

HABITATS

STANDING THE TEST OF TIME

The Palm Springs Alexanders

By James R. Harlan



Above Vintage sales brochure for Las Palmas Estates, c. 1959.

Center A restored 1957 Palmer and Krisel-designed, 1,600 sq. ft. home with a "butterfly" roof in the Twin Palms tract.

Top A restored 1957 "Model B" home in the Vista Las Palmas neighborhood, designed by Palmer and Krisel. At 2,100 sq. ft., these homes were more luxurious and included a much-requested maid's room.

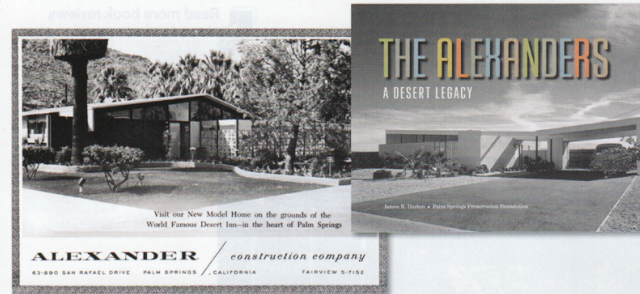
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The past few years have seen a revival of enthusiasm for the modernist homes known as the Alexander Houses in Palm Springs, where developer George Alexander and his son, Robert, began building tracts of affordable single family residences in 1957. The area had, up until then, been an exclusive winter playground for the wealthy, especially for Hollywood types, and the arrival of middle-class developments could have spelled the demise of the desert retreat's charm. But the Alexanders were a different breed of developer: keenly interested in innovative architecture and convinced that affordable homes could be rich in design excellence, they hired some of the most forward-looking architects in the area, leaving a legacy of more than 1,000 modest but livable and attractive residences.

Before focusing on the southern California desert, the George Alexander Company built residential tracts and apartments in Los Angeles for almost 15 years. George Alexander started off as an accountant, but noticing the substantial profits of his construction company clients, he decided to change careers. His early projects were traditional and typical for their time. But shortly after World War II, his son, Robert, known as "Bob," joined the company and began to chart a different direction: not only would he commission modernist architects to design the homes, but the designs would aim to improve the homeowner's quality of life.

George initially dismissed this approach and, in an attempt to prove that Bob's newfangled ideas were unmarketable, he built a tract of ten architect-designed modernist homes in Los Angeles' burgeoning San Fernando Valley. The homes turned out to be both popular and profitable and led to the company's next modernist residential development, the nearby 287-home tract of Corbin Palms. Built between 1953 and 1955, the homes were designed by the Los Angeles architecture firm of Daniel Palmer and William Krisel.

In 1955, George, now semi-retired, moved to Palm Springs to rest and attend to his health. He quickly became restless, however, and, understanding that the growing desert city needed housing, formed the Alexander Construction Company (ACC). This new venture was motivated by the growing competition and dwindling opportunities for development in Los Angeles and the realization that the "village" of Palm Springs had not yet seen builders as competent and savvy as the Alexanders. This untapped desert market was still risky for the kind of large-scale speculative housing that the Alexanders specialized in, however, so they decided to start with a "destination resort" to draw people to the more remote area of south Palm Springs, remembers architect William Krisel. Completed in 1956, the Ocotillo Lodge was followed the next year by Twin Palms, the Alexanders' first Palm Springs housing tract,



Far left A sales ad showing a model home at Las Palmas Estates from the November 1960 issue of *Palm Springs Life*. Built on the grounds of the Alexander-owned Desert Inn, the house was moved to the Twin Palms neighborhood in 1961.

Left The cover of author James R. Harlan's book on the Alexanders features a c. 1959 Julius Shulman photo of a model home at the Racquet Club Road Estates, designed by Palmer and Krisel.

Below A c. 1960 decorative concrete-block wall with a new metal gate at the Racquet Club Road Estates.

located directly behind the new hotel. The 90 homes were spacious for their time, at 1,600 square feet on 10,000 square foot lots; they were priced at about \$30,000.

The Alexanders' streamlined planning and construction techniques substantially lowered their costs, giving them an advantage over other Palm Springs builders. "The framing materials for the homes came as a kit, with all the parts pre-cut, with beams and studs labeled and ready to be assembled," recalls Krisel, greatly reducing construction time. Construction began only after all the building materials, such as tile, plumbing fixtures, windows and doors, had arrived at a local warehouse, avoiding construction delays. Including built-in closets, unusual at the time for mass-produced houses, also saved money because they doubled as room dividers. And buyers could not customize their homes before construction: the finishes, tile colors, materials and rooflines were predetermined; in most of the Alexanders' 16 Palm Springs developments, a pool and fenced rear yard were "standard."

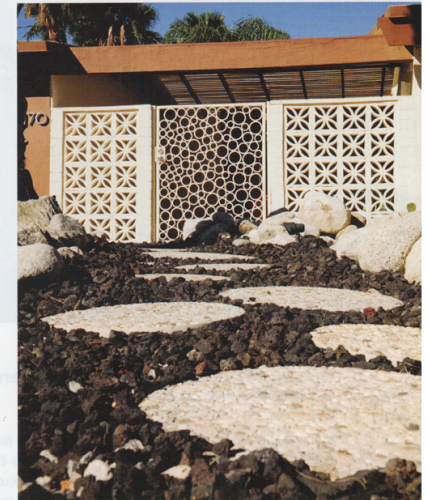
Because the early ACC homes were built primarily as second or weekend homes, their owners were more apt to embrace the unconventional designs with their open floor plans and walls of glass. But while their product was stylish and contemporary, the Alexanders were ultimately marketing a lifestyle. Beautiful, eye-catching brochures promised sun, leisure and cocktails. Each new Alexander neighborhood featured a completely furnished model home — in at least one case, decorated by Arthur Elrod, a nationally-known interior designer.

Setting themselves apart from other Coachella Valley builders, the Alexanders engaged a host of talented modernist architects in addition to Palmer and Krisel, including Donald Wexler, Richard Harrison and Charles Dubois, whose creativity was not bound by building codes or conventional thinking. One Palmer and Krisel building code variance at Twin Palms allowed an exterior wall to extend beyond the perimeter of the house, creating integral garden walls. Surprisingly, this was done for design, rather than functional, purposes — a rarity for speculative construction on this scale.

Starting in the late 1970s, Palm Springs began to lose its status as the hub of the Coachella Valley. New communities, many of them based around golf courses, began to spring up to the east, on vast inexpensive tracts of former date groves. Palm Springs, which simply did not have enough open land for golf courses, lost out to the growing popularity of these developments. And California's fascination with the new made Palm Springs' charming village center appear dated compared with the strip malls in the new communities.

But lately, a new generation has been snapping up the Alexander homes in Palm Springs. Thrilled to have landed one of these pioneering modernist gems, they strive to return them to their original state, removing insensitive additions and redoing previously renovated kitchens and baths in a more compatible manner. George Alexander believed that "in this luxury community, quality homes could be built to fit the budgets of all families." He would be happy to know that the newest owners of his Palm Springs homes are still finding this true today. ■

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All Alexander

You can tour dozens of Alexander homes in Palm Springs during Alexander Weekend, from March 25 to 27, organized by the Palm Springs Preservation Foundation.

The weekend kicks off with an illustrated talk by author James Harlan and a discussion with Alexander architects William Krisel and Donald Wexler. Harlan will also sign copies of his new book, *The Alexanders: A Desert Legacy*, the first comprehensive examination of the Palm Springs Alexanders, with original plans, vintage photos by Julius Shulman and new photography by James Schnepf. For details, visit pspreservationfoundation.org.