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# A Modern Use for a Modernist Gem in Palm Springs

By:  
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*A rendering of the Palm Springs Art Museum Architecture and Design Center, Edwards Harris Pavilion. The museum is tentatively scheduled to open the fall of 2014.*

When Sidney Williams and the the Palm Springs Art Museum staff decided to invest in an old bank building downtown for a new architecture and design center, it helped that the museum and the bank already had something in common -- both were designed by the same Modernist architect.

E. Stewart Williams, who designed the Santa Fe Federal Savings and Loan building in 1961 and the museum in 1973, had a lasting impact on the look and feel of Palm Springs. In the fall of 2014, the remodeled bank will reopen as the [Palm Springs Art Museum's new Architecture and Design Center, Edwards Harris Pavilion](#) (named after

a major donor). It's a rectangular and airy flat-roofed structure, and it sits right on an easily accessible street corner.

Sidney Williams, curator of architecture and design at the Palm Springs Art Museum and the daughter-in-law of the late E. Stewart Williams, says that the building, once completed, will feature exhibits on architecture, photography, and design.

“We thought that it would be a great asset not only to the museum, but also to the community,” she says.

“We loved the aspect that it was in downtown Palm Springs,” adds J.R. Roberts, the museum’s development consultant for the project. “It offers tourists something cultural and rich to do other than shopping and ice cream cones.



*The Santa Fe Federal Savings and Loan building was built in 1961 and designed by renowned California architect E. Stewart Williams. [Credit: Santa Fe Federal Savings & Loan, 1960, Julius Shulman (1910 - 2009), photographer; E. Stewart Williams (1909-2005), architect, © J. Paul Getty Trust. Used with permission. Julius Shulman Photography Archive, Research Library at the Getty Research Institute (2004.R.10)]*

When the museum purchased the building in 2011, its ideal location and spacious parking lot had made it the target of a condo developer's hypothetical plans to turn it into a retail or restaurant space at the center of a larger development.

**“It’s like this all-glass jewel box that floats in the air,” says Roberts. “Building towers around it would have destroyed its character and architectural integrity. This was a big dream come true for all of us preservationists.”**

Now that the Palm Springs Art Museum owns the building, it is facing the dual challenge of restoring the structure to its full 1960’s glory (some changes have been made over the years) while at the same time bringing it up to 21st-century building codes. Two main priorities are installing an elevator to make the two-story building handicap accessible and to make transporting art to the lower-level storage vault easier, as well as installing a brand new HVAC system that will help keep temperature-sensitive exhibit materials in good condition.

“The building is being brought back meticulously to its original look and feel,” says Roberts, also emphasizing that the space will be state-of-the-art from a technological perspective.



*The interior of the building is being retrofitted, while the exterior is being restored to look the way it did in the 1960s. [Credit: Santa Fe Federal Savings & Loan, 1960, Julius Shulman (1910 - 2009), photographer; E. Stewart Williams (1909-2005), architect, © J. Paul Getty Trust. Used with permission. Julius Shulman Photography Archive, Research Library at the Getty Research Institute (2004.R.10)]*

As of right now, the museum is still in the midst of fundraising efforts for the project, drawing inspiration from Mad Men's impeccable Modernist design for a stylish benefit during Palm Springs [Modernism Week](#) in February. Roberts has also been approached by the family of Frank Sinatra to collaborate on an invite-only fundraising event -- Sinatra himself commissioned a house from Williams' firm in 1947.

While work on the museum is tentatively set to start in June, curators have already planned out one of its first exhibits, and it's a natural fit: a retrospective on the life and work of E. Stewart Williams and his indelible mark on Palm Springs.

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