

William Krisel Tribute

Over the course of a remarkable 60-year career, William Krisel designed more than 40,000 residential units across the United States—about 75% of which were in Southern California. He was among a small group of architects whose work from the 1940s through the 1960s significantly influenced the look of Palm Springs, its demographics, its assets as a travel destination, and in doing so, its economy. Mr. Krisel introduced to this region many of the attributes now regarded as hallmarks of the mid-century modernist architectural style, including open carports, clerestory windows, exposed concrete block, breezeways, and butterfly roofs. The innovations he pioneered in economically producing tract homes that look like custom projects were wildly popular at the time of their construction and successfully brought modernist architecture to the masses. His concepts were adopted by his contemporaries, forever changing the look of Palm Springs, and exerting an influence that continues to this day.

William Krisel was born in 1924 in Shanghai of American parents working overseas for the US State Department. He lived in China until age 13, when his family returned to the US. After serving in World War II, he attended the University of Southern California from which he received his degree in architecture. In 1954 he became a licensed landscape architect, believing that all aspects of a home should be unified in concept.

A close personal friend of real estate developer Bob Alexander and his family, Krisel came to the Desert at the request of Alexander to design a tract of modernist houses then dubbed Smoke Tree Valley and now known as the Twin Palms neighborhood. Other Krisel projects in Palm Springs include Vista Las Palmas, Kings Point, Canyon View Estates, and Racquet Club Estates. He also contributed significantly to the Sunmor and Little Beverly Hills neighborhoods, as well as several others in the city and region. The names “Krisel” and “Alexander” are now linked as proponents and pacesetters of the style that’s become known as “desert modernism.”

Among his Palm Springs projects, “The House of Tomorrow” in Vista Las Palmas was conceived as

an experiment in modern living. It so impressed Alexander’s wife Helene that they made it their personal residence. The house later gained fame as the “honeymoon hideaway” of Elvis and Priscilla Presley.

The work of William Krisel has been well-recognized through an AIA Lifetime Achievement award, the Palm Springs Lifetime Achievement award, an American Society of Landscape Architects award, a National Association of Home Builders award, a USC Architectural Guild Distinguished Alumni award, and many others.

William Krisel was among the few mid-century modern architects who has not only lived to see, but also to participate in, the resurgence of interest in modernism in Palm Springs. In 2008 he collaborated with Maxx Livingstone on precise replicas of his mid-century designs but constructed with all new materials and designed for LEED certification. In 2009, Krisel was honored with the release of a documentary film about his life and career entitled *William Krisel, Architect*. The film was updated and re-released in 2016. He was honored with a star on the Palm Springs Walk of Stars in 2013, and in February 2016, the Twin Palms Neighborhood Organization sponsored the rechristening of one of that neighborhood’s most historic gateway streets as *William Krisel Way*. More than 220 well-wishers attended the renaming event, and Mr. Krisel appeared in a video recorded for the occasion to express his gratitude. Also in 2016, the definitive book on Mr. Krisel’s work in Palm Springs, *William Krisel’s Palm Springs: The Language of Modernism*, was published. In 2018, the Twin Palms Neighborhood Organization debuted the museum-style multimedia exhibit, *William Krisel’s Twin Palms*.

Mr. Krisel described himself as “...a firm believer that good modern design can make your life happier, more productive, and more enjoyable.” That’s certainly true for the many thousands of owners of his homes nationwide.

The Krisel Archive is held at the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles.

— Eric Chiel, Twin Palms