Relief from Hard 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 Durell 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 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 helped catapult to architectural stardom.

Much has since been written about Stone and his 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 Blocks: 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 and advertising campaign carried on, with screen block’s relevance. Recognizing that their screen block patio wall could be made quickly and at a high profit as tracts of houses were slapped up to accommodate the postwar boom.

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 outdated faux. 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 pictorial enthusiastically touted screen block’s ability to conceal with “Hide-A-Car, Hide-A-Compost, Or Hide-A-Hotel-Garbage-Pickup-Area, Hide-A-Anything-You-Wanna-Hide…[screen block] can handle the toughest 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 Maritan figures. Then buzz by Canyon View Estates east on Canyon Vista. This neighborhood of detached condominums, 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-Vue 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 Durell Stone, his influence on the Coachella Valley desert was far from over. But that’s a story for another week.