

THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

Little known architectural details were his passion

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The word “gloriette” comes from the 12th century French, “gloire” meaning “little glory.” It is an adornment, a celebration, a building in a garden erected on an elevated site allowing for views. The form is often of a pavilion or a tempietto, the small temples that dot the landscape all over Italy’s gardens. But the most famous gloriette in the world is in Vienna at the Schönbrunn Palace. The Schönbrunn gloriette makes the incorporation of the feature into Richard Neutra’s Desert House for Edgar Kaufmann in Palm Springs understandable, as Neutra emigrated from Austria.

In the middle of the 20th century, important architecture was popping up everywhere. Architect and architectural historian Patrick McGrew, writing in 2012, noted that contemporaneous with the Kaufmann house, “Mies van der Rohe produced the Farnsworth Residence in Plano, Illinois, and Marcel Breuer delivered the butterfly-roofed Geller Residence in Lawrence, New York. Charles and Rae Eames’ Pacific Palisades residence arrived; Eero Saarinen’s General Motors Technical Center unfolded in Warren, Michigan; and Le Corbusier’s Unite d’Habitation soared skyward in Marseilles, France.”

Neutra’s Desert House, complete with its gloriette, for Edgar and Liliane Kaufmann is at home with these masterpieces and a perfect counterpoint to Falling Water, the Kaufmann Pennsylvania country home designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. Wright had tried for the original commission but Edgar Kaufmann selected Neutra instead.

The idea of a gloriette suited the rocky desert landscape and Neutra’s intended design of perching a machine-age building atop it. It was also a marvelous adaptation of the sleeping porch that was an integral part of desert buildings, allowing for magnificent views while catching a cool evening breeze.

The word “gloriette” can also refer to a large birdcage, similar in form to the architectural gloriette, often made of wrought iron or, more rarely, wood. Liliane Kaufmann may well have felt that the Desert House more aptly fit this definition, and that she was a bird in that glorious cage.



The gloriette of the Neutra-designed Kaufmann House. COURTESY PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Her husband was a notorious lothario, and their marriage was disintegrating. Little known is that Wright actually did get his chance to design a house for the site. McGrew elaborated: “In the early 1950s, Liliane Kaufmann commissioned Wright to design another house in Palm Springs on the north side of the property where the Neutra house sits. An unflattering image of the Neutra house appears in Wright’s rendering. Named ‘Boulder House,’ as confirmed by Edgar Kaufmann Jr. in his book ‘Fallingwater Rising,’ this commission was to be a home for Liliane Kaufmann who could no longer live with her philandering husband. But she died before the project could be built. It is said that Wright put both Edgar and Liliane’s names on the rendering in a vain attempt to regain Edgar’s patronage.”

The idea of Wright designing another house adjacent to Neutra’s after losing the original commission is a tantalizing tidbit. It is the kind of obscure information that now fascinates so many visitors to the desert.

It is the kind of thing that historian Robert Imber would unearth and then wax poetically about, at length, in his many tours of Palm Springs architecture. Imber is rightfully credited with focusing attention on architecture in the desert and creating a demand for seeing it. The notion of that sort of architectural tourism has come to full fruition in Modernism Week.

Imber started Palm Springs Modern

tour niche and seeing the endeavor grow, along with the advent of others to fill an ever-growing need, it’s just time. I’ll continue to provide press, media and special private tours as interest in Desert Modernism increases. This decision has been long in coming ... it’s part of creating a personal ‘next step’ that at some point I hope you’ll take with me. I’ll make a more formal announcement around the first of the year, but as a ‘teaser,’ in the meantime be thinking of architectural destinations you’d like to visit for a few days, both near and far!

“I truly cannot thank you enough for your friendship and support over more than 15 years doing tours. I hope this transition will allow for time to enjoy the company of others that hasn’t been possible in a long while. It remains an extraordinary journey and humbling honor to be an ambassador for Palm Springs, to have welcomed a myriad of visitors and locals to explore our architectural heritage. I see this transition as an opportunity to give back to the community in a variety of new ways, yet after so many years of twice-daily tours it’s certainly odd to have unstructured time ... but it’s a creative juncture and I find myself very excited and shall keep you posted.

“I hope in some way that my new chapter will enable us all to continue to savor, share, educate and join others in more architectural adventures so with the deepest appreciation, I’ll just say ‘see you soon ...’”

Imber was eloquent in his lengthy exuberance. Sadly, his imagined next step was not to come to fruition as planned. With his passing the knowledge of many tidbits and architectural curiosities perished too. As this weekend’s festivities of Modernism Week Fall Preview unfold Imber’s influence is omnipresent. His notice of those little glories that enriched the midcentury’s architectural profusion in the desert is dearly missed. Those who love the desert’s architecture may find a champion taking up his glorious mantle in the tours offered by the Palm Springs Historical Society. For more information, visit pshistoricalsociety.org.

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Robert Imber, architectural tour guide extraordinaire. COURTESY PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Tours in 2001, schooling even sophisticated visitors in tidbits not found in textbooks. In so doing he created an increasing demand and appreciation for the treasure trove of midcentury buildings in the desert and their more esoteric backstories. His packed minivan would be seen by local residents prowling neighborhoods and then lingering at interesting sites while Imber would explain, at length, their import. His stories animated the architecture, enlivening it, recreating its context.

Imber’s untimely death some months ago leaves a terrible void. He had been thinking of new adventures. He wrote to many friends in 2017: “I’m writing this first round of emails to tell you that recently I’ve been winding down my business and, for the most part, am no longer doing daily tours. After creating the regional architectural