

THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

John Byers' authentic design was desert home to Cary Grant

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Enamored of historical building techniques, John Byers embraced California's early heritage. Born in Michigan in 1875 after the Civil War, the transplant to sunny Santa Monica understood the delicious textures, distinctive massing and gracious living uniquely afforded by early Californian architecture. He would become the quintessential practitioner of it.

After receiving a degree in Electrical Engineering from the University of Michigan he went on to do graduate work at Harvard University. Fluent in French and Spanish, he worked at the North American Academy in Montevideo, Uruguay, before arriving in Southern California after the turn of the century where he taught romance languages at Santa Monica High School. After the school day was over, Byers would work as a translator for Mexican workmen on construction sites where he learned how to build with adobe. He began his architectural career building houses for his own family in this manner.

Byers completed his first commission in 1916 for a house at 510 Lincoln Boulevard for the principal of Santa Monica High School, W.F. Barnum. Over the following decades, he proceeded to design and build dozens of homes on the most fashionable streets in the new neighborhoods of Brentwood, Pacific Palisades and Santa Monica in the architectural vernacular he called "Latin Houses."

Fascinated by traditional Mexican and Spanish methods, Byers wrote several articles in the 1920s and 1930s on the construction of adobe houses and the style's influence on California architecture. He established his own workshop, employing Mexican craftsmen to create and install adobe brick, decorative tile, wrought iron and woodwork that were in demand for tony Southern California houses. He named his company the John Byers Organization for the Design and Building of Latin Houses.

In 1931 the Los Angeles Times noted: "Styles of residential architecture particularly suited to Southern California are featured in the exhibition of the work of John Byers, architect. ... Spanish colonial, early California and the Mexican ranch house types ... are included in the display as well as the many other styles devoid of virtuosity and sophistication which are declared suitable to this climate and country. All types of construction have been used by architect Byers in his residential work. He is largely responsible for the revival in the use of adobe, but he does not specialize in this kind of construction, it is stated. Each house to be designed is said to be a problem and the most suitable type of material for the location and style of architecture is one of the solutions that the architect must find.

The collection of photographs and sketches of John Byers' work is declared to illustrate the charm



John Byers-designed Andalusian farmhouse, which would be Cary Grant's house from 1954-1972. The expansive lot and views are visible in this early photograph. COURTESY PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

and beauty which it is possible to incorporate into these solutions."

Byers soon became known as Santa Monica's most important architect and builder. He acted as a consultant for the development of Rancho Santa Fe and other projects in California, Nevada and Arizona. Byers told the Los Angeles Times on May 17, 1931: "Buildings of adobe are replete with a delicate and elusive charm and there is an easy plasticity about the material that makes it particularly suitable to the Spanish or California type of architecture."

Despite being self-taught, by 1926 Byers was a licensed architect. Described by David Gebhard and Robert Winters in their definitive Los Angeles architecture guidebook, Byers' "designs set an example which others followed to good effect, making northern Santa Monica an architectural monument of traditional images of the twenties and thirties." He soon had an impressive list of clients, including Hollywood luminaires Norma Shearer and Irving Thalberg, Shirley Temple, Joel McCrea, Buster Crabbe, Constance Talmadge, King Vidor and J. Paul Getty. He went on to design Ray Bradbury's house, the club house at Brentwood Country Club, (where he was a member and an avid golfer) and the Miles Playhouse in Santa Monica.

Conjuring up the romantic past of California during the Mexican Rancheros, Byers' designs were as practical as they were graceful, and they translated perfectly to the desert.

Dr. J.J. Kocher is best known for the architectural commission that caused Albert Frey to move to the desert. Frey, casting about for something to do after the Aluminaire House, was sent to the desert to de-

sign Kocher's professional offices by his brother, A. Lawrence Kocher, managing editor of Architectural Record.

But years before the modernist masterpiece, the savvy Kocher imported Byers from the coast for his 1930 desert house.

Byers' genius and commitment to indigenous architectural forms are abundantly in evidence in this house where he produced something entirely authentic in an older language.

Named "Las Palomas," Spanish for "The Doves," the house sits on an expansive lot with views to San Jacinto to the west and the Little San Bernardino Mountains to the east. Unusual for Palm Springs at the time, it featured a second story with endless vistas in both directions. The house was separated into two wings: one for the common spaces of living room and kitchen; and one, across a breezeway adorned with elaborate wrought-iron gates, for the bedrooms. Each bedroom had its own bathroom and kiva fireplace.

Modeled on an Andalusian farmhouse, Las Palomas was purchased by actor Cary Grant and his third wife, Betsy Drake, in 1954, after his divorce from heiress Barbara Hutton. Grant had been in the desert with Hutton and decided to stay.

During his ownership, the legendary actor made it a gathering spot for celebrities and the Old Hollywood elite, including, among others, Alfred Hitchcock, Clark Gable, Grace Kelly, Katharine Hepburn, Howard Hughes and Frank Sinatra. A lifelong supporter of the U.S. armed forces, Grant also made a practice of hosting events for the troops stationed at the nearby 29 Palms Marine Corps base. Grant lived at Las Palomas for the next 18 years. During his residency he made his most famous films: "To Catch A Thief" (1955), "Houseboat" (1958), "North by Northwest" (1959), "Charade" (1963) and "Father Goose" (1964).

The house has had multiple owners since Grant sold it in 1972, including some famous people who prefer to remain anonymous. It has endured some ignominious attempts at remodel and improvement. One sympathetic expansion though saw an addition to the kitchen/living room side of the house by Wallace Neff, another famous practitioner of the Spanish style in California. But remarkably, the house has remained largely intact throughout the near century since it was built.

Even more notable is that the expansive grounds have remained unsubdivided, having escaped the sad fate of most of the surrounding lots. The gardens are now mature, creating a lush oasis where once there was open desert. Settled within that oasis, the soulfulness, grace and historic authenticity of Byers' design persists.

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