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THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

Shulman knew desert in words, photos

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“Modern architecture has had notable exponents in Palm Springs since the first houses of Neutra and of Clark and Frey early in the 1930s. Because such architecture is a continuing evolution, each year produces new solutions to the old problems. The house...designed for Mr. and Mrs. Earl Cordrey by the firm of Williams, Williams & Williams, is one of the latest and most significant developed there.”

The Cordrey House, now much remodeled, was featured in the Los Angeles Times Home Magazine of January 1950 with photographs by none other than Julius Shulman.

Intriguingly though, Shulman also penned the magazine article about the obscure house, and his writing is just as earnest as his stunning photographs. “Structurally the house is simple. Built on a flat concrete slab with concrete block, glass and wood siding as the basic elements, it illustrates how honest design can provide dramatic appearance, low construction costs and complete comfort.”

By the time of his most approving assessment of the house, Shulman had seen everything Southern California had to offer in modern architecture. He knew all the practitioners of the art and photographed this new style in a way that made it famous and then iconic. To say that Shulman had an eye for important architecture is absurdly obvious, as his photograph of a building could make it important.

Shulman goes on to detail what makes for a superior desert building. “The first consideration of the architects was the orientation of the house. In Palm Springs there are two basic views. One is toward the east across the desert with an every-changing vista of color on the distant mountains. The other, south and west, toward the Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains. The view from the living-dining area of the Cordrey home is toward the latter. Directly to the southwest in the mouth of Tahquitz Canyon. As one enters the house the illusion is such that it appears as if the house is within arm’s reach of the canyon.” In fact, in the photographs, it looks like the mountain is right at the front door.

The open vista of seemingly endless space, captured by his lens, stretched right from the front yard of the house to Tahquitz Canyon, the steepness of the mountain exaggerated by its proximity. The sheer natural escarpment and an artful man-made overhang made possible a wall of windows on the western exposure of the house. When the shade produced by the overhang was overwhelmed by the hot afternoon sun, the mountain would soon provide a lovely twilight for several hours before the actual sunset.

“An unusual feature of the living room is the planting space next to the plate-glass wall. By place the



The Spa Hotel colonnade by Julius Shulman. COURTESY OF THE PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

glass at the edge of the overhang and setting the structure beam and columns back from it almost three feet, it was possible to provide a planting area the full length of the room. This provides for a colorful mass of flowers the year-round.” Shulman celebrated bringing the garden inside in a mid-century signature manner.

The second story studio featured a wall of glass facing north as always prescribed by artists for the studios and ateliers.

“Besides providing ideal light conditions, it offers a breathtaking view over Palm Springs to the Chocolate and Little San Bernardino Mountains. Long after the sun has set in Palm Springs one can watch the distant shadow play and varying sunset colors on these mountains.”

Shulman also appreciated bringing the natural colors of the desert into use for the building, despite his photographs being black and white. “Exterior colors were chosen to blend with the desert brush and surrounding mountains. The lower walls are lavender-gray with accent walls of deep purple. On the interior the concrete-block walls and the ceilings are warm gray. All the cabinetwork is natural oak, glazed with white. Floors are concrete, color with acid stain.”

The article was lavishly illustrated with original Shulman images providing evidence in favor of his

high grades for its design and execution. “Though this house is completely attuned to desert living, its design is a definite departure from early desert houses which attempted to shut out head and the elements by heavy walls. This, of course, eliminated any possibility of outdoor living and one had to go outside to enjoy a view. Today’s design, as so aptly illustrated in the Cordrey house, opens entire walls to the outdoors. Circulation of air, intelligent use of insulation and other technological improvements are the keys to a freer way of living.”

Shulman’s photographs conjure up the ideal of freer living, elegant and honest, without the constraints of clutter and fanciful architectural detailing. His photograph of Pierre Koenig’s Case Study House #22, the Stahl House, has been reproduced countless times and is shorthand for an entire era. The Los Angeles Times noted in 2009, “Shulman’s 1960 photograph of Koenig’s Case Study House No. 22 -- a glass-walled, cantilevered structure hovering above the lights of Los Angeles, became one of the most famous architectural pictures ever taken in the United States. It was, as architecture critic Paul Goldberger wrote in the New York Times, ‘one of those singular images that sum up an entire city at a moment in time.’”

Shulman is credited with popularizing the mid-century modern style itself through his seductive images. The vast archive of his images, some 260,000 items, is housed at the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles, and Shulman’s own Los Angeles house, designed by his friend Raphael Soriano in 1947, was designated a cultural heritage monument in 1987.

Shulman’s photographs speak for themselves as his precise compositions reveal the relationship between the building and the landscape. His words reveal his abiding interest in, and deep understanding of that interplay.

Shulman’s keen interest in new solutions to the old problems brought the Cordrey House to his attention. His approbation of the obscure but inventive home in Palm Springs was shared by others who cared deeply about good design. Priscilla Chaffey reported for the local paper in 1949, “We have it on the authority of Douglas Haskell, publisher of The Architectural Forum, that illustrator Earl Cordrey’s... Colony is the BEST piece of architecture in Palm Springs! Mr. Haskell didn’t take personal responsibility for this statement, publishers are smart people and seldom take personal responsibility for anything, but he said it was the ‘consensus of opinion’ among the convening architects. Over 300 of them milled through the (house) Sunday afternoon, so they should know.” Julius Shulman certainly knew and agreed.

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