

Palm Springs Life

Preserving a Legacy

Palm Springs Preservation Foundation celebrates architectural designer Herbert W. Burns with launch of tribute journal.

LYDIA KREMER / MAY 15, 2018 / [CURRENT DIGITAL](#), [MODERNISM](#)



Gayle Burns relaxes poolside at the Town & Desert Apartments in 1947. PHOTOGRAPH BY JULIUS SHULMAN, J. PAUL GETTY TRUST. GETTY RESEARCH INSTITUTE, LOS ANGELES (2004.R.10)

Herbert W. Burns started a renaissance in Palm Springs without even knowing it.

The architect's 1955 Village Manor Inn was reinvented in 2001 as the Orbit In by owners/entrepreneurs Christy Eugenis and Stan Amy, beginning an architectural preservation revolution of Palm Springs' modernist architecture. This wave of preservation spawned what is now a global appreciation for the city's architecture through annual events like Modernism Week.

Burns, who passed away in 1988 at age 91, is a part of a small architectural fraternity that includes the likes of William Krisel, Donald Wexler, E. Stewart Williams, Hugh Kaptur, and Albert Frey, who are attributed to launching the Desert Modernism movement in Palm Springs.

To celebrate Burns' contribution to Palm Springs' enviable architectural cache of modernism, the Palm Springs Preservation Foundation devoted a full weekend celebration in March. The weekend featured presentations as well as interior and exterior home tours of several of Burns' residential and commercial buildings

The Burns Weekend festivities included the launch of an 84-page tribute journal, *The Design of Herbert W. Burns*, and a presentation by the author, Steven Keylon, a Palm Springs Preservation Foundation board member and landscape historian.



Herbert and Gayle Burns' living room at the Town & Desert featured an enormous plate glass window, which blurred the boundary between indoors and outdoors. PHOTOGRAPH BY JULIUS SHULMAN, © J. PAUL GETTY TRUST. GETTY RESEARCH INSTITUTE, LOS ANGELES (2004.R.10)

Keylon's book is among the most comprehensive and scholarly overview of Burns' life and career to date. While he never became a licensed architect, Burns was enormously talented and had multiple careers — a lighting designer/fabricator, stockbroker, building contractor, and finally an architectural designer — earning the name “charismatic chameleon” by Keylon.



Architectural designer Herbert W. Burns poses next to his custom-bodied two-seater 1951 Cadillac, parked outside his Town & Desert Apartment Hotel. PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY BURNS FAMILY ARCHIVES

Keylon lectures on cultural landscapes and was involved with the Los Angeles Conservancy for 12 years before relocating to Palm Springs two years ago. He and his partner, metal sculptor John De la Rosa, live in a Herbert Burns home that was on the

weekend home tour, the Slayman-Bock Residence in Deepwell Estates, which they have restored.

“We moved to Palm Springs for that house,” Keylon explains. “We used to visit Palm Springs often, and we went to an Open House at that house.” When they returned home to Los Angeles they kept thinking about that house and decided to make the leap.

The weekend celebration concluded with a cocktail party at the Burns-designed Hideaway (originally the Town & Desert Apartments), the companion property of the Orbit In. Described as the “apartments of tomorrow” when it opened in 1947, the complex received national attention in the May 1948 issue of Architectural Record in an article entitled “California Hide-Away, Motel Style,” which featured photographs by Julius Shulman. The Hideaway has become a local favorite since its renovation in 2002 and was designated a Class 1 Historic Site in 2014.



Vintage snapshot of the Village Manor Apartment Hotel (now the Orbit In).
PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY PEYO MICHAELS

The Herbert Burns Weekend helped raise funds for Palm Springs Preservation Foundation’s educational mission. They have given the Palm Springs Art Museum’s Architecture and Design Center a \$10,000 grant to help catalog the archives of Kaptur. “This is a passion project for us,” Keylon noted. PSPF will honor Kaptur next March during a similar weekend celebration.

The salute to Burns created a family reunion of sorts as Keylon was able to track down Cindy Simpson and Sharon Varnes, along with their brother Gary, Burns’ grandchildren from his first marriage to Mildred Burns, as well as Jim Henry, his great grandson.

“When he passed away we found his drawings and blueprints, [but] we never realized he was so popular,” Simpson says. They shared those archival documents, including photos, with Keylon for the book.

“I [had] never met him,” Varnes says. “Cindy had met him several times but I feel like I really got to know him through this event.”

“PSPF did such a fantastic job taking care of us, it was just amazing,” Varnes continues. “Steven taught us so much; we look at architecture different now. I have so much more respect to learn how he was self-taught and self-made. He was such a fantastic man. It was a memory that will live forever.”

The Design of Herbert W. Burns tribute journal is priced at \$20 and available for purchase at pspreservationfoundation.org/journals.html.



Herbert Burns' Late Moderne detailing at the Town & Desert Apartment Hotel, 1947.
PHOTOGRAPH BY JULIUS SHULMAN, © J. PAUL GETTY TRUST.
GETTY RESEARCH INSTITUTE, LOS ANGELES (2004.R.10)