

Palm Springs Modern Committee Awards Architect Susan Secoy Jensen for Preservation Efforts

She came to Southern California 40 years ago with the dream of preserving midcentury architecture.

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Story by Site Staff



Secoy Architects restored the 345 Glass House, designed by Carl Droppers in 1965, in Brea, Ohio.

PHOTO COURTESY SUSAN SECOY JENSEN

A day after receiving her bachelor's degree in architecture from Kent State University in Ohio, Susan Secoy Jensen embarked on a cross-country road trip to Southern California, where, as a child on vacation, she first discovered midcentury modern design.

Armed with a portfolio and lofty goals, she was determined to find work as an architect. She landed at an architecture firm and, in the mid-1990s,

earned a master's in architecture from UCLA. Her goal was within reach. But she had little idea what lay ahead — or the multitude of Palm Springs buildings she would come to save.

Today, Secoy Jensen is one of the most respected architects and preservation consultants in Southern California. Her firm, Secoy Architects Inc., works to rescue historic buildings from demolition, specializing in the design of midcentury modern structures and adaptive reuse projects, both residential and commercial.

One ambitious project was the restoration of Kaptur Plaza, formally named Tahquitz Plaza, designed by Hugh Kaptur and erected in 1977. “It had been acquired by a developer, and it took a village to restore it,” she says. She served as the architect of record and prevented its demolition. In 2019, it received a Preservation Design Award for Restoration from the California Preservation Foundation.



Secoy Jensen poses on the stairs of a completed residential project, one of the first homes in Southridge, originally designed by the local team of Patten & Wild.

PHOTO BY ANDREW ECCLES

“Now it’s a thriving piece of architecture,” Secoy Jensen says, “and it has an energy there that the community could have lost.”

As with many of her projects, Secoy Jensen stayed true to the integrity of the property's original design. In fact, she met with Kaptur to walk the site and discuss the specific materials he had used. "Wood had decayed and showed evidence of harsh desert sun and water damage throughout the years," she says. "The developers had no interest in maintaining the material." So, she found a durable wood-like siding that mimicked the original.

Going to great lengths is what sets Secoy Jensen apart from other architects, her colleagues say. "So many architects are tempted to leave their own imprint or stamp on a restored project," says Steven Keylon, a landscape/architecture historian and vice president of the Palm Springs Preservation Foundation board of directors. "But Susan tries to understand the architects' design intent down to the materials they used."

Over the years, many preservation groups have availed themselves of Secoy Jensen's expertise. She is a member of the Palm Springs Architectural Advisory Committee and on the board of advisors of the **Palm Springs Preservation Foundation**. She even worked six years as a tour guide for Modernism Week's double-decker bus tour, and as a home tour curator and lecturer.

A renowned community organizer, Secoy Jensen advocates for the preservation of significant architectural works. "She is really able to understand how adaptive and reuse buildings can be beautiful and economical," says Beth Edwards Harris, who holds a doctorate in architectural history from UCLA. "She's rallied to show people that these projects were feasible and functional and that the buildings should be allowed to remain in the community, because they make up a community's identity."

Long associated with midcentury modern architecture and design, Palm Springs' spirit lives on through Secoy Jensen's work. "Not every architect is trained as a community advocate," Harris points out. "This is

something you need to have a passion for. And Susan has become a student of the community. She is the best I have ever worked with.”

When asked if she has accomplished all she’s set out to achieve, Secoy Jensen says she feels inspired by the recognition and wants to continue restoring significant architecture. Funding efforts are underway to begin construction at Palm Springs American Legion Post 519 (1947, John Porter Clark and Albert Frey), and while a portion of the Town & Country Center (1948, Paul R. Williams and A. Quincy Jones) has been revitalized, she has set her sights on its courtyard and other neglected structures. “It is satisfying to have one’s work acknowledged by one’s peers, but this is just the beginning of my next chapter. As architects, we get better as we get older.”



A rendering shows Secoy Jensen’s plans for the exterior of Palm Springs American Legion Post 519.



Secoy Jensen served as architect of record and prevented the demolition of the 1977 Kaptur Plaza, also known as Tahquitz Plaza.

MARK YOUR CALENDAR

The Palm Springs Modern Committee will honor Susan Secoy Jensen, AIA, with the Excellence in Preservation Architecture Award on Oct. 19 at the 2024 Architectural Preservation Awards. For tickets and additional information, visit psmodcom.org.