

# SANDPIPER

In the middle years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the mountains and desert sands of the Coachella Valley inspired a design aesthetic that became known as **Desert Modernism**.

Notable for its use of glass, clean lines, natural and manmade materials and indoor/outdoor spaces Desert Modernism defined a lifestyle of elegant informality. The Desert Modern style grew out of local and visiting architects' desire to adapt Modern materials, techniques, and floor plans to the unique requirements of desert living. These talented designers created Modern structures of every size and function: residential, commercial, civic, religious, and institutional.

Fortunately, much of this historic Modern legacy exists today to be appreciated by future generations, though alterations and new development often endanger it.

One of the Coachella Valleys best remaining examples of a concentration of Desert Modernism is the **SANDPIPER** of Palm Desert.

"Thoughts of the Architect on the Sandpiper Project:

1. Sandpiper was (I believe) one of the first condominium projects in the P.S. desert area
2. Conceived as a second home in the winter season
3. Groups of 24 (Later 16) homeowners in clusters, for intimacy of scale
4. Swim pool was point of focal-visual image
5. Privacy, quiet, views were the guiding design criteria
6. Capture the beauty of the mountains
7. Walk / landscape patterns reflect desert angles
8. Landscape pallet of desert plant materials
9. Night-low-lighting expressing garden and walks
10. To encompass the artistic, experimental, social, environmental, technical, professional results that are enduring without destroying the neighborhood"

**William Krisel - A.I.A. Architect and Landscape Architect**

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**Back in 1958...** . In the area which is located near the corner of Highway 74 and El Paseo there was one fire station, a few smoke trees, a handful of distant houses and a lot of sand.

On March 21, 1958 it was announced by the **Western Land and Capital Company** of Newport Beach that a site in Palm Desert was to be developed incorporating completely new ideas in luxury desert living (45 - 55 acres).

The idea was to provide residential privacy along with resort hotel service. Such things as monogrammed *SANDPIPER* towels, linens, gardeners, maids, and room service was to be included. A bar-b-q and sheltered entertaining area would be built. Recreation would include private putting greens, swimming pools, tennis courts (not built), shuffleboard courts and children's play yards (not built).

Arrangements for memberships in the nearby **Shadow Mountain Club** were made to promote the SANDPIPER.

**The builder** selected for the project was **George M. Holstein and Sons** located in Costa Mesa, Las Vegas, and Beverly Hills. This builder had recently finished the Fairway cottages at the Thunderbird Country Club. The Holstein organization was known for building high end, custom homes for many of Hollywood's most noted personalities (Merle Oberon, Edgar Bergen, Deanna Durbin, Dick Powell, Nelson Eddy, Lionel Barrymore, Jane Greer, Jerry Colonna, Jack Holt, Charlie Barnett, Irene Dunne, Mike Romanoff, Jane Russell, Arline Judge, Laraine Day, and Mary Pickford).

**The architect** for the project was **William 'Bill' Krisel of Palmer and Krisel, A.I.A.** The firm was very well respected having received numerous national awards for their design of homes and apartments. The firm had a reputation of being extremely practical and very conscious of builders' problems. At the time of the start of the SANDPIPER project Palmer and Krisel had already designed the **Ocotillo Lodge and the Alexander homes found in the Twin Palms, Vista Las Palmas, and Racquet Club estate areas of Palm Springs.**

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The SANDPIPER project started with a survey of the property. These elevations were then taken back to the firm's office where numerous versions of site plot plans were developed.

An early attempt was made to design four-unit, cross-shaped buildings. **The chosen design however, incorporated 8 three-unit, single story, pin-wheel-shaped buildings clustered around a common area.** This configuration provided for individual privacy, as well as wonderful views to the common property, the sky and the nearby mountains.

**Decorative concrete block walls** were used extensively. The blocks had sculpted patterns and cutouts and were sometimes indented when placed for further effect. Palmer and Krisel designed many of these patterns for the SANDPIPER. The block manufacturer was then permitted to sell these NEW patterns later to others.

**Flat roofs were used along with post and beam construction.** This construction allowed the use of windows with aluminum sash, clerestory windows and large expansive **Trim-View** sliding doors. Construction was genuine lath and plaster. The beams and ceiling remained exposed as a design feature. The homes also included **patio overhangs and a system of 'Sunflaps'** that protected each unit from direct sun. Every inch of space was designed for living, storage, and relaxation. The masonry walls also provided a soundproofing effect.

Krisel who is also a landscape architect, completely detailed placement and designated plant and tree selection for the project. Several contoured mounds were incorporated in the project plans. These allowed for the convenient disposal of site debris and more dramatic views of the desert plantings.

Careful review of the elevations resulted in the conclusion that concrete block steps could be used to help **maintain the contour of the property.** This allowed for drainage control, better views and lower building cost due to easier site preparation.

The straight lines and sharp angles of the landscaping for the SANDPIPER project contrasted with the rolling mountain backdrop. **Bill Krisel received a Landscaping Merit Award for the SANDPIPER project.**

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Considerable thought was put into the actual shape and placement of the pool. It was decided that the **pool and Ramada would include dramatic angles** that would provide interest and emphasize the MODERN aspect of the project. The common recreation area was set a few steps below grade.

Each home in the 3 unit buildings were creatively designed to appear unique. Ceiling height was varied. Block patterns were changed. Decorative exterior block walls had different heights and angles. Patios were different shapes. Buildings were reversed in orientation. Yet every owner had privacy and a view!

**Desert colors** were repeated in the paints, structural materials and the plantings.

Krisel convinced Holstein to keep **all utilities underground**. These included individual TV and phone jacks to each unit.

Each 2 bedroom, 2 bath home included custom lighting fixtures by **Lightrend**, flexible room dividers, and modern furnishings. These were **MODERN** homes with all the advantages of technology! Full refrigeration, **COLOR-MATCHED** electric range, oven and refrigerator by **Westinghouse**, and a 'super hush' **Waste King** garbage disposal (Krisel had to include a drawing of how to install such a new thing as a garbage disposal)! Each of the early SANDPIPERS included a small circular marker embedded in the front door step entrance, which read "**MEDALLION HOME - LIVE BETTER ELECTRICALLY**".

Bill Krisel would travel to the desert once a week during the construction to observe the SANDPIPER project. Typically he would leave LA early in the morning and first arrive in Palm Springs to meet and have breakfast with Bob Alexander. They would review the progress of the Alexander homes projects. In the afternoon, Krisel would then travel on to Palm Desert to the SANDPIPER project. These **progress observation visits** put Bill in contact with all the main elements of project construction and landscaping (this was before there was any city or county permit inspections). His observations were not only the basis for payment of work performed but also conformance to the design drawings / specifications. At the end of the day he would travel on Highway 74 to San Diego where the next day he would manage other projects!

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Construction of the SANDPIPER was mainly accomplished in the 'summer' months. First, the SANDPIPER site was cleared of large rocks that were saved for latter use in the landscaping. Krisel walked the site and adjusted the placement of each unit for maximum views. After the site elevations and common utilities were set the 4-inch floor slabs were poured. Next the reinforced block walls were erected and the large support beams were then placed. The **beams were painted a dark weathered brown**, nearly black, color prior to their placement to support the roof. The cabinets were individually designed for each type of kitchen (round, angle, straight). A European trained craftsman made the **custom wood cabinets** on site. He even **slept on the kitchen floor** of each unit as the cabinets were made and installed.

**Vee Nisley** of Rancho Mirage was brought in as the first decorator for the model units. She introduced bright colored MODERN furniture as well as accent wallpaper, mosaics, imported prints, paintings and hanging wall sculptures. Her interior decorating emphasized the SANDPIPER theme of **carefree desert living**. She referred to the trim customized kitchen as a "**conversation kitchen** ... that was much desired in intimate desert living... the dinning bar serves a dual purpose when utilized during the **cocktail hour**." She included furniture that would allow the effective use of the Krisel designed **flexible room divider**. The owner could then switch between having a second bedroom or an extended living / den area. She also emphasized the use of the **outside patios as additional rooms** for living. Nisley was so successful in her decorating that she continued on for years to decorate the majority of the SANDPIPER homes for the new buyers.

The world-renowned architectural historian and photographer, **Julius Shulman**, took several early photographs of the Sandpiper. He made several trips to the SANDPIPER project during various building phases. His photographs brilliantly captured the realized Krisel vision of a man made development fitting in to the natural environment. These images appeared in numerous local and national magazines as well as in promotional literature. Several of his photographic images of the work of Krisel, including the SANDPIPER, are now part of the architectural photography collection of the **PALM SPRINGS DESERT MUSEUM**. Shulman often uses the Sandpiper as a positive example of good development in his many world lectures and commentary on urban planning.

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Krisel designed a SANDPIPER **sales office** and placed it on a temporary foundation near the corner of El Paseo and Highway 74. In later years this building would serve as the first location of the **Palm Desert City Hall**.

A large SANDPIPER BIRD was erected after being ceremoniously painted by the **Honorary Mayor of Palm Desert, Bing Crosby**.

Coverage of the project progress along with numerous advertisements appeared in both **The Desert Sun** and **Palm Springs Life**.

The first set of 24 homes sold well and it was decided to continue the project but without the original plans for tennis courts and child play areas. The project moved up the hill to what is now called **Unit 2**. Here the same basic ideas were incorporated. In order to fit naturally in the site Unit 2 became a more circular cluster. Here the Ramada was made curved and the pool deck area was round. This area did not require any stepped block retaining walls. Unit 2 later appeared on the cover of the **1960-61 'Annual Pictorial Issue' of Palm Springs Life**.

In 1959 work began on **Unit 3** located on the highest elevation of the property. Here Krisel **customized** several of the units for the owners. Some of these were original owners in Unit 1 and were friends of George Holstein. Additional rooms were added, select bathrooms were made more deluxe, and the first very **large enclosed patios** were added. Many of the new features developed in this circle were carried over into future Sandpiper designs.

By 1960 **Unit 4** was well underway and represented the start of the expansion of SANDPIPER in a westerly direction. Here the Ramada was a triangular shape that neatly fit into the landscape.

It was now clear that **people were willing and ready to spend more time and money** at larger designed SANDPIPER units. The switch was made to clusters of eight single story buildings each containing two homes. In **Units 5, 6, 7 and 8** buyers could chose from designs that either included two exterior patios and 2 bedrooms or included one exterior patio, one interior patio, and 3 bedrooms.

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The 'Palm Desert Sandpiper Motel' was designed by Krisel to be built in the triangular space next to the fire station located on El Paseo. Each of the 16 rooms would have its own patio, parking space, and air conditioning. The motel would have an in house manager and a pool and desert landscaping. It was thought that many of the visitors that were coming to see new SANDPIPER owners could stay at the motel. The design however, was never built. The open green space remains to this day.

Instead it was decided that even larger versions of SANDPIPER units would be built in the next phases. **In Units 9, 10, 11, and 12** owners were given several choices of homes with larger interior and exterior patios, larger bathrooms, and 2 or 3 bedrooms. The basic floor plans typically ranged between 1600 sq. ft. and 2200 sq. ft. The ceilings of these units no longer had exposed beams and ceilings. In addition, to most of the features found in the earlier SANDPIPERS all units offered both front and rear entry and included their own laundry facilities.

A new builder, **Kemp and Osborn** was used during this period with the continued architectural help of Bill Krisel.

In 1964 the SANDPIPER project was included in the **Homes for Better Living Program** sponsored by The American Institute of Architects in cooperation with the magazines **House and Home** and **The American Home**.

The next years saw the build out of the remaining of the SANDPIPER project by **Kemp** as the builder. Many of the earlier design features of the SANDPIPER were continued without the participation of Bill Krisel.

In the end the SANDPIPER included 306 individual homes and 18 swimming pools. Today these owners are represented by nine separate associations, which were created according to building phase. The historic project proved that a 'own your own apartment' concept would be practical to live in and financially successful to build in the desert environment. The 'MODERN' SANDPIPER paved the way for many more developments in Palm Desert and the rest of the Coachella Valley. **Thanks go out to all past and current owners who are maintaining the architectural integrity and vision of the original SANDPIPER project.**

# KRISEL PHILOSOPHY ON ARCHITECTURE

1. The Architect is the Captain of the "built-environment" TEAM
2. The Architect is the Master Builder and Master Designer
3. The Architect must create projects that are: a)comfortable b)cost-effective c)memorable
4. Architects must be tenacious, vigorous, and a leader in design
5. Architects must bring together all professionals involved in the building environment
6. Architects must better control the end-product, as the Captain
7. Architects must produce projects of consequence by combining: a)thought b)discipline c)integrity along with theory, history, philosophy, science and technique, craft and process... all overlaid into a truly multi-disciplinary balanced result
8. Architects must believe that no detail is too small to consider
9. Architects must create a balanced design of vision, budget, program along with painful compromise with clients and end-users
10. Architects must integrate the project with society, community and history to promote a healthy growth
11. Architects must earn the right to have a balanced practice and to demonstrate not only how to live but also how to build... this involves risk taking and professional growth
12. Architects must have respect for the modernist masters

Architecture is an agent of change, to make a **positive impact on society**