

## TwinPalmsPS.org William Krisel Tribute Page

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 1950s and 1960s significantly influenced the look of Palm Springs, its demographics, its appeal as a travel destination, and in doing so, its economy.

### Local Impact

William Krisel introduced to this region many of the attributes now regarded as hallmarks of mid-20<sup>th</sup> century architectural style. He's among the most important founders of Desert Modernism—a branch of Modernist architecture that both accommodates and takes advantage of our desert environment. The style is characterized by open carports, sheltered breezeways, patterned concrete block, sun-shielding overhangs, clerestory windows, walls of glass, butterfly roofs, and exposed beams.

The innovations he pioneered in economically producing tract homes that appear to be custom projects were wildly popular and helped bring Modernist architecture to the masses. The concepts he implemented in Palm Springs were frequently adopted by his contemporaries, forever changing the look of the city, and influencing an aesthetic that continues to this day.

### Early Life

William Krisel was born in 1924 in Shanghai, China where his father managed regional film distribution for major US studios. He lived in China until age 13 when his family returned to the States. After serving in World War II, Krisel studied architecture at the University of Southern California (USC). He became a licensed architect in 1950, and four years later received his license in *landscape* architecture. With these dual credentials he could pursue his objective of creating not just individual homes, but visually complex yet cohesive *neighborhoods*.

### Growing Career

Most of Krisel's work in the desert was produced for the Alexander Construction Company (ACC). ACC was founded in the 1930s by George Alexander, a successful accountant-turned-land-developer in Los Angeles. George's son, Robert, attended USC and joined his father in the business in the late 1940s.

By the early 1950s, Robert Alexander was taking on more responsibility in the company and beginning to influence its projects. Although his father largely rejected tract housing and Modernist styling, Robert was allowed free reign to test these concepts with a small tract of 10 homes within a large site the company purchased in the San Fernando Valley. Robert brought in his college friend, William Krisel, as the architect, marking the first of many collaborations between Krisel and the Alexanders. Those 10 homes were the first foray for Krisel at designing stylish residences that appear custom but achieve the economies of scale of tract housing.

All 10 homes sold quickly and proved more profitable than comparable homes the Alexanders had previously built. George Alexander gave the young team the rest of the tract—277 additional home sites—and this became the Corbin Palms neighborhood in Woodland Hills.

When the Alexander Construction Company moved to Palm Springs in 1955, they brought along Krisel. His next assignment was a tract of Modernist houses then dubbed "Smoke Tree Valley Estates" but now known as the Twin Palms neighborhood. It was the first of several Krisel/Alexander developments in the city, each elaborating on concepts initially established here in Twin Palms. These included homes in Vista Las Palmas, Racquet Club Estates, Sunmor, and Little Beverly Hills, as well as the Kings Point and Canyon View Estates condominiums.

Krisel was also responsible for the innovative “House of Tomorrow” in the Vista Las Palmas neighborhood. Outfitted with every electronic convenience at the time, the home was the pinnacle of modern living. It so impressed Robert Alexander and his wife that they made it their personal residence. Years later, the house gained fame as the “honeymoon hideaway” of Elvis and Priscilla Presley.

Today, the professional union of William Krisel and the Alexanders remains one of the most prolific, profitable, and influential partnerships in the architectural history of the region.

### Later Recognition

William Krisel has been formally recognized in many ways, including with an AIA Lifetime Achievement award, a 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.

Krisel was fortunate to be among the few mid-century architects who lived to see and participate in the resurgence of interest in Modernism in Palm Springs. Beginning in the late 1990s, a new generation of homeowners was coming of age that grew up in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century America. They recalled fondly the aesthetics of the 50s and 60s that are evident in Krisel’s homes, and they held in high regard their practical construction features and harmony with the desert. Homes that had suffered decades of neglect were now being purchased and restored with respect for their original design. By the 2020s, his neighborhoods once again became showplaces for stylish and practical desert living.

### Enduring Relevance

William Krisel passed away in 2017 but remains as relevant as ever. In 2008, he collaborated with Maxx Livingstone on replicas of his mid-century homes but constructed with all new materials and eligible for LEED certification.

In 2009, Krisel was honored with the release of a documentary film about his life and career entitled *William Krisel, Architect*. That film was updated and re-released in 2016, and remastered in ultra high-definition for its third release in 2023.

In 2013, Mr. Krisel was honored with a place on the Palm Springs Walk of Stars, and in February 2016, the Twin Palms Neighborhood Organization initiated the rechristening of one of the 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*, was published.

In 2018, the Twin Palms Neighborhood Organization debuted the museum-style traveling multimedia exhibit, *William Krisel’s Twin Palms*. The exhibit is displayed annually for Modernism Week, and is periodically assembled for major events throughout the city. More than 20,000 people were recorded entering the Palm Springs Public Library during the exhibit’s six-week installation in its central reading area. That display continues to expand.

### The Krisel Legacy

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

Eric Chiel  
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