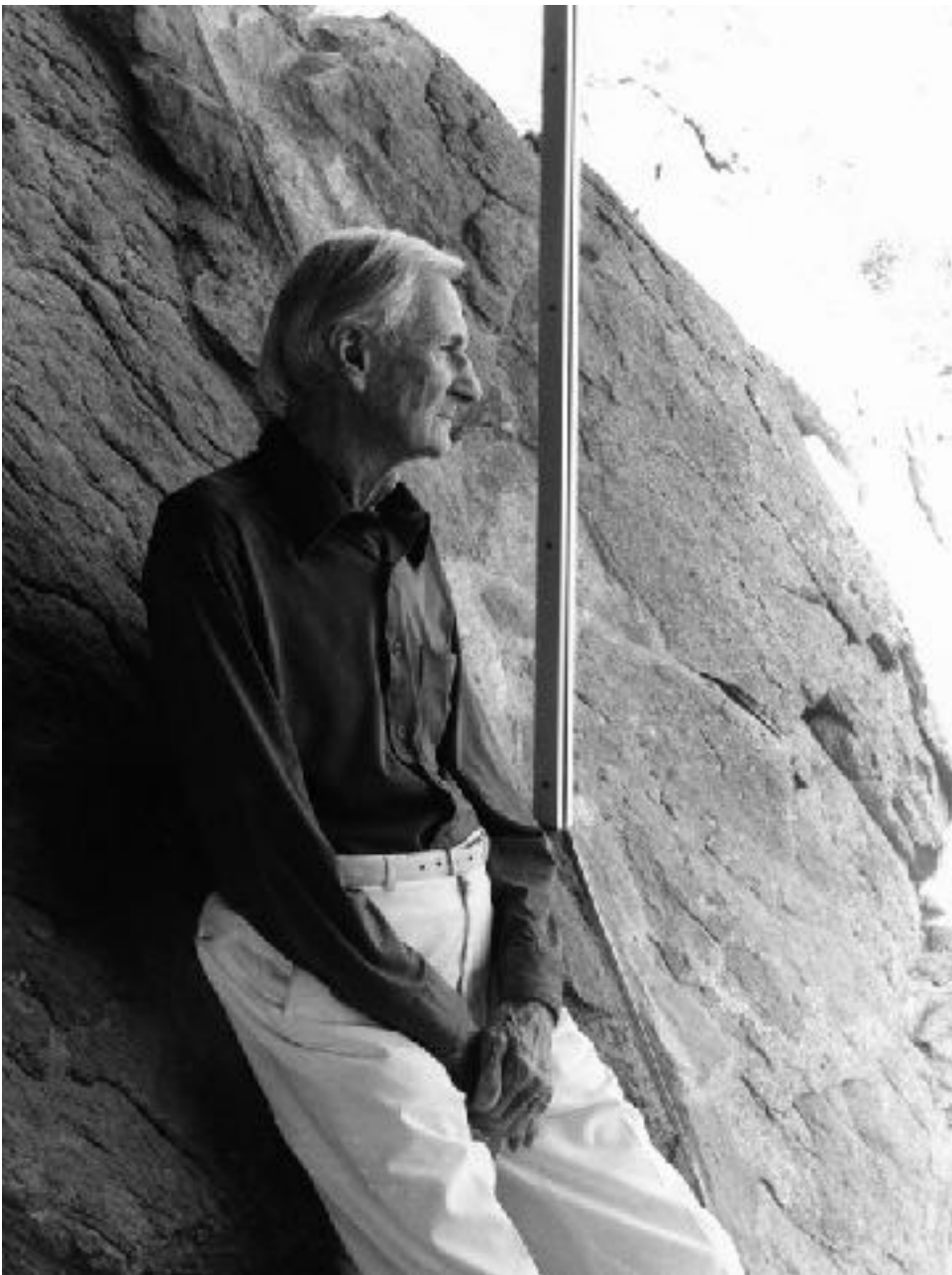


Albert Frey: Father of Desert Modernism's love-affair with the Coachella Valley

Tracy Conrad, Special to The Desert Sun Published 12:47 p.m. PT Feb. 16, 201



(Photo: Palm Springs Historical Society/Special to The Desert Sun)

That Palm Springs should be a mecca for modern architecture seems natural enough now. But a century ago it was unlikely, to say the least. Consider the appearance of a tiny article in the Limelight News on Nov. 10, 1934 which headlined with "Prominent Architect Visits Village."

It heralded the arrival of Albert Frey, "an associate of A. Lawrence Kocher, Editor of the Architectural Record published in New York City ... to be the house guest of Mr. & Mrs. Raymond R. Wilson and Dr. & Mrs. J.J. Kocher. Mr. Frey is reputed to be one of the first authorities and exponents of modern architecture. He is a graduate of the University of Geneva and did post graduate work in Architecture at the famed LeCorbusier in Paris."(sic)

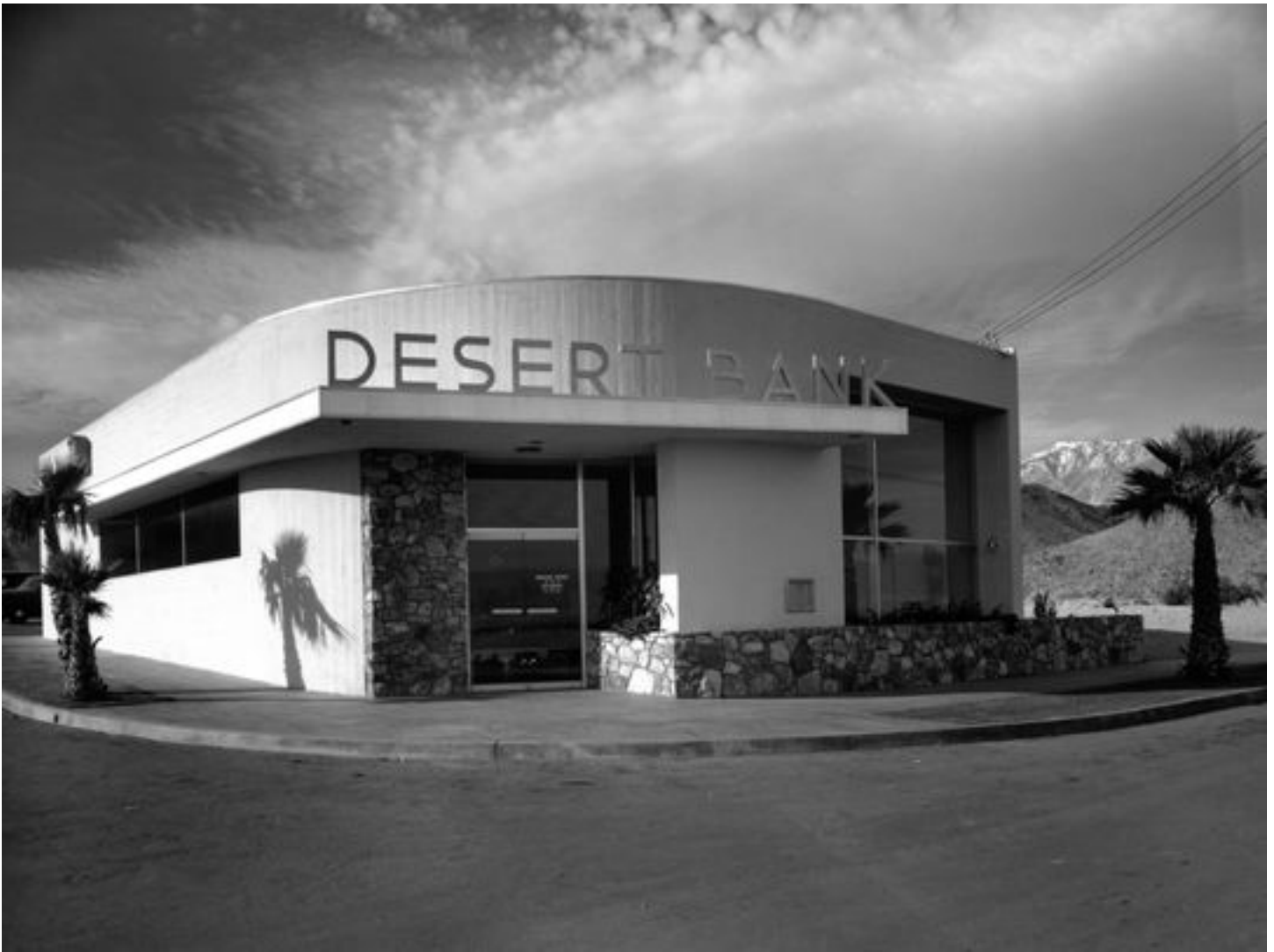
Frey had been in New York casting about for a job after completing the Aluminaire house. The Aluminaire had been a revolutionary idea, designed together with Kocher, and assembled modern living from readily available pre-made parts.

That seems quite natural now, too, but employing simple, industrial materials in their unadorned state was completely novel in the early 1930s. A. Lawrence Kocher wanted to help his Swiss friend, but fresh out of projects, sent him to the little village of Palm Springs to assist his brother, Dr. J.J. Kocher, by having Frey design the doctor's office building.

Frey arrived at his unusual destination, a whole continent away from the New York architecture scene, and became entranced.

The little town embraced him back. Over the next six decades, Frey would design dozens of buildings.

The forward-thinking desert community commissioned banks, churches, hospitals, a fire station, schools, civic buildings and of course a few houses.



Desert Bank, designed by Albert Frey, at 456 N. Palm Canyon Dr. (Photo: Palm Springs Historical Society/Special to The Desert Sun)

The breadth of Frey's projects is dazzling and now iconic. He designed the Palm Springs City Hall, the Tramway Valley Station and the North Shore Yacht Club at the Salton Sea (a man-made inland desert ocean, the most unlikely thing in the whole Coachella Valley).

By the spring of 1943, the *Limelight News* featured an article entitled "Frey Weekend Host" boasting that houseguests of Frey's were "Mr. & Mrs. Richard J. Neutra of Los Angeles." The article went on to explain the significance, "Mr. Neutra is the well-known architect so famous for his ultra-modern houses. He designed the Grace Lewis Miller modernistic house here a few years ago, which since has appeared in many architect magazines as an outstanding example of modern design."

As sophisticated and well-heeled visitors discovered the desert, they brought with them architects of world-renown. The biggest names in architecture were now making the difficult trek to the exotic desert.



Dining room of Tramway Valley Station. (*Photo: Palm Springs Historical Society/ Special to The Desert Sun*)

Frank Lloyd Wright tried for a desert commission from department store magnate Edgar Kaufmann, Wright's patron for his masterwork, Fallingwater. Losing out, even after planting cactus as a gift to Kaufmann, the commission went to Neutra, the master of the ultra-modern, instead. And Frey, advocating for those cutting-edge designs was always in the mix. (Frey designed a house almost next door for industrial designer Raymond Loewy.)

Soon there was a cadre of young, vital modernist architects in the desert, innovating and experimenting. In the 1930s, Harry Williams was summoned to the desert by his very important client Julia Carnell. Stewart Williams followed his father to Palm Springs after World War II. As the story goes, Stew was sitting in his office when Frank Sinatra happened in, eating an ice cream cone and asked him to design a house. Convinced that a Georgian pile with columns and lots of brick was the thing, Stew talked him into something more evocative of the desert surroundings and Mr. Sinatra agreed.



North Shore Yacht Club. *(Photo: Palm Springs Historical Society/Special to The Desert Sun)*



Clark and Frey Building (*Photo: Palm Springs Historical Society/Special to The Desert Sun*)

A new style was developing with the work of John Porter Clark, Donald Wexler, Ric Harrison, Bill Cody and Herbert Burns. Each interpreting, adding, stretching and helping the style evolve with Frey also continuing to refine.

The ultimate advocate for desert living, Frey wrote, “It is a most interesting experience to live in a wild, savage, natural setting,... but without losing contact with civilization due to the intellectual milieu of Palm Springs and the presence of visitors from all parts of the world. Moreover, the sun, the pure air, and the simple forms of the desert create perfect conditions for architecture.”

With the arrival of tens of thousands of visitors for Modernism Week, it feels like Albert Frey is again a weekend host and most vociferous advocate of desert living. That a Swiss modernist would have charted the course of desert architecture and become synonymous with it was certainly unlikely, but now seems entirely correct.

The Aluminaire House

The Aluminaire house was designed as a case study by architects A. Lawrence Kocher and Albert Frey in April 1931. Made of readily-available, donated materials and built in ten days, was the first all-metal house in the United States, and was assembled in the Grand Central Palace exhibition hall as part of the Architectural and Allied Arts Exhibition.

Some 100,000 people walked through it during the month-long exhibition. The following year the house was exhibited again at the Museum of Modern Art for the Architectural League of New York.



The Aluminaire House. (Photo: Palm Springs Historical Society/Special to The Desert Sun)

After the shows, the house was sold for \$1000 to Rockefeller Center architect, Wallace K. Harrison and assembled on his Long Island estate. The house suffered unsympathetic additions and when the estate was subdivided, it was disassembled and moved to the New York Institute of Technology's Islip campus and re-erected due to the efforts of Michael Schwarting and Frances Campani. The campus was subsequently closed and the house was once again disassembled and put into storage.

An attempt to reassemble it in Sunnyside Gardens in Queens, a 1930s neighborhood was met with opposition as the modernist design did not fit with the traditional brick houses. At Modernism Week in Palm Springs in 2014 Campani and Schwarting were lecturing on the house and a small group of Palm Springs residents thought it entirely correct that this very first example of Albert Frey's work should come to the desert and have since worked to move the Aluminaire house to Palm Springs.

The first "tiny" house is now in storage in the desert waiting to be reassembled.
