

Defining the aesthetics of early SoCal style

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The chemical formulas for the tile glazes were top secret. The manufacturers and artists creating the exuberant colors and patterns to adorn the most fashionable houses in California of the 1920s were careful to keep those secrets. Small companies, making bespoke artisan tiles proliferated and their wares would have a lasting impact on the larger world and define an aesthetic for which California, and Southern California in particular, is still known.

The 1915 Panama Pacific International Exhibition held in San Diego celebrated the opening of the Panama Canal created the tile craze, and in the process a whole new design aesthetic perfectly suited to the salubrious California climate. Bertram Goodhue had been selected as the master architect, and with Carleton Winslow as his lieutenant, consciously avoided the formal Beaux-Arts architectural forms and appointments of previous international fairs. Instead, the buildings in San Diego would invent something entirely new, earning their own designation as Spanish Colonial Revival or Spanish Mediterranean Revival. And this conjured up "indigenous historical vernacular style" required piles and piles of decorative tile.

Visitors to the fair were astonished by the gorgeous architecture created specifically for the exhibition and its adorning tile. Featuring thick cement or adobe brick walls topped with red clay barrel tile the buildings were stunning. Alluring courtyards were animated with the splash from tiled fountains. Arches delighted those passing beneath their tiled-embellished underbellies. Stairs rising upon layer and layer of tile clung to the exteriors of buildings alongside wrought-iron railings. There were completely tiled rooms: floor, walls and ceilings, painstakingly set inches at a time. Fireplace surrounds and hearths fea-

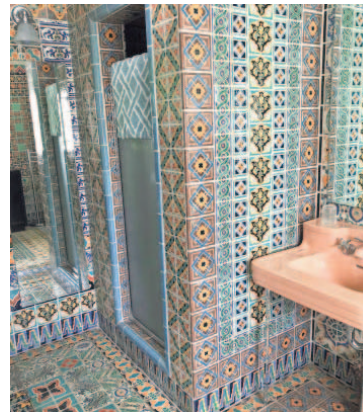


The swimming pool at the Kirschner house in Old Las Palmas featured a tiled medallion and light columns. PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY/SPECIAL TO THE DESERT SUN

tured exuberant displays. And of course, furniture was similarly appointed, with tiled tabletops, occasional tables, and accompanying oil jars and decorative narrative plaques.

The gorgeous display created instant demand for California tile. Between 1915 and the early 1930s, more than one hundred tile factories were born. Malibu Potteries, Taylor Tilery, Catalina Pottery, Batchelder, California Clay Products Company, Claycraft and Gladding, McBean Company mined clay, hired hundreds of workers, erected kilns and enormous factories. Competing for the best design talent and experimenting with new glaze formulas, they churned out huge quantities of decorative California tile. Their products topped and floored buildings at universities, train stations, libraries and all manner of civic buildings.

The Spanish Colonial Revival archi-



The Kirschner estate's elaborate tiling included this bathroom.

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tectural style was perfectly suited to the desert and the trend quickly proliferated here. The most fashionable and desirable houses and hotels in the 1920s were built in this style and featured the tile that defined the aesthetic.

Prominent architect Gordon Kaufman designed a charming, but small, one-bedroom house for Walter Morgan that would become the nidus for the La Quinta Hotel, its bungalows and bathrooms all sprinkled with tile.

Nellie Coffman enlisted the help of Tom O'Donnell to transform the Desert Inn from clapboard and tent housing into the pleasing Spanish Mediterranean Revival style that was all the rage. O'Donnell's house, built in exchange for his loan to Coffman, featured Batchelder, S&S Tile Company and American Faience Tile in its kitchen and bathrooms. The floors were by Gladding, McBean with Malibu Pottery tile inserts. Coffman would floor her new hotel with the same pavers and two-inch incised blue inserts.

Businessman extraordinaire Walter Kirschner's 1937 Old Las Palmas residence, stretched out over three lots was a tile tour du force. Stuffed with Claycraft and Malibu tile in a mélange of color and pattern, practically no surface was left out. The swimming pool was completed tiled and surrounded with tiled columns topped with globe light fixtures. At the bottom, a square tiled medallion, the breadth of the pool, demarcated its center. There was an elaborate tile mural of a peacock at the edge of the garden. Kirschner's later Tower Ranch in Indio was even more ornamented.

Marshall Wilkinson, a Hollywood architect who designed homes for Alan Ladd, Fred Astaire, Douglas Fairbanks, Jr. and Carole Lombard designed El Encanto Apartments in the revival style, replete with California tile.

Harry J. Williams, the father of modernist architect Stewart Williams, used

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the style for La Plaza, the mixed-use development he designed for Julia Carnell. The buildings housed shop girls and chauffeurs above, and retail stores below and featured a tiled doggie water fountain for passing pedestrians and their pets on Palm Canyon that survives today.

One of the finest installations of tile in the entire desert may be found in the Newhall house in the Movie Colony neighborhood in Palm Springs.

Newhall, of the town that bears his name, had retired to Valencia, Spain, in a hacienda named La Chureya — the roadrunner — and surrounded himself with orange trees.

Promised the same, if he would return to California, the house here replicated the Spanish style and the gardens and has eight fabulously tiled bathrooms reminiscent of the best Spain had to offer. One bathroom featured tiles of the deepest midnight blue color imaginable.

Invernada, the 1935 “Wintertime” home of Tillie Lewis, the Associated Press’ 1951 Businesswoman of the Year thanks to her ingenious cultivation of Italian tomatoes for mass markets, is a delightful example of the revival style and is situated on an entire city block.

Arthur Bourne, the heir to the Singer Sewing Machine fortune, commissioned Wallace Neff, a fine practitioner of Spanish Colonial Revival architecture to build him a huge compound in Palm Springs in 1933. Shaped in a U, surrounding a tiled swimming pool, much of the original design and tile has been lost through the years, but the historic photographs attest to the allure of the style, and its tile, in the 1920s.

There are too many fine examples to recount. Other Southern California places, like Santa Barbara and Rancho Santa Fe would adopt the revival style and its colorful tile for good, dictating that all new construction adopt its conventions.

For decades the predominant building style in the desert was Spanish. But after the second World War, there would be an influx of modernist architects and their minimalist approach to building became stylish. The colorful tiles produced by the secret glaze formulas of the 1920s were no longer re-