HISTORY

The divine desert architecture of Walter S. White

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Special to Palm Springs Desert Sun
USA TODAY NETWORK

Each week in the early 1950s, an entire page of the Los Angeles Times was devoted to announcements by religious institutions about their offerings. A vast array of possibilities was available, ranging from the Self-Realization Fellowship to every imaginable permutation of Christian churches. Various temples, synagogues and even institutions of theosophy were all offering lectures and sermons to service the soul.

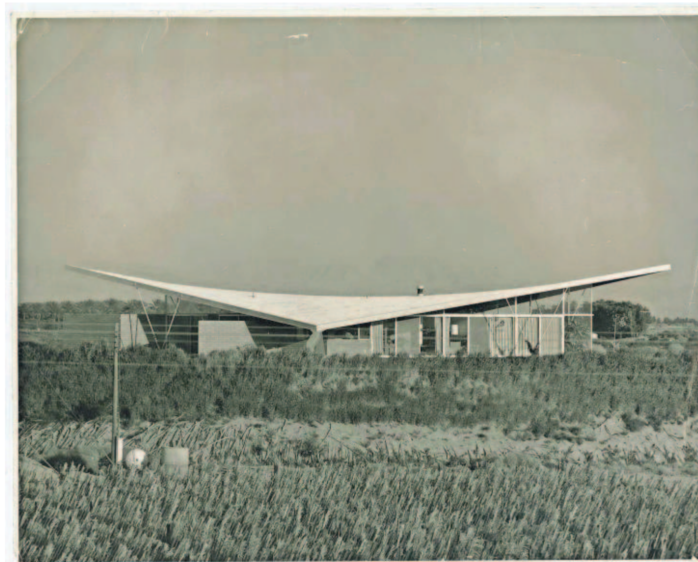
The lectures of Reverend Max E. Willcockson, minister of education of the First Congregational Church at 6th and Hoover Streets in Los Angeles were regularly featured. He was a graduate of the University of Chicago and had been active for decades in the churches in the Midwest and California. One particular sermon advertised in the Los Angeles Times entitled "As Inclineth the Twig – So the Tree" could have presaged Willcockson's unlikely contribution to the desert and the growth of midcentury modern architecture in the desert from a small seedling to a full forest.

In wide-open spaces of Indio, Willcockson hired Walter S. White to create architecture worth worshipping.

White was an important figure in the history of Palm Desert. Son of a builder from San Bernardino, he set himself up down the road a bit from the Henderson brothers near the corner of Highway 111 and Cabrillo Avenue. After buying a lot from Cliff and the Palm Desert Development Corp., new owners could have a modern desert dream house designed by White. White would plant more than 50 houses on the desert landscape in the 1940s and 50s.

According to architectural historian Volker M. Welter, White worked briefly for Harwell Hamilton Harris and also for Rudolph Schindler. Schindler said of his own 1946 Palm Desert Maryon Toole house: "The whole is shaded by an ample but lightly poised roof reminiscent of a giant oak leaf." White would expand dramatically on that idea of creating spectacular, beatific rooflines.

The idea would dominate the buildings he would produce for the rest of his career. White's inventive 1954 Franz Alexander house in Palm Springs is crowned with an upward-sloping curve that seems balanced precariously. His 1955 Bates house in Palm Desert is a giddy confection. The small house is topped with a rapturous wave breaking above the clerestory glass and simple block. But the roof of the Willcockson house, a few years later, is even more ambitious and ecstatic. Its anchoring supports touch down atop a sand dune on two cement feet that seem impossibly dainty from a distance. The expanse of the roof hovers above the desert like outstretched wings of a spacecraft from another world. An engineering marvel, especially from someone who was not formally trained, the roof was supremely impressive and pre-dates architect Albert Frey's now famous hyperbolic paraboloid Tramway Gas Station by half a decade.



The Willcockson residence still stands, and its roof reaches to the heavens in seemingly silent prayer. COURTESY WALTER S. WHITE PAPERS AT UC SANTA BARBARA, ART, DESIGN AND ARCHITECTURE MUSEUM

Beneath the outstretched expanse of the roof, White's meticulous detailing with mitered glass corners illustrates the true mien of an architect. Creating an unsupported corner of glass was expensive and technically difficult and is now synonymous modern architecture. Not part of structural system, the glass is sheltered below an impossibly empyrean roof. Welter calls the extravagant design symbolic of White's aesthetic aspirations to be truly modern even in small houses of 700 or 800 square feet.

Of course, the roof was a perfect solution to the scorching sun. The parabolic wings of the roof reach skyward, perfectly angled to block the height of the sun while preserving the view of the mountains.

Summarized for a University of California, Santa Barbara, Art, Design and Architecture Museum show of White's work, "White's designs for the Coachella Valley desert cities of Palm Desert, Indio, La Quinta and Palm Springs in the 1940s and 1950s addressed the extreme climate with thrilling, expressionistic forms that took inspiration from the natural landscape, while proposing new, ecologically sensitive and inexpensive construction methods."

In 1960, having built countless houses in the Coachella Valley, White moved to Colorado Springs where he designed many of the early homes in the Kissing Camels Estate and buildings for the Kissing Camels Golf Club. Kissing Camels was pristine acreage adjacent to the area affirmed as the "Garden of the Gods" by poet and writer Helen Hunt Jackson.

(Jackson had certainly seen the grandeur of the West during her campaign for justice for native peoples and knew a divine landscape when she saw one. The Colorado Transcript reported on April 5, 1893: "It was Helen Hunt Jackson, it is said, who named 'the Garden of the Gods' in Colorado. Riding past the cabin of a prospector from the South in one of the early days of the settlement, she was attracted by a beautifully kept garden in which two negro servants, a man and a woman, were working. In answer to a question the man informed her that his name was Jupiter, and the woman's Juno, whereupon she exclaimed, 'Then this must be the Garden of the Gods.'")

Walter White would find himself in this idyllic landscape where he designed bigger, fancier houses for the well-to-do. Welter explains that Al Hill, a wealthy oil man from Dallas, had invested with the Henderson brothers in Palm Desert and was likely the connection to Kissing Camels. White moved to Colorado with a friend who was in the construction business and created modern houses in a wholly different geography for the wealthy clientele that moved from place to place according to the calendar and the weather.

Welter recounts that during the 1960s White continued to innovate, developing partially pre-fabricated mountain cabins, a concept that he successfully translated in the following decade into permanent houses. White was seriously interested in low-cost housing and designed kit houses sold by Sears that he said could "be assembled in a matter of hours."

While in Colorado, White became fascinated with passive solar residences, an idea he took back with him to California in the early 1980s. Despite his lack of formal training, the State of California granted him an architectural license upon his return in acknowledgement of a lifetime of inspired work.

The Franz Alexander House and the Bates House have been restored and designated historically significant. In Indio, the Willcockson house still stands, and its roof reaches to the heavens in seemingly silent prayer. Its fate is uncertain these days, reportedly having recently changed ownership. In a concept that unexpectedly connects to the house's original ecclesiastical owner, there are apparently plans to build a large church complex in the pristine desert open space around it.

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