



MOJAVE MODERN

A PRESERVATIONIST KEEPS IT COOL IN THE DESERT

WRITTEN BY LYNN MORGAN PHOTOGRAPHY BY ETHAN KAMINSKY

"I couldn't even pronounce Neutra when I first moved here!" laughs William Kopelk. That changed when he became president of the Palm Springs Preservation Foundation, an organization dedicated to protecting the architectural heritage of the desert resort town he calls home. During the 10 years that San Francisco-born Kopelk has lived in Palm Springs, he not only learned how to pronounce Neutra, he also became an aficionado of his work and of the other mid-century modernist masters—E. Stewart Williams, William Krisel, Albert Frey and John Lautner. Their work defines the now-iconic Palm Springs style that's still so fresh today.

Kopelk, a landscape architect and the head of his own firm, Inside Outside Design, is the ideal caretaker for Palm Springs' architectural legacy. Trained at the University of Oregon, Kopelk worked as a landscape architect at Harvard. "It was enlightening and frustrating at the same time," he recalls wryly. "It taught me a lot about working within an environment that is very devoted to its history and very protective of it." After completing his Harvard project, Kopelk remained in Cambridge, joining The Architects' Collaborative, the firm founded by Walter Gropius, father of the Bauhaus. Kopelk's work took him to the Middle East, designing projects in Kuwait, Baghdad and Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. "It was an important lesson in creating architecture in harmony with its environment and culture," he recalls. "I had to orient mosques so they would be facing toward Mecca and make them the center of the civic design." Kopelk says his work in the Middle East was excellent preparation for life in Palm Springs. "It's a Zone 13 climate, too," he chuckles.

In Palm Springs, Kopelk has worked vigorously to restore and renovate historic properties for owners of some of the city's most extraordinary architectural treasures. "I worked on the Kasden house, a Richard Neutra design," he recalls. "I have done work on Kriesel, Cody and Wexler houses as well." Ever passionate about the area's architecture, Kopelk wants visitors and residents alike to appreciate and enjoy the history of Palm Springs, irony and all. "A lot of people are attracted to the 'martini modern' vibe," he says. "Turquoise, boomerang-shaped coffee tables, martinis and the Rat Pack. That's the slightly kitschy, ironic aspect. It's fun and playful." He believes that preservation should not mummify buildings or try to convert them into static museum vignettes, but rather it should allow the structures to continue to have a useful, vital existence adapted to contemporary needs. "I like the work that Kelly Wearstler has done with the Viceroy," he points out. "The Kor Group bought the old Estrella hotel and restored it in the spirit of the Hollywood Regency style and it looks fresh and elegant. It's a wonderful example of adaptive re-use: keeping the original style and flavor." Palm Springs Modernism is just one more way for William Kopelk and the Palm Springs Preservation Foundation to share with a wider audience the history and architecture of the city they love.