

RELIEF FROM HARSH SUN OF DESERT LED TO ARCHITECTURAL STARDOM

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In the middle of the 20th century, in 1954, on the other side of the planet in another desert climate, the U.S. State Department chose New York architect Edward Durrell Stone to design the new American Embassy in New Delhi.

The defining element for the new embassy was a *brise-soleil*, designed by Stone. This curtain wall was constructed of thousands of one-foot square perforated blocks that shielded the embassy's interior glass from the hot Indian sun.

Theories abound regarding Stone's inspiration for screen block. During the lengthy construction of the New Delhi embassy, the architectural press gave Stone much credit for being sensitive to the centuries-old tradition of decorative wooden grilles in Hindu and Moorish architecture.

Perhaps his source of inspiration was his friend Frank Lloyd Wright's textile blocks. Possibly he was inspired by the concrete forms used by Belgian architect Auguste Perret at the Notre Dame du Raincy, a building Stone visited as a young man. Regardless of the source of his inspiration, the genius of Stone's solution to the brutal Indian sun was undeniable; and in creating relief from the desert climate he was catapulted to architectural stardom.

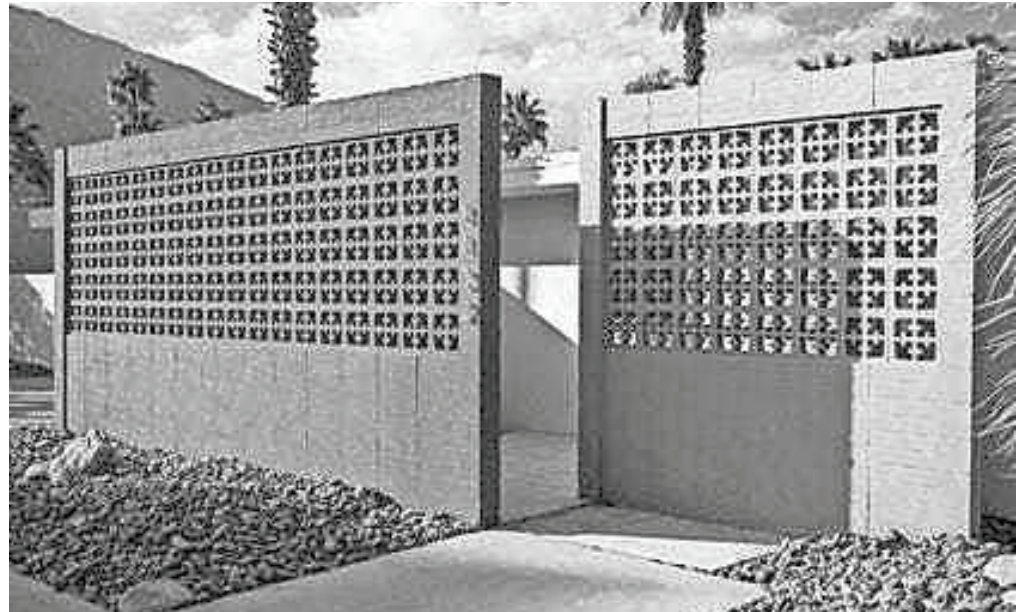
Much has since been written about Stone and his many projects. He appeared on the cover of Time magazine in March of 1958 and concrete block has become iconic in defining midcentury architecture. Ron and Barbara Marshall of the Palm Springs Preservation Foundation have studied and written extensively about this modest building material and the architectural craze started by Stone in the midcentury.

Their excellent book, "Concrete Screen Block: The Power of Pattern," recounts the fascinating story of concrete screen block, starting with Stone in New Delhi, reaching its apogee at the 1964 New York World's Fair, and following its slowly diminished popularity in the 1970s, to its resurgence of late. In between those years, the clever marketing of screen block as "fashionable" by manufacturers resulted in an explosion of patterns and applications.

Most commonly produced in 12-inch square blocks with perforated or pierced patterns, screen block offered modest decoration with helpful function for the desert Southwest's emerging "sunbelt" communities in the last half of the 20th century.

According to the Marshalls, by the late 1950s concrete screen block was frequently specified by leading architects for grand department stores, schools, churches and palatial residences. In climates where the challenges of sun protection spawned a host of architectural solutions (including metal grilles and wood louvers) screen block offered a tough, modular and cheap alternative.

Along with this popularity screen block inherited a cascade of synonyms including breeze block, grille block, solar block, veil block, perforated block, vented block, and pierced block. And with the synonyms also came a profu-



This Maltese pattern is an example of a concrete screen block. PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY



Screen block is constructed out of square perforated blocks that shield from the sun.

sion of patterns and the additional option of creating unique shapes. The Marshalls have documented some 250 different patterns and have established 58 examples in Palm Springs at last count.

They note in their book, "the allure of being able to reimagine the brise-soleil by using different and 'fresh' geometric block shapes was irresistible. Suddenly, the concrete industry's dictate to 'Fashion your future in Screen Block... [the] excitingly new building material with almost indescribable design potential' started to materialize and a raft of interesting screen block shapes came to the market. While some block patterns were mere variations of earlier designs, others were truly imaginative."

The various screen block patterns were given exotic-sounding names like Mei Ling, Koshi, Samurai, La Paz, Maltese, and Morocco, conjuring up the romance of faraway deserts.

Other pattern names took advantage of the midcentury's fascination with space and science including Constellation, Starfire, Starburst, Starlight, Venus and Polaris.

Screen block appealed to the concrete industry and builders because it could be made quickly and at a high

profit as tracts of houses were slapped up to accommodate the postwar boomers.

The popularity of screen block peaked during the 1964-65 New York World's Fair. Over three million concrete blocks were used during the fair's construction, including many custom-designed patterns.

By the 1960s, screen block was being supplanted by other design elements. The craze was over, and some looked at the building material as an outmoded fad. In response, the concrete industry made some clever attempts to resurrect screen block's relevance. Recognizing an application that seemed to have great potential, a trade organization pictorially enthusiastically touted screen block's ability to conceal with "Hide-A-Car, Hide-A-Compost, Or Hide-AHotel-Garbage-Pickup-Area, Hide-A-Anything-You-Wanna-Hide...[screen block] can handle the touchiest problems in cleaner fashion than any building material."

The ugliness of parking garages was cited as a particularly intractable yet screen block was said to be able to "veil and beautify" such structures. Nevertheless, despite these highly functional uses, the late 1960s and 1970s witnessed a steady decline in the popularity of screen block. The enthusiasm for screen block evaporated with block producers and users alike.

The Marshalls note that, "Today, screen block can still be found in virtually every midcentury neighborhood in the Sunbelt. Certainly, few homeowners realize that their screen block patio wall is a close cousin of the wooden grilles found in Moorish and Hindu architecture. But despite these exotic connections, history shows us that screen block's functional versatility and design appeal was so compelling that it was embraced as a uniquely American product, forever linked to space-age optimism and the Sunbelt lifestyle." And with the resurgence in popularity of

midcentury design, screen block is once again being specified by architects and builders alike.

Palm Springs has an abundance of screen block and the Marshalls have created a short self-guided screen block tour that highlights some fine examples. Developed for the convenience of a quick jaunt, the windshield survey is big fun.

Drive by 190 E. Palm Canyon Drive. This exotic three-dimensional block was designed by Austrian-American sculptor Erwin Hauer. Far more expensive and difficult to produce than standard screen block, surviving examples of Hauer's blocks are extremely rare.

Nearby find Twin Palms Apartments at 495 Twin Palms Drive. These walls of Venus pattern screen block create imaginative Martian figures. Then buzz by Canyon View Estates east on Canyon Vista. This neighborhood of detached condominiums, designed by architect William Krisel, offers a diversity of screen block, including the Starburst and Mei Ling patterns.

But for a tour de force of screen block, drive down the 2200-2400 block of Alhambra Drive which showcases many rare patterns produced by North Hollywood Block in the mid-1960s. Finally, the Parker Hotel at 4200 E. Palm Canyon Drive sports a massive double wall of the classic Vista-View pattern block at the entrance.

For a whirlwind tour around the world of concrete screen block where the Marshalls do the metaphorical driving, attend their lecture during Modernism Week on Wednesday, Feb. 19, at 1 p.m. at the Palm Springs Cultural Center. The lecture is free, but reservations are required. Tickets are available, as is the book, "Concrete Screen Block: The Power of Pattern" at www.pspreservationfoundation.org.

As for Edward Durrell Stone, his influence on the Coachella Valley desert was far from over. But that's a story for another week.