

THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

Bullock's was a special shopping experience

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There was a time when shopping was an edifying experience, mostly because of the exquisite architecture of department stores. The banal act of buying clothing, sporting goods or cosmetics was elevated to something extraordinary by beautiful surroundings. In Palm Springs and Los Angeles, the apogee of that experience was Bullock's.

The Los Angeles flagship Bullock's store was a tour du force of Art Deco style designed by John and Donald Parkinson. The interiors were just as spectacular and appointed by an undeservedly obscure master architect who is the subject of a gorgeous new book by Christopher Long. Entitled "Jock Peters, Architecture and Design: The Varieties of Modernism," it is essential reading for anyone who wants to truly understand midcentury modern design in Southern California. Breezing through its pages creates a yearning to be in Peters' rarefied interiors, even for just a moment of shopping.

In Palm Springs, Bullock's operated as a seasonal shop, a "resort store" catering to wealthy tourists during the winter season. It first opened in a Spanish Mediterranean-styled building of the Desert Inn.

The Los Angeles Times carried an item announcing its opening in November 1930: "Housed in a newly erected building of Spanish design with red tile roof and gay awnings, the shop has attracted a fashionable clientele. ... Sports and travel apparel for men and women are in the shop's stock of merchandise. There is a room in which articles for men exclusively are shown. Boots, spurs, golf clubs and sweaters contribute a clubby outdoor aspect against a setting of hand-woven rugs of ancient Indian design and deep leather chairs in beige and rust.

"The women's shopping room is equally cheerful. Hand-woven curtains, walnut furniture especially built for Bullock's Desert Inn Shop lend a feminine touch against a background of cool greens and henna with snappy offerings of sports and travel costumes."

The store also provided the furnishings for multiple demonstration homes



A Stephen Willard postcard of Bullock's from La Plaza, circa 1954.

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in the late 1930s through the 1940s in Las Palmas and Little Tuscany.

In October 1947, Bullock's opened a new Streamline Moderne building at 151 S. Palm Canyon Drive, which echoed the grandeur of the Los Angeles building. The building's geometric, sleek vocabulary was conceived to contrast with its jagged backdrop of mountains beyond. The facade of the front pedestrian entrance and the rear parking lot elevation were symmetrical. A patio was formed on the rear side with a circular bed of plantings placed in the middle.

"The new store will be unique in its expression of desert living." Architects Walter Wurdeman and Welton Becket told *The Desert Sun* December 14, 1945: "The building is being planned so that a feeling of out-of-door freedom enters every major selling area. Glass walls from floor to ceiling will be bordered by flower and shrub gardens, while opaque walls will be of heat-resistant Thermopane faced with adobe and desert stone."

Great consideration was given to cooling a large department store in the desert. The key was to allow in gorgeous sunlight in the temperate months, while sheltering the interior in the scorching summer. The architects designed long

eaves overhanging large display windows and providing shade during the heat of the afternoons. *Architectural Record* in April 1948 noted that the effort at solar control resulted in vertical louvers of the second floor and an elaborate cooling system suspended above the interior ceilings.

For a time, the department store's interior was open on the first floor, demonstrating modern ideas about open, flexible spaces. On the street level were displayed apparel and departments for men, women, girls, intimate apparel, dresses, suits and coats, all merged with one another, separated only by small spur walls and structural supports. *Architecture Record* explained that the low counters and open plan permitted the use of a skeleton crew in the summer "slack season."

The second floor featured a dining table department, sun and a modern shop, gifts, a glass and china section, furniture, appliances, beds and linens — and all were accessed by the first ever elevator in Palm Springs.

The presence of the swanky, new, architecturally distinctive store made a huge impact on the desert as a whole.

Arthur Elrod moved to Palm Springs and found a job as junior staff in the

home furnishings department at the newly opened 1947 Bullock's, launching his vaunted decorating career from the second floor of the spectacular building.

Thanks to its haute couture offerings, Bullock's provided for fashion shows at the Desert Inn, the El Mirador Hotel and the Racquet Club, which became a staple in the desert in service of raising money for various charities and scholarships.

The beauty salon, also on the second floor, was particularly attractive. An advertisement in *The Desert Sun* elaborated: "There's exciting news in the hair-dressing world, and Mr. Jay, well-known stylist of the celebrated Coiffures American of New York, is bringing it to Bullock's Palm Springs. It's the new 1957 version of the flattering young Feather Cut ... streamlined, sleek with new lightness. Mr. Jay is introducing a whole series of exciting new Feather-Do's at Bullock's. You are invited for a complimentary consultation this week while Mr. Jay is here." The streamlined Feather-Do was perfectly matched with the streamlined, quintessentially modern building.

That year, 1957, also saw the celebration of the new store's 10th anniversary. The town's glitterati and Bullock's big-wigs gathered at Thunderbird Country Club for a dinner. Addie Hubbard, the manager who had opened the original store in 1930 at the Desert Inn, was seated at the head table as a guest of honor. The history of the entire institution and the Palm Springs store were recounted. The tremendous growth enjoyed by the Palm Springs store over the next two decades was heartily cheered.

By the early 1990s, though, the building was vacant and slated to be demolished because the purported "asbestos problem makes it impractical to renovate." It was to be replaced with a new retail complex and parking structure. Many locals and preservationists lamented the loss of this architectural gem. A generic stucco and tile building, sadly not edifying or elevating in the slightest, now stands in its place.

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