

Restoration of the 1960 Santa Fe Federal Savings and Loan Building

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Designed by E. Stewart Williams

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Designed in 1960 by renowned mid-century Modern architect E. Stewart Williams for the Santa Fe Federal Savings and Loan, the glass pavilion in downtown Palm Springs reflects the optimistic view that beautiful design could both educate and inspire. **The original building was one of more than ten banks and bank complexes created by Williams in his career that fulfilled the changing needs of the postwar banking business.** The building's simple and elegant architecture helped define the new transparency of the bank in a rapidly growing resort town. Williams long considered the building one of his finest. He stated that one of his goals for the project was "to achieve, if possible, a quality within the space enclosed that elevates the human spirit above the level of mere daily existence."

When the president of the Santa Fe Federal Savings and Loan asked Williams to design a building for downtown Palm Springs, he asked for a "little jewel box."

The single-story light steel frame structure, with aluminum and glass walls, is elevated on a floating concrete base surrounded by low landscaping. This platform, with its floor-to-ceiling windows, broad overhanging roof and sliding aluminum shade screens provided an elegant solution. Built on a five-foot dimensional module with thin steel columns placed at twenty-five foot intervals, the building expresses a classic clarity of design. The structural columns do not interrupt the wall plane but rather allow it to stand uninterrupted as a curtain wall defining the spatial volume. The cantilevered roof structure is echoed in the cantilevered concrete base that floats above the landscaped border.

The transparency of this structure of steel and glass recalls the optimism of the early 1960s, brought about by the possibilities of modern materials and technology to provide solutions to the complexities of modern life. Williams adhered to a simple and functional design and also addressed solutions to the environmental conditions of the site, such as the anodized aluminum screens that provided sun protection while maintaining natural illumination from the glass curtain walls. Deep roof overhangs provided shade, at the same time emphasizing a bold horizontality characteristic of the International Style.

After changing hands several times, the building received Class 1 Historic Site protective status in 2009. The Palm Springs Art Museum purchased the building in 2011, expanding its campus to two E. Stewart Williams-designed buildings.

From there, the museum sought out a firm to bring the building up to current codes while more completely revealing the architect's original vision. The building would be devoted to architecture and design exhibitions, programs, and archive study space and house the museum's growing collection of architecture and design-related works.

Most recently converted into a real estate office, the building did not meet current code requirements. On the exterior, the structure showed its age mostly because of general lack of maintenance. Previous tenants had applied window film and tint to the glazing on the east side of the building, where the original louvers had been stolen. Landscape and site walls along the west and north sides of the building had been removed; desert vegetation had been replaced with turf. On the interior, the building was showing its wear in the mechanical system. Many of the original finishes remained unchanged but were deteriorated. Original walnut veneer panels and doors in the present-day curator's office were bleached from the sun, and the terrazzo floor had been demolished in places.

The restoration designs were based on black-and-white photographs of the building taken by Julius Shulman, as well as Williams' original drawings. The biggest challenge was the change of occupancy classification from office to assembly and meeting space. This required negotiation with the City of Palm Springs, especially in regard to retaining nonconforming aspects of the building.

Renovations included removing office dividers to create one seamless space, removing carpeting to reveal the original terrazzo floor, and adding sustainable desert landscaping. Eliminating parking at the entrance created a more formal entry sequence and allows for an unobstructed, uninterrupted view for museum visitors.

The main level features gallery space for architecture and design exhibitions, curatorial offices, and a store located in and around **the bank vault, which retains its original door**. The lower level serves as a study center and provides meeting and archive spaces as well. **An elevator was added to make the building handicap accessible and to make transporting art to the lower-level storage vault easier.**

In order to convert the glass bank building into a museum environment, one of the primary challenges was to control light suitably to display and archive art, sculpture, photographs, and architectural models. The movable, anodized aluminum screens original to the west-facing facade were replaced and restored, providing essential shade while allowing visibility to the street and mountains. The angle of the louvers is designed to shade the interior during the peak hours of the sun. Operable solar screens have been integrated at the interior of the space to provide further control of the sun into the gallery space.

Structural upgrades were implemented to increase the structural integrity without changing the appearance of the original design. Mechanical and electrical systems were upgraded to allow for a museum-quality environment.

Some existing walnut cabinetry and paneling has been restored, while the custom-designed reception desk is based on the original Williams bank teller counters. A drive-up teller window on the east side of the building was preserved, recalling the original function of the building and the convenience of “motor banking” in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

Restoring the structure to its original beauty and simplicity has recaptured its forward-looking spirit, transforming the glass-and-steel building into a leading example of innovative design that respects the past and embraces current technology. A prime example of midcentury Modern design, the Palm Springs Art Museum Architecture and Design Center is an ideal site for the exhibition and study of architecture and design and the preservation of Palm Springs’ architectural legacy.