

THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

Clever historians solve hotel design mystery

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The notion of the desert as wasteland and simultaneously utopia fascinates architectural historian Luke Leuschner and causes him to chase after some seriously esoteric questions. The resultant mystery tour taken by Leuschner and his compatriot history sleuths is often circuitous and unpredictable. Their recent deep dive into the history of architects and architecture in the valley has unearthed some most unusual facts.

One such case: the Monkey Tree Hotel at 2388 E. Racquet Club Road in Palm Springs. The building's architecture is dramatic, inviting comment and speculation about its design. Often attributed to famed architect Albert Frey, the Monkey Tree Hotel, instead, has an even more fascinating history.

Following up on fellow historians Melissa Riche's and Steven Keylon's work, Leuschner working with Brad Dunning documented an amazing tale that illustrates how such research can take some unexpected turns and result in an interesting story like those now vaunted by Modernism Week.

Years ago, Keylon was driving by the Monkey Tree Hotel with noted architect Hugh Kaptur and asked Kaptur if he thought Frey designed it. Keylon posited that the design was distinctive and looked nothing like Frey despite the oft-repeated attribution. Kaptur confirmed it was not Frey but thought it was designed by a draftsman for E. Stewart Williams "with a funny name he couldn't remember." So, Keylon went digging into what he



Postcard of the Monkey Tree Hotel illustrating its distinctive architecture designed by Colleen Crist. COURTESY PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

rightly characterized as "a bowl of spaghetti."

Nicholas Astrahantseff was indeed a mouthful, and he was a draftsman who did work for Williams. Further digging revealed he was married to Colleen Crist. Crist's father and brother shared the same initials, (making for distinctive monograms of ABC,) and creating some further confusion. There were two A.B. Crists: Albert Belden Crist, Colleen's father, developer and designer of houses in the original Hollywoodland tract, and her brother, Albert Beach Crist, who was a builder.

A. Belden Crist enjoyed a very successful career and regularly advertised in *The Desert Sun*. He lauded his years of experience in Hollywood and Palm Springs and the luxury homes he produced from his 353 Stevens Road address.

Born in Kansas in 1887, he started as a carpenter and moved west to Los Angeles in 1907. The very first house he ever built for his own business in Hollywood cost \$25,000 and was valued at almost 10 times

that near the end of his long life.

The *Desert Sun* covered Crist's 100th birthday in 1987 and noted: "A book titled 'The Achievements of A.B. Crist' shows black-and-white photographs of his work. The homes, with their intricate detail and style, have a charm that is gone from many of today's carbon-copy homes. Colleen Astrahantseff, Crist's daughter, described her father's designs as 'romantic.'"

During World War II, Crist moved his family to the desert. Crist recalled: "When I first went there Palm Springs was just a village. My idea of the future of the city was nothing like it is now. I think it surprised all of us."

The newspaper documented that "his most famous client here was Elvis Presley. Crist added a bedroom and exercise room to the singer's Las Palmas area home. The addition doubled the size of his home. We built a bedroom that had two baths. After it was finished, he wanted me to add another 10 feet."

Leuschner and Dunning spent all this last summer poring over the Frey archives at the Palm Springs Art Museum and at University of California, Santa Barbara in anticipation of a Frey exhibition at the Palm Springs Art Museum coming in 2024. Dunning notes that Frey thoroughly documented his work yet he and Leuschner could not find a single mention of the Monkey Tree Hotel.

Dunning explains, "In preparing for the exhibition on Frey, it became clear that he had no involvement whatsoever in the design of the existing Monkey Tree Hotel. There is not a letter, contract, photos or scrap of paper, let alone any blueprints that attach him to the design of the hotel. The only reason that Frey is associated with the Monkey Tree's design is because he told the architectural historian Joseph Rosa that he had designed a preliminary scheme which was never realized. We have not seen this scheme or physical evidence that it exists. If Frey told Rosa that he had designed an early scheme, he very well did, but by no means does that mean it was built. As Rosa indicates clearly in his book, it was a project, meaning it was never constructed."

While the Monkey Tree Hotel is not a design by Albert Frey, it has an even more interesting legacy. The hotel was actually designed by Colleen Carol Crist, (whose monogram is CCC,) the daughter of A. Belden Crist. As one of the few mid-century buildings in Palm Springs designed by a woman, the Monkey Tree Hotel is indeed special.

Leuschner, in solving the mystery and summarizing said, "Although Crist never received

AIA status, she worked as a draftsman for architects such as William Cody and E. Stewart Williams. Her husband Nicholas Astrahantseff was also a draftsman who appears to have worked in the same offices. As is prominently mentioned in her obituary, Colleen was responsible for the design and contracting of the Monkey Tree Hotel — which implies that it was her proudest architectural work."

Colleen Crist was born in 1922 in Hollywood, where her father was working and graduated from Hollywood High in 1941. Her obituary notes: "She worked as an architectural drafter in Los Angeles and in Palm Springs for such firms as Williams & Williams and Bill and Jay Cody. She helped design the upper station of the Palm Springs Aerial Tramway and the Palm Springs Spa, plus homes for celebrity residents and portions of the College of the Desert. She designed and contracted the construction of the Monkey Tree ... A pioneering woman in chiefly a male field, Colleen is remembered by colleagues as a superb and highly diversified artist of great logic and style. Her award-winning painting and sculpture has been exhibited throughout the Southland."

Although largely forgotten by history of late, Colleen Crist has been resurrected by the group of dedicated architectural historians who have put the mystery of the Frey attribution of the Monkey Tree to rest and have supplanted it with her more unusual story.

Tracy Conrad is president of the Palm Springs Historical Society. The Thanks for the Memories column appears Sundays in The Desert Sun.