

# E. Stewart Williams Properties Seek National Recognition

Rosalie Murphy, *The Desert Sun*

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Palm Springs preservationists are seeking to double the number of local buildings in the prestigious National Register of Historic Places this fall.

Last year, a coalition got 11 Coachella Valley buildings designed by Albert Frey, including Frey House II and the North Shore Beach and Yacht Club, added to the list, which includes more than 90,000 historic and architecturally significant properties nationwide. Donald Wexler's Steel Development House #2 is also on the list.



*(Photo: Courtesy of Palm Springs Historical Society)*



**A picture of architect E. Stewart Williams, who is the subject of the documentary “The Nature of Modernism: E. Stewart Williams.” His work can be seen throughout Palm Springs, including the Palm Springs Art Museum.**  
*(Photo: Courtesy photo)*

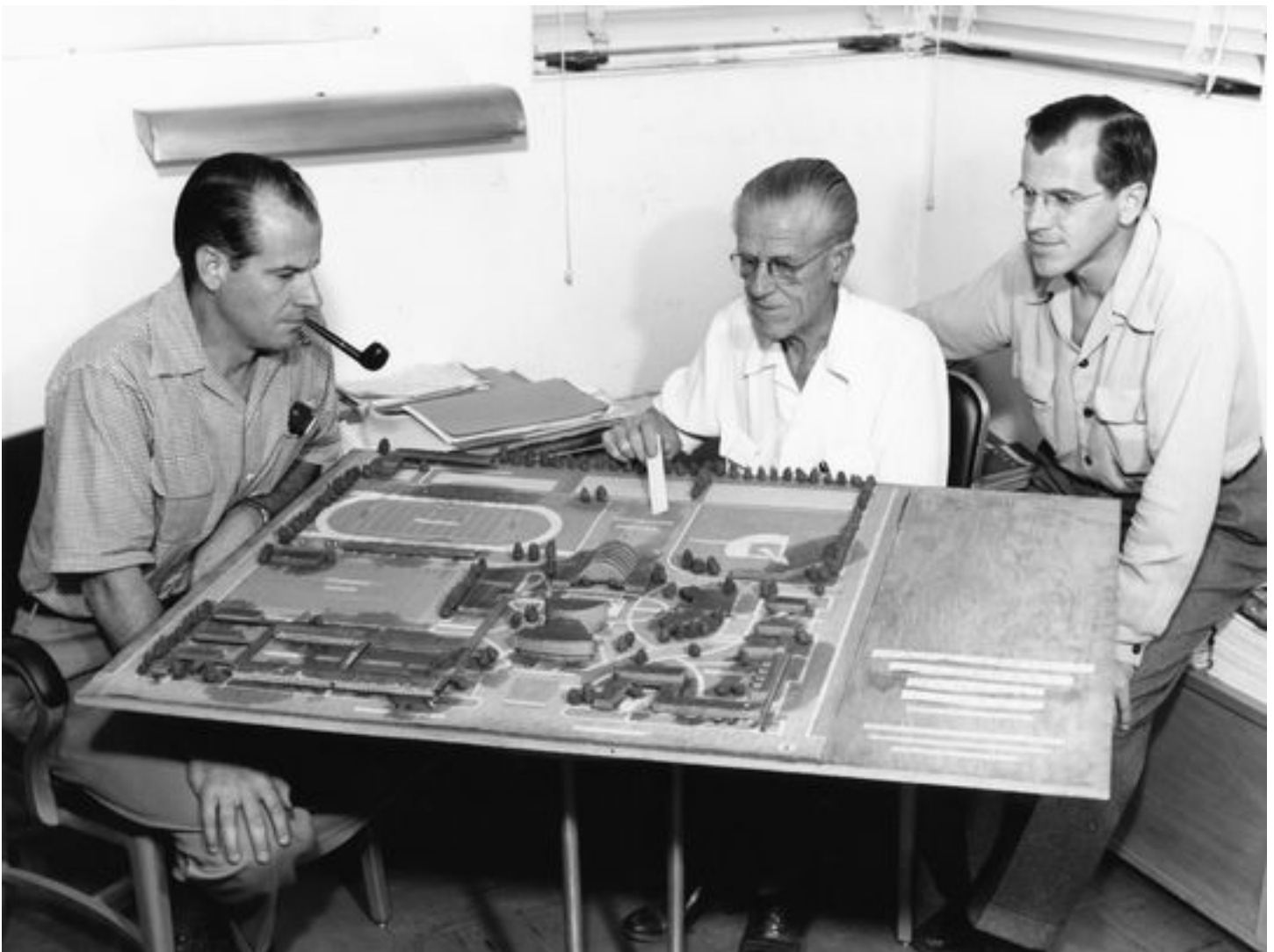
The current submission, which will be reviewed at the state level this month, includes 12 buildings by E. Stewart Williams, including the Palm Springs Art Museum, Frank Sinatra's Twin Palms house and several downtown banks.

"It's the highest honor that can be given to an architect's work," said Peter Moruzzi, an architectural historian who prepared the application to the National Register. "It's extremely prestigious."

E. Stewart Williams, who died in 2005, was one of the elders of mid-century modern design in Palm Springs. His father, also an architect, designed the La

Plaza shopping center, according to the Palm Springs Modern Committee. Williams, his father and his brother formed a firm, where Williams designed Frank Sinatra's first Palm Springs house, the Edris House, many downtown commercial buildings and the Palm Springs Art Museum.

"There's no question that he's one of the most important architects the valley ever produced," Moruzzi said. "He was partnered with his father and his brother for a long time, but Stew was really the designer at the firm... what we're looking at when we see a building by the firm is really the design work of E. Stewart Williams."



**E. Stewart Williams, Harry Williams and Roger Williams with model of Palm Springs High School. (Photo: Courtesy of Palm Springs Historical Society)**

Much of Williams' work, especially his downtown banks, are defined by horizontal and vertical lines and open interior spaces full of natural light. The upside-down arches at Coachella Valley Savings #2, now Chase, are seismic supports possibly modeled on the work of Brazilian architect

Oscar Niemeyer, Moruzzi said. Santa Fe Savings and Loan, now the Palm Springs Art Museum Architecture and Design Center, reflects the International style, with a flat roofline, lots of glass, and the use of water to make the building look like it's floating.

"I don't think he had a style, per se," said Sidney Williams, former curator of architecture and design at the Palm Springs Art Museum and Williams' daughter-in-law. "He admired the modern aesthetic of clean lines, of connection with the outdoors, that sense of the interior and the exterior connecting and relating to the landscape. He was a great admirer of the desert, and you can see that in a number of his buildings, where he integrated into the site in a very sensitive way."

Moruzzi pointed out that Williams often incorporated natural rock into buildings and preserved mountain views — Frank Sinatra's Twin Palms estate (1947) and the Edris House (1954), both in Palm Springs, feature rock prominently.

J.R. Roberts, a Palm Springs City Council member and longtime preservationist, bought the Edris House in 2000. He said he fell in love with it after seeing the exterior, and when a real estate agent called to tell him it was on the market, he and his partner submitted an offer within days.





**Frank Sinatra's house in Palm Springs designed by E. Stewart Williams.**

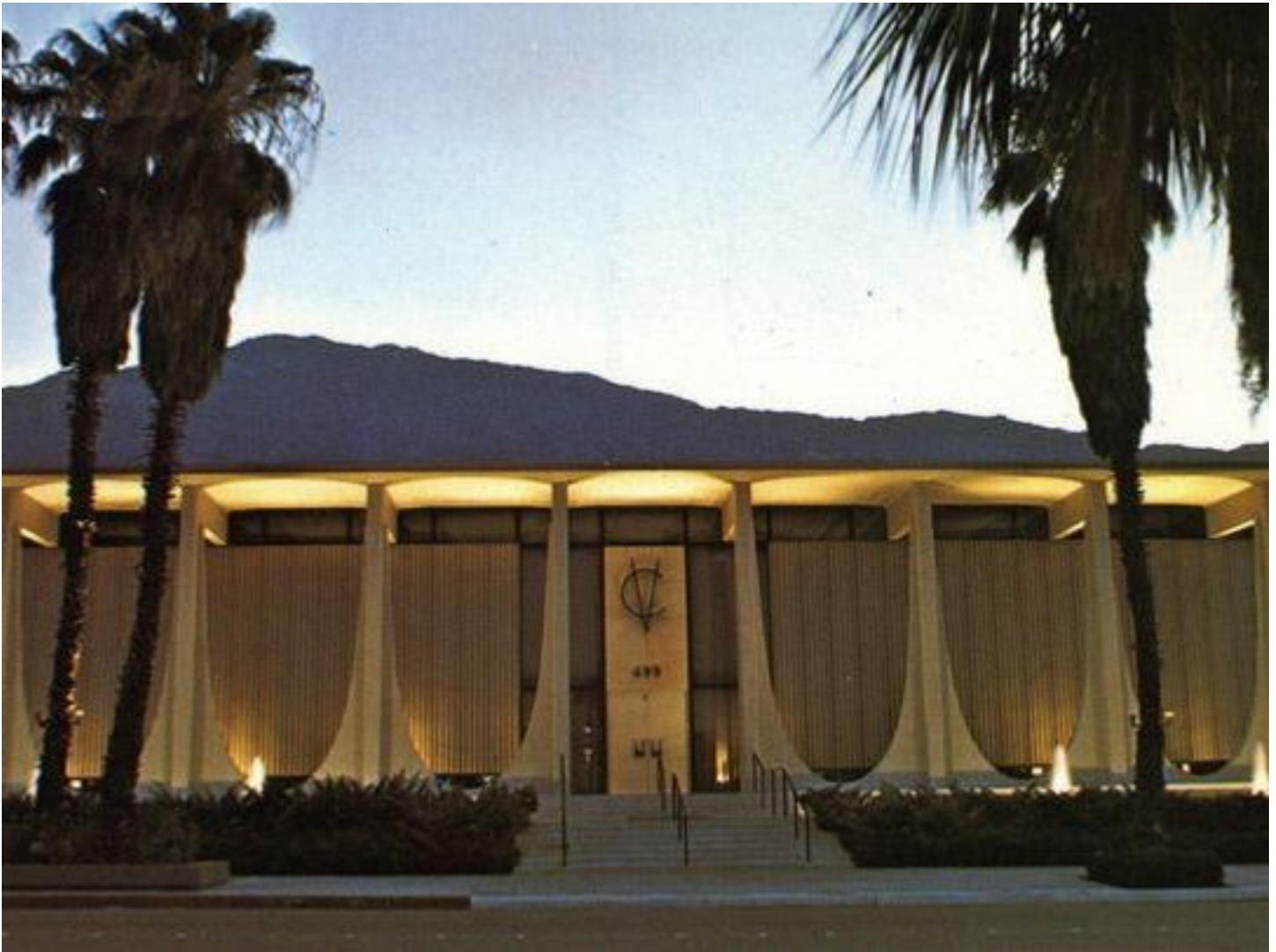
*(Photo: Courtesy of Palm Springs Historical Society)*

"I just found its shape and the way it was sited on the hill so interesting. It had an elegance and a dignity about it which I love," Roberts said. "The materials were all beautiful and varied and just the way it sort of sat like this bird ready to take flight off the hillside really turned my head. It had architectural details I'd never really seen before."

When he began restoring the house, Roberts called Williams, who began visiting regularly. They would sit on the couch, have a drink and talk for hours, Roberts said.

"Stew was a remarkable man... a very gentle, humble, man," Roberts said. "In his 90s, he had this amazing memory. I'd point to a light fixture and say, 'tell me about

that.' 'That came from the Universal Lighting Company on the Upper West Side in New York, I don't think they're there anymore.'"



**Coachella Valley Savings and Loan #2, now Chase Bank, designed by E. Stewart Williams.** *(Photo: Photo courtesy of the Palm Springs Historical Society)*

The application will be heard by the California State Historical Resources Commission at a meeting in Redlands on Oct. 28. That body will make a recommendation to the National Register, which will decide whether to add these buildings to the list about two or three months later, Moruzzi said.

"The more properties that are officially recognized... it validates all of the excitement for Modernism," Moruzzi said. "It's impressive to live in a city or valley that is so renowned for great architecture. Even if you don't care about it, it's nice to know that you're living in an area that people come from all over the world to see."

The properties aiming for inclusion in the National Register are all located in Palm Springs except the Palm Springs Aerial Tramway Alpine Station, which is in an unincorporated part of Riverside County. Moruzzi shared this list:

E. Stewart and Mari Williams' residence at 1314 Culver Place

Edris House, 1030 West Cielo Drive

Frank Sinatra Residence, 1145 East Via Colusa Road

Coachella Valley Savings #1, 383 South Palm Canyon Drive

Coachella Valley Savings #2, 499 South Palm Canyon Drive

Santa Fe Federal Savings, 300 South Palm Canyon Drive

Oasis Commercial Building, 101 South Palm Canyon Drive

Palm Springs Aerial Tramway Alpine Station

Palm Springs Desert Museum (today the Palm Springs Art Museum), 101 Museum Drive

Palm Springs Unified School District headquarters, 333 South Farrell Drive

Koerner Residence, 1275 South Calle de Maria

Sutter Residence, 1207 South Calle de Maria

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# E. Stewart Williams Buildings on Way to National Register

Rosalie Murphy, *The Desert Sun*

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(Photo: Courtesy photo)

Twelve Coachella Valley properties designed by E. Stewart Williams are on their way to the National Register of Historic Places after a unanimous vote to support their bid for recognition.

The California State Historical Resources Commission, at a Friday meeting in Redlands, has recommended that all 12 of the buildings seeking recognition be included in the National Register, which architectural historian Peter Moruzzi called "the highest honor that can be given to an architect's work."





**A special Preservation Party for E. Stewart Williams was held at The Shops at 1345. All proceeds will be used to designate several of E. Stewart Williams' work to the National Register of Historic Places. (Photo: David A. Lee/Special to The Desert Sun)**

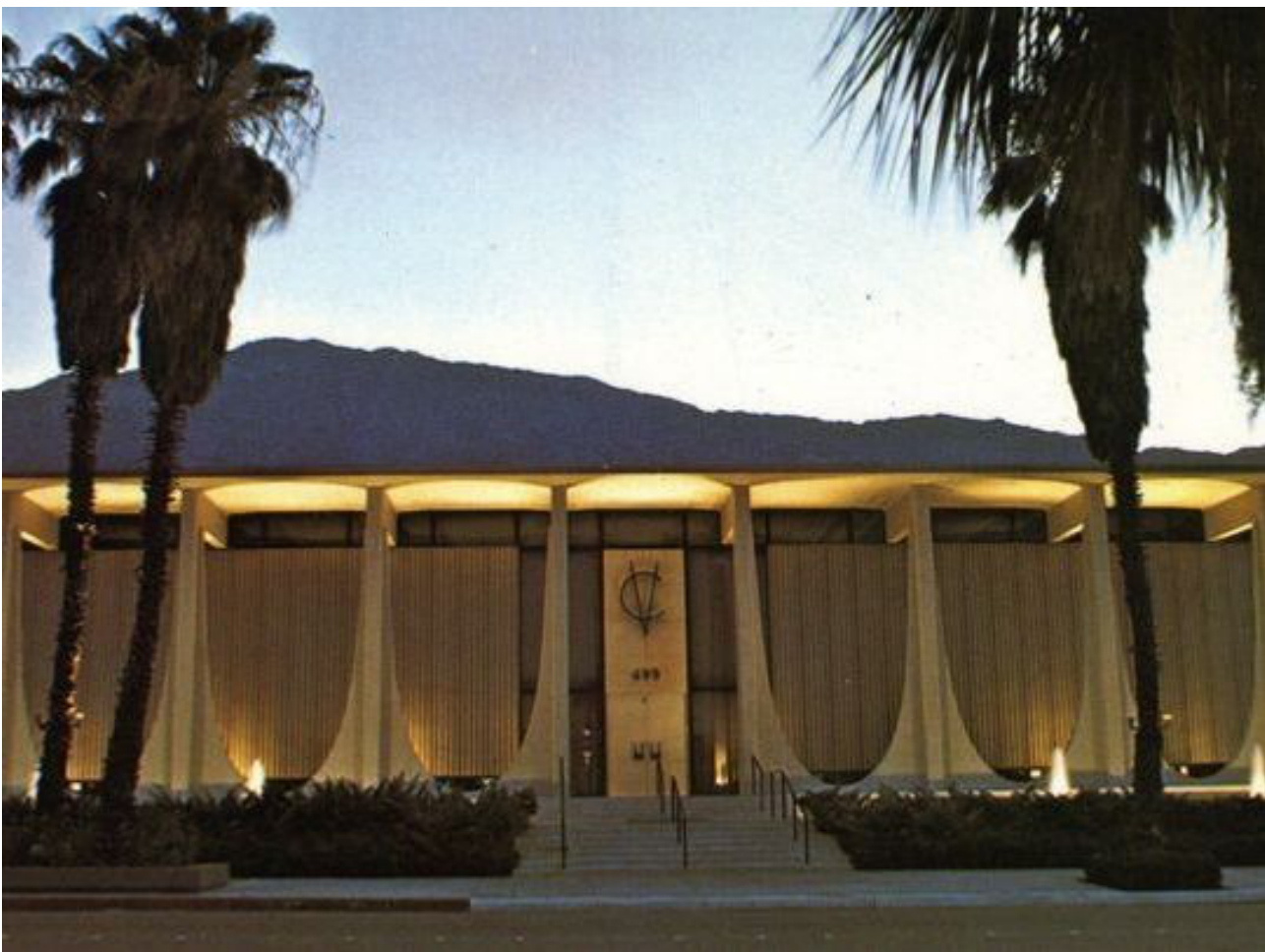
Williams was one of Palm Springs' prominent mid-century modern architects. His buildings include Frank Sinatra's Twin Palms estate; three prominent banks at the southern edge of downtown Palm Springs and the Palm Springs Aerial Tramway Alpine Station.

Moruzzi, who wrote a detailed history of each building for the commission's review, said that the owners of the Oasis Commercial Building — the two-story building that includes the Starbucks at Tahquitz Canyon Way and Palm Canyon Drive — spoke out against the property's inclusion in the National Register, but their claims

that Williams may not have designed that building were "soundly refuted" by the architect's son, Eric Williams.

"We were very pleased," Eric Williams said. "Right now all 12 of my father's projects that were originally nominated have been approved... I think it's a key victory for us and I don't think there's anything that's going to happen at the national level" to prevent their addition to the National Register.

The hour-and-a-half hearing ended with five commissioners voting unanimously to send the slate of properties on to their last review, at the national level. Moruzzi said the Keeper of the National Register, who makes the final decision, seldom acts counter to state recommendations. He expects these buildings to join more than a dozen others from the Coachella Valley — including Donald Wexler's Steel Development House #2, the O'Donnell House and 11 buildings by Albert Frey — in the National Register before Christmas.



**Coachella Valley Savings and Loan #2, now Chase Bank, designed by E. Stewart Williams.** (Photo: Photo courtesy of the Palm Springs Historical Society)

The buildings included in the submission are all in Palm Springs, except the Aerial Tramway Alpine Station, which is in unincorporated Riverside County:

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