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Back to the Future

Thanks to an increasing number of bold developers and industryites, Palm Springs Modernism is no longer a thing of the past

By Laura Meyers

They have the hallmarks of mid-century desert homes: butterfly rooflines on low-slung pavilions, open-plan post-and-beam construction, expansive glass windows to capture mountain views and, of course, the all-important pool. One enclave's homes bear the names "Brandy Alexander" and "Cosmopolitan." In another, street names pay homage to Palm Springs' Atomic Age architectural masters: Neutra Street, Lautner Lane, Wexler Way, Cody Court. These are not classic homes erected circa 1950, however, but brand-new abodes constructed this year.

NEW IN TOWN

Call it "Palm Springs neo-Modernism" or "post-and-beam redux." Or call it the hottest architecture trend to hit the modernist-centric Palm Springs in years. Indeed, dozens of developers and architects are churning out individual custom homes and entire housing tracts in nearly perfect re-creations of 1950s style.

Lit agent Jim Lenny of Jack Lenny Associates, one of the first showbizzers to take advantage of the trend, is currently building a modernist steel-and-glass villa designed with the help of Modernist Modular Homes, a company that derives its signature style from vintage Pierre Koenig Case Study Houses. "So many people want the modernist look," says Patrick Seabol of Modernist Modular Homes. "They want a wide-open plan and walls of glass. It's very elegant."

Meanwhile, developers of the new gated community Alta will soon offer 67 semi-custom modernist lux-



RETRO CHIC Built by Modernist Modular Homes, agent Jim Lenny's custom home, above and right, in Palm Springs, fuses Case Study floor plans with Albert Frey's penchant for metal and glass.

ury homes, designed by award-winning architect Narendra Patel, in the \$1.5-million to \$2.5-million range. Patel, who cut his teeth working with emblematic modern architects Richard Neutra, William F. Cody and Donald Wexler, is known for designing modernist manses for clients like Goldie Hawn. "We are trying to capture that retro lifestyle," he says. "I don't believe that copying what was done 50 years ago is the right thing to do. However, this is a continuation and evolution of the same trend. I call it 'desert contemporary.'"



Modern Living Spaces, on the other hand, has been more liberal in its attempts to re-create developments in the manner of George and Robert Alexander, the famous father-son duo who helped initiate Palm Springs' modernist revolution in the 1950s and '60s. Their homes, which start as low as \$369,000, include interiors with terrazzo, cork or shag flooring, George Nelson light fixtures and



MODEL HOME Developers are borrowing designs from mod classics, including Neutra's Kaufmann house, above.

authentic Atomic Age exterior designs. And Contempo Homes, a company with four developments in the works, including the Royal Desert Palms Court, are using actual measurements of William Krisel-designed Alexanders. (Prices range from \$650,000 to \$1.5 million, depending on location.)



INTERPRETATION a winning design by Narendra Patel for the new 30-acre, gated enclave Alta

Not surprisingly, the trend doesn't sit well with locals, who groan about the dramatic rise in prices. After all, the cost for authentic mid-century homes in 1999 was about \$150,000 unrestored and \$250,000 to \$350,000 fixed up. Realtor Paul Kaplan, who specializes in mid-century Palm Springs homes and counts actor Andy Dick among his clients, says, "The weekend getaway that cost \$150,000 five years ago could easily cost \$750,000 today." And forget about spending less than a million in Vista Las Palmas (where, by comparison, Carl Wilson of Beach Boys fame paid \$200,000 for his Alexander in the late 1980s, and his son, L.A. realtor Jonah Wilson of Sotheby's, recalls, "my aunt paid \$176,000 for hers in 1995").

Homeowners can thank industryites, in part, for that inflation. While Palm Springs was the original backyard playground for the rich and famous during the studio system's Golden Era, the number of industryites buying first and second homes in the area skyrocketed in the 1990s and 2000s. For instance, "Unzipped" director Doug Keeve, whose latest film, "Seamless," recently showed at Tribeca, purchased and restored one of Wexler's iconic steel-and-glass demonstration houses in 1998. Music video/commercials producer Jeffrey Adkins was another early Fab Fifties renovator; more recently Bob Merlis, former president of Warner Records, and his partner, L.A.com CEO Lynda Keeler, purchased an Albert Frey-designed tract home.

Similarly, Maria Grasso, a development VP at the WB network, purchased and renovated a late-1950s Alexander tract home designed by Krisel, as has screenwriter Marcel Sarmiento and Andy Dick.

So it's no wonder that the newest thing under the desert sun is new construction of the same of thing. After all, say neo-mods, why buy something old when you can have something new — for less?