

Cody's Cameron Center was Googie-style

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Special to Palm Springs Desert Sun
USA TODAY NETWORK

"The Cameron Center has the 'Look of Today' with the Huddle Springs being termed 'America's Most Beautiful Restaurant,' and the groundbreaking...for the new, completely modern Mayfair Market (completes)...architect William Cody's sketch of the future." The plan included hundreds of parking places and a variety of additional shops and offices. A sign reading, "Dedicated to the Parking Convenience of Palm Springs Shoppers" was planted on the site during the opening ceremony.

George Cameron's eponymous center was being contemplated when he had a surprise wedding to Daphne Myrick. The bride and groom were going to live happily ever after, splitting their time between their Thunderbird and "palatial" Beverly Hills homes upon returning from their honeymoon. In the after-the-fact newspaper account of the wedding in January 1955, Cameron was identified as a "Texas oilionaire (sic) who is going to build the five-million-dollar Cameron Center in Palm Springs."

The restaurant was placed on the corner of Mesquite Avenue and Palm Canyon Drive and marked the beginning of what was called the Golden Mile, a glittering vision of modern living measured in terms of the automobile. William Cody's sketch for the future encompassed a huge plot of land, stretching east to Random Road and north to Riverside Drive, but at the hard corner would be a signature architectural statement in a design that rightfully reflected the dominance of the automobile in Southern California, hence all the parking places.

Architectural historian Alan Hess in his book "Googie: Ultra Modern Road Side Architecture," notes that the automobile and the service industry that evolved to cater to it, allowed development not in a central downtown, but out in the suburbs, or even the in the middle of the desert, where business hubs



Frank Bogert with daughter Donna near some of the signage for Aloha Jhoe's at 950 S. Palm Canyon Drive in the 1960s. PROVIDED BY THE PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

could be interspersed with residential areas. There was less congestion, wide-open spaces, but that came with a challenge. Owners tasked architects with developing stunning visual imagery to insure customers would recognize the commercial offering from behind the wheel.

Googie architecture takes its name from Googie's Coffee Shop on Sunset Boulevard at the start of the strip in Hollywood. The small restaurant was next door to Schwab's Pharmacy and was a hangout for movie stars like James Dean and Dennis Hopper and high school kids, like Lana Turner, who was mythologically purported to have been "discovered" next door at Schwab's. Designed in 1949 by architect John Lautner, Googie's Coffee Shop became famous again in 1986 with the publication of another Hess book, "Googie: Fifties Coffee Shop Architecture" just before it's unfortunate demolition in 1988.

Hess and fellow historian Steven Keyton trace Googie's beginnings to the Streamline Moderne architecture of the 1930s, which stylized the very notion of the future. Hess characterizes the style as embodying the "invisible forces of speed and energy." Cars, trains, and zeppelins were novel at the time and were gorgeously detailed to evince optimism and progress. Sleek lines and rounded edges of Moderne evolved into Googie's wild shapes outlined by long diagonals, boomerangs and atomic bursts. Googie buildings were roadside billboards in and of themselves. Various devices had been used to catch the attention of motorists since the invention of the car, but during the 1950s the extreme contours of Googie style became more widespread, especially in Southern California. And the car, with its associated parking lot, was all important.

Cameron's corner restaurant was initially called "The Springs" and then "Huddle Springs," but by 1958 it had been transformed into another post-war stylized motif of Hawaiiana, called "Aloha Jhoe's."

The return of soldiers from World War II caused a fascination with all things Polynesian. Many veterans had become enamored of the charms of the South Pacific and were willing to spend their money in recreations of aesthetic, and Aloha Jhoe's would capitalize on that.

The unveiling of the new restaurant design was captured for the newspaper. Pictured with the ambitious renderings were architect Cody, restaurateur Milton Kreis, general manager of the Cameron Center, Lew Levy, and John DeCuir, an art director and production designer, known for his work on "The King and I" (and later "Hello, Dolly!" and "Cleopatra"). The design is credited to Lyle Wheeler, a prolific art director who won Oscars for his work on "Gone with the Wind," "Anna and the King of Siam," "The Robe," and "The King and I."

Wheeler worked on more than 350 films and after being nominated for

twenty-four Academy Awards won an impressive total of five Oscars. He was also the art director for the movie "South Pacific" four years before the opening of Aloha Jhoe's. His restaurant concept required the work of master woodcarver and set designer Jim Casey. The fantasy they conjured up put all other tiki bars to shame.

The Googie contours of the building were meshed with the Polynesian theme and fantastical carved totems to stop traffic on the Golden Mile. With the new appointments for the restaurant and the opening of the Mayfair Market came the completion of 1,000 parking places at the shopping center.

Meanwhile Cameron was busy investing in Palm Springs. He bought a majority interest in The Desert Sun newspaper and all of KDES radio, making it easy to advertise. Cameron sponsored a "Lucky Parker" contest. Patrons who parked their car at the center might find their license plate photographed and printed in the Saturday edition of the paper. Winners received a potted palm tree.

In January 1959 Cameron announced plans to turn one corner of the center into a spacious putting green and making it "the only shopping center in America where you can go from tea to tee."

And Cameron celebrated the 2,000th swimming pool permit issued in the city by hosting the crowning of "Miss Cool Pool" at the center.

Palm Springs boasted the highest per capita number of swimming pools (and golf courses) in the country at the time — one pool for every six residents and one golf course for every 1,000, respectively. With the completion of 1,000 parking spaces and twice as many pools, Palm Springs was apparently all set for the future.

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