

# The inspired architecture of Palm Springs' mid-century banks

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Not so long ago, banks were symbols of stability and built in architectural styles reflective of that, like Greek revival, replete with columns and Palladian proportions or beautifully embellished Beaux Arts splendor. It was easy to spot the bank in most communities of the 19th and early 20th centuries. But by in the mid-20th century confidence was plenty high, and that exuberance echoed in imaginative new designs for these institutions. And in the desert, there were some particularly swanky banks.

The Town and Country Center was designed in 1948 by A. Quincy Jones and Paul R. Williams and featured an interesting mix of uses including a bank. The Town and Country Center also featured elegant shops, the newspaper, a furniture store and a restaurant encircling a geometric courtyard punctuated by a dramatic cantilevered staircase and planter.

The center's Bank of America building, with its vertically-folded concrete facade pierced by glazing made a modern architectural statement, setting a high bar, and stunning curious observers. Competitors took note. The striking design of the Town and Country inspired architects of other commercial buildings to new creative heights.

In 1958, a decade after the completion of the seminal Town and Country Center, Southwest Builder and Contractor magazine proclaimed the Palm Springs headquarters of the City National Bank of Beverly Hills to be "one of the most dramatic structures to rise in Southern California." The unique triangular-shaped lot at the intersection of Ramon Road and Palm Canyon Drive was brilliantly sited, with a likewise roughly triangular-shaped building that represented a new and specific idea in banking.

Designed by Victor Gruen and Associates with an integration of parking and banking intended to make the bank



**Town and Country Center's Bank of America building is seen through the gates of the Desert Inn.** PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY



**City National Bank was "one of the most dramatic structures to rise in Southern California," a magazine said.**

visible and easily accessible to passing traffic. The rich adornment of blue glass mosaic tile and the organic curvilinear form suggested the famous Le Corbusier influence.

The magazine called it "the most beautiful bank in America."

The interior of City National was stunning in its simplicity. Gone were the usually edifying Greek columns, brass filigree decorations and impressive rows of safe deposit boxes. Instead, the interior was filled with light, and a lustrous use of materials like marble counters, terrazzo floors and floor-to-



**Brise soleil is displayed behind a woman standing in front of the City National Bank.**

ceiling windows louvered from the outside with fenestrated aluminum. The lounge area featured a drinking fountain, an innovative wall clock and a built-in scale for customers to weigh themselves.

Along Palm Canyon Drive, between these two these standouts, other dramatic bank buildings were built including some remarkably modern structures for Coachella Valley Savings and Loan designed by E. Stewart Williams. In 1956 a glass pavilion constructed atop a rock-encrusted pedestal housing a down-stairs vault. A sweeping staircase brought customers and bankers to the second floor with a soaring ceiling above. The east-facing windows of this large glass box were later encased by an aluminum brise soleil.

And in 1961, at the corner of Palm Canyon and Ramon, Williams experimented draping concrete, almost like great swaths of frosting, around the exterior of a building surrounded with a shallow reflecting pool. Reminiscent of other iconic buildings, this design won an award for the architectural firm of Williams from the Portland Cement Company for the creative use of concrete.

But Stew Williams' favorite was his Santa Fe Federal Saving and Loan Association building at Baristo Road and Palm Canyon Drive. The 1960 floating pavilion seems suspended in space. Used were the same materials and principles now considered requisite in desert modernism: elegant lines, an abundance of glazing and solar control through aluminum louvers. The building looks deceptively simple but is singularly harmonious in its restraint.

Repurposed by the Palm Springs Art Museum as the Architecture and Design Center a few years ago due to the largess of kind citizens, notably Beth Edwards Harris, John Boccardo and Trina Turk, it services visitors from all around the globe in search of the mid-century architecture for which Palm Springs is now so famous.

In the space of a few blocks on Palm Canyon Drive, a leisurely stroll reveals an architectural landscape of impressive mid-century bank buildings and inspires optimism. One can only imagine a visitor to the desert half a century ago might've been inclined to open an account.