

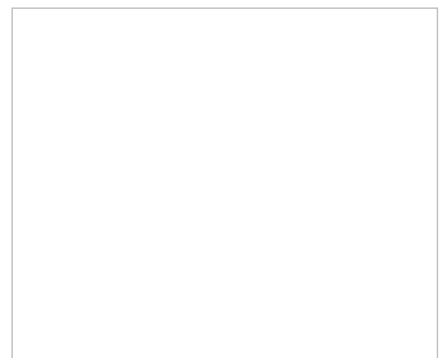
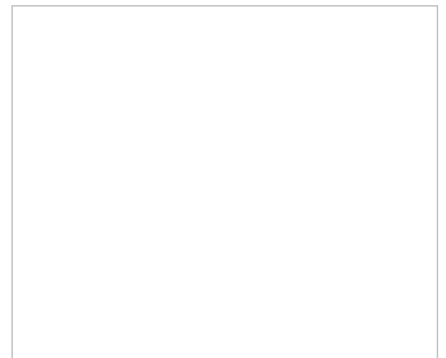
To Live and Build in Palm Springs



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WRITTEN BY [AARON BRITT](#) DECEMBER 24, 2012

We were recently in Palm Springs soaking up the sun and the majesty of the town's mid-century design. But we also made a point of ferreting out some of the best contemporary architecture in a city that can feel, at times, like a modernist museum. Architect [Sean Lockyer](#) gave us a tour of a few of his projects, houses across the Coachella Valley that continue on in the great post-war tradition of desert modernism. Here he shares his ideas about what makes for great contemporary design and what it means to build in a vintage paradise.



Lockyer's Sagebrush residence from 2009 carries on in the mid-century tradition without slavishly copying it.

Do your clients want mid-century replicas when they build in Palm Springs? How do you encourage them to go for something in the modernist idiom, but a contemporary home? We've been lucky with clients that tend to already approach us with their own understanding of the need for an updated version of a similar, historically modern look or aesthetic. This is not that hard of a sell for us in most cases. A lot of our clients get the need to update and move into the next phases of today's standards with regards to energy efficiency, building

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material longevity, and systems.

We heard a couple times in town that when Frank Sinatra was building a house in Palm Springs he wanted a Georgian design. So architect E. Stewart Williams showed him one, but he also showed him the plan for a modern home, which Sinatra ended up doing. Do you ever have to do that kind of educating?

Fortunately, we do not have to do that level of educating. Most of our clients that come to us already know the basics of what we do. I've heard that story about the Frank Sinatra house also and have always wondered why he went to Williams for the design if that's what he wanted.

How do you build within a town like Palm Springs while continuing to innovate?

This is more of the educating that we have to achieve. A lot of clients request forms and ideas that reflect something from the past. It takes a fair bit of diplomacy to push for newer ideas, although we've been lucky in this regard also. Most of our clients are willing to push into new ideas if they can visualize them. We then seem to do a lot of work to show them through graphics and 3-D models.



Do you feel any kind of pressure when building in Palm Springs? A pressure to get it right?

We do feel the pressure. The education and awareness level of modern architecture is extremely high in this area. We have a lot of local historic and modernist organizations who push for both a preservation of modern design and push for excellence in new design. They also reward architecture in both preservation and new work each year (we just won one of these this year for "new contemporary work"). This town is also a Mecca for modern architecture that is only growing in popularity each year. A lot of new ideas in modern architecture and living began here and people recognize this. Our attendance at our modernism week seems to grow exponentially and tours sell out faster than we can print tickets. I see Palm Springs building and backgrounds in international print and media about once a month. So in short, I feel like there are a lot of discerning eyes on our projects and we cannot afford to take that lightly. If design is important, it's paramount here.

Why have you guys started building your own projects? It must be a whole new brand of headache. What do you get from that process?

It is a whole new headache but it did get rid of a few others. The primary reason for deciding to build our own designs was to add to the level of design and custom detail throughout the construction process while not having to break the budget by doing so. Change orders are a contractor's way of either increasing the profit margin or simply not wanting to work harder for a better product. With us in control of this process, the end result and detail is up to us. By being on site every day and giving each detail the care and love that it needs, we realize a much finer, more detailed result while still maintaining the project's budget. We are definitely not solely interested in becoming contractors though and only want to build our own projects. I'm sure this is selfish, but we didn't make this decision to get more work or business...just a better product.



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Palm Springs is, of course, so well known for mid-century design. Who do you think is doing a good job in terms of residential architecture and landscape design today?

I think William Kopelk and Marcello Villano are doing a great job on landscapes.

Do you feel like there's much of a contemporary design scene in Palm Springs? Or is much of the design world centered around preservation, or selling that retro martini-time vibe for which the town is so well known?

I think that this scene is growing but still in its early years. With each project I see the envelope get pushed a little further, but no one has landed any space ships out here yet. We hope to be landing a few of our own in the next few projects that we have on the boards.

Do you ever feel the desire to combat that kitschy version of modernism that often holds sway in Palm Springs? How do you do it?

Every day. We do it by educating our clients through design and then showing them the best representation of this that we can. With the more projects we build the easier this becomes because we can walk them through the structures to show them the physical product.

Sean Lockyer has been practicing architecture in Palm Springs since 2005. He's originally from Philadelphia.

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