

## **Firm of Williams, Clark and Williams 1971-1982**

### **Palm Springs Desert Museum 1976 (now the Palm Springs Art Museum, extant)**

By the early 1970s, Palm Springs had grown sufficiently in size and stature to support a much larger cultural institution than the existing Desert Museum located in a small downtown building erected in 1958. In conceiving a replacement, the museum's director and board of trustees organized a fund-raising campaign that would allow for a robust program consisting of an art gallery, natural history museum, and performing arts center. In competing for the commission, Williams invited the trustees to tour Crafton Hills College, which had recently opened. Sufficiently impressed, the firm of Williams, Clark and Williams was given the job to complete the new museum.

Due to a two-story height limit in Palm Springs at the time, a subterranean level was necessary to accommodate the 75,000 square foot building planned for the site. The art gallery and natural history museum were to be raised above street level in consideration of security. Each would include space for both permanent installations and changing exhibitions. The core of the main floor was the orientation center—a grand space providing access to both galleries, which were housed in cubic volumes set at 90 degrees to the street. A staircase from the main floor leads to the lower level where the 433-seat theater was located as well as storage, workshops, and other spaces. The lower level also leads to the landscaped sculpture gardens.

Williams constructed the museum out of concrete mixed with Warmtone cement and several aggregates. Long expanses of concrete panels were hammered to expose the aggregate. For cladding, Williams sought a lightweight material with colors sympathetic to the adjacent mountainside. Following an extensive search, a lightweight volcanic cinder weighing one-fourth of regular stone was located in Clearlake, Inyo County, California. "The dramatic textural effects of his selected materials were sympathetic to the characteristics of the terrain, yet strengthened and distinguished the museum's presence—no small accomplishment given the power of the mountain. The drama of the materials was carried into the museum interior, where they add to the character of the open spaces."

A highly innovative structural system of post-tensioned high-strength steel cables that ran the length of

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cantilevered floor and roof beams was employed for seismic resistance and to support the high- ceilinged, column-free 60-foot span in the galleries, 80-foot span in the theater, and 100-foot span in the orientation center.

Hess summarizes the overall sense of the building:

*The Palm Springs Desert Museum is Williams's major civic monument. As at Crafton Hills College he used large, blocky forms; ... but once again Williams' skill of proportion comes into play. The solid, mostly windowless wings of the museum are lifted above sunken sculpture gardens, imparting a sense of visual lightness. The sunken gardens provide a variety of smaller outdoor spaces that also break down the apparent massiveness of the structure. Secondary wings jutting at an angle from the main façade are impressed with a layer of reddish-brown volcanic cinder cone; as always, Williams ties his building to the site by recalling the rugged textures and colors of the mountain immediately behind the museum. The Annenberg Theater on the below-grade level of the museum uses both curving concrete structural ribs and a thin skin of curving wood to reflect the organic shapes of Scandinavian design Williams had seen on his travels in the 1930s. Form, material, color, scale—the themes that he had been observing and mastering since his earliest studies in architecture unite in this building.*

In 1978, the Palm Springs Desert Museum was given a Special Award of Excellence from the Inland California Chapter of the American Institute of Architects.

By the early 1980s, more space was needed to display the museum's Western Art Collection. As a result, the museum's administrative functions were relocated to a new, separate building just north of the original building. Named the Marks Administration Building, it was designed by Williams and completed in 1981. Then, in 1993, a generous donation from interior designer Steven Chase helped fund a 15,000 square foot addition to the museum to house new galleries, a lecture hall, art storage and other utilitarian spaces. Williams came out of retirement to design the addition, which opened in 1996. "Cleverly, the original structure was designed to support the weight of a third floor, and fortunately, city building codes had evolved—there was now a 60-foot height limit. As if designed from the beginning, the expansion and modifications appear seamless and the museum has opened up, allowing site-lines which connect the divergent sections." The Palm Springs Desert Museum became the Palm Springs Art Museum in 2005.

Commented Williams of the museum when interviewed in 1986, "It certainly has become the center of Palm Springs cultural and social life. We're very proud of it. ... I think that's going to be the thing that maybe the Williams brothers are remembered for the longest in Palm Springs. It's certainly been our joy

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to do it and I think it will be there for a long long time after we're gone."

## **Preserving E. Stewart Williams' Architectural Legacy**

E. Stewart Williams, FAIA died in 2005 in Palm Springs. He was 96. The Palm Springs Art Museum's comprehensive 2014 exhibition "An Eloquent Modernist: E. Stewart Williams, Architect" and its associated catalog thoroughly documented Williams' interpretation of desert modernism as revealed in five decades of work. As noted, many of the architect's earliest works have been demolished—Bistonte Lodge, Oasis Hotel, Pepper Tree Inn, and Potter Clinic—the latter as recently as 2007. In 2009, a proposal to cocoon Williams' Santa Fe Federal Savings building with new construction was thwarted after a protracted battle by a vote of the City Council to designate the property as a local landmark. The building has been reborn as the Architecture and Design Center (ADC) of the Palm Springs Art Museum. When the Oasis Commercial Building was proposed for local landmark designation, the City Council chose to protect only the second story, leaving the ground floor vulnerable to inappropriate alterations. Fortunately, the most recent election cycle resulted in a new majority of preservation minded city council members and mayor. With Williams' archive safely housed at the Palm Springs Art Museum along with the consensus that the best of the architect's remaining work deserves protection, it is hoped that such preservation battles will be a thing of the past.

## **Conclusion**

The context associated with this Multiple Property Submission is "Architecture as environmental expression in the greater Coachella Valley 1946-1976." As has been shown, for E. Stewart Williams, FAIA "...it was the desert environment and a sense of professional responsibility to his clients that were the ultimate determinants of his architecture." ... "Williams took a non-doctrinaire approach to Modernism. He embraced a rational use of technology but did not let it override the expression of humanizing values conveyed through scale and natural materials."

*Williams was an exceptionally gifted architect, and if he had a greater appetite for publicity or was willing to practice on a larger stage, his reputation during his lifetime might have expanded outside California. To a great extent, this is also true of some of Williams's contemporaries, such as [Donald] Wexler, [John Porter] Clark, and William Cody. Only [Albert] Frey seems to have enjoyed a global reputation during his lifetime, and that may be more due to his European associations than to his raw talent. However, by staying in a developing community that encouraged his spirit of innovation, Williams was able to produce a remarkable body of work.*

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For his obituary in 2005, Elaine Woo of the Los Angeles Times wrote that Williams was, “a Palm Springs architect who reflected a love of modernism and the desert in houses and buildings that became landmarks of midcentury style.” She continued, “The last of his generation of Desert Modern architects, who included Albert Frey, William Cody and John Porter Clark, Williams helped define an aesthetic that embraced the informality of Palm Springs and stressed clean lines, indoor-outdoor living, and the use of glass and other artificial and natural materials.”

Scholar Lauren Weiss Bricker concluded: “Williams was a gentle, modest man who was quietly proud of his architectural accomplishments. He was a gifted writer who could articulate the poetry of his architecture without pretense or excessive embellishment.”

In the E. Stewart Williams tribute booklet published in 2005 by the Palm Springs Preservation Foundation, author and critic Michael Stern concluded:

*As one of the founding fathers of the Palm Springs Modern style, E. Stewart Williams brought a humanistic architecture to the spectacular desert landscape. With a career duration of 50 years (his last building was completed when he was 86 years old), the California desert is gifted with an abundance of his unique brand of Modernism—a mixture of natural and manmade materials, seamless interior/exterior flow, profuse warmth and a firm dedication to allow the power of the desert to inform much of his work.*

All of the buildings associated with E. Stewart Williams, FAIA that continue to meet registration requirements deserve the honor of inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places at the local level of significance under Criterion C.