration of Frey House II. "It was just this incredible, preserved, midcentury ghost town," he recalls of his move to the desert. "And I thought, *Of all places to be!*" To be a curator, for example.

Adam Lerner, executive director of the Palm Springs Art Museum who succeeded Grachos, puts it this way: "Working with Brad on this exhibition was different from working with other guest curators because he is more than an expert. He is a believer."

Frey, an international figure, was involved in more than 500 projects in the desert. "That's why I focused quite a bit on his relationship with Corbusier [and] Kocher. I had two [gallery] walls of his work on the East Coast. People only think about him being in Palm Springs. I love this **Palm Springs School**," Dunning says, "I think Frey stands out from that school on an international level."

If, as Dunning says, it was "a real twist of fate" that brought Frey to Palm Springs, *Albert Frey: Inventive Modernist* makes the case that the same could be said of the curator.



PHOTO BY ANDREW ECCLES

MARK YOUR CALENDAR

The Palm Springs Modern Committee will honor Brad Dunning with the Curator Award on Oct. 19 at the 2024 Architectural Preservation Awards. For tickets and additional information, visit psmodcom.org.