

# Interior Motives

Like time travelers, Palm Springs' modern interiors of the past transport us to a sustainable future

BY LINDA L. MEIERHOFFER



The Elrod House, situated in the Southridge neighborhood of Palm Springs, was designed by architect John Lautner and appeared in the James Bond film *Diamonds are Forever*.

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**B**auhaus style, one of the purest forms of modern design, streaks across Germany in the 1920s and '30s like a revved-up Mercedes. By the time it crosses the pond, this international brand of modernism propels 20th century Americans in a new direction of unadorned, less-is-more living.

Modernism celebrates its heyday in Palm Springs with midcentury icons: Arthur Elrod and Hal Broderick create custom built-ins and sleek furnishings inside flat-roofed or futuristic homes built by William Cody and John Lautner. The modern marriage between form and function, inside and outside, architect and interior designer is consummated. Flat, rectilinear roofs morph into butterflies, furniture's curves wear chrome, boulders and waterfalls move indoors and, eventually, "green" turns into environmental gold.



Noel Burns interior at the Abernathy House, 1965

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### Green Sustenance

Rancho Mirage architect/designer Narendra Patel started designing green more than 20 years ago because it was the right thing to do.

"We integrate luxury with green design in every aspect, every space, every detail of a project," he says. "We are about high style balanced by comfort, not style at the expense of comfort. I promote green architecture by making it sculptural, by making it organic and inspiring." Patel's business philosophy considers a structure's entire life, including how people live in it, as he consciously eliminates wasted energy, space, and resources.

"Key green features include energy-efficient lighting and appliances; high indoor air quality; water-saving plumbing; low-emission paints; fabrics made of natural contents like bamboo without toxic dyes or other chemicals; carpet and furniture — and even lightweight concrete — certified to contain recycled contents," he says. He insists that his contractors organize the construction site waste on each job so it can be sent to a

recycling facility rather than a landfill. "Going green might be the buzz phrase today, but ultimately, it will become a survival skill," Patel says.

### The Torchbearers

Like an aging movie star's career, midcentury modern interior design faded after its boom years until a new crop of designers grabbed the torch, put their own spin on it, and resurrected the Palm Springs modern look.

"Very early Palm Springs modern design had similarities to the Bauhaus in that designers used materials for their inherent qualities. Stone was used as stone, glass as glass, and metal as metal," says Jeffrey Jones, president of the American Society of Interior Designers Palm Springs chapter. "Bauhaus founder Walter Gropius said the movement was 'free of facades and trickery.'" But designer Steve Chase, who began his career with Arthur Elrod, turned that claim upside down as an eclectic modernism revival in the late '80s and early '90s put Palm Springs back on the design map.



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Gary Jons circa 1968.

“Steve Chase was the end-all of interior design up until his death in 1994,” says Evan Morgan, an ASID past chapter president and an interior designer since the late 1950s. She and Jones describe Chase’s modern style as over-the-top, heavy on adornments, with an unexpected use of materials beyond their inherent qualities. “He’d mix Chinese pieces in with the mauve and gold or use leather carpets next to lighting in the floor that was in strips, like a starburst pattern,” Jones says. “It was such a distinctive style where Steve used certain details. You can walk into a house today and know it was his design.”

According to Morgan, designers Gary Jon and Noel Birns also rose to prominence during that time and advertised their studios on the pages of *Palm Springs Life*. Archived copies of the ads breathe life into their choice of bold geometric print fabrics and wall coverings, the pairing of bright Kelly green and canary yellow in bamboo and cane furnishings, plus the use of shag carpet with tufts deep enough to hide a toy poodle.

### Driven by Design

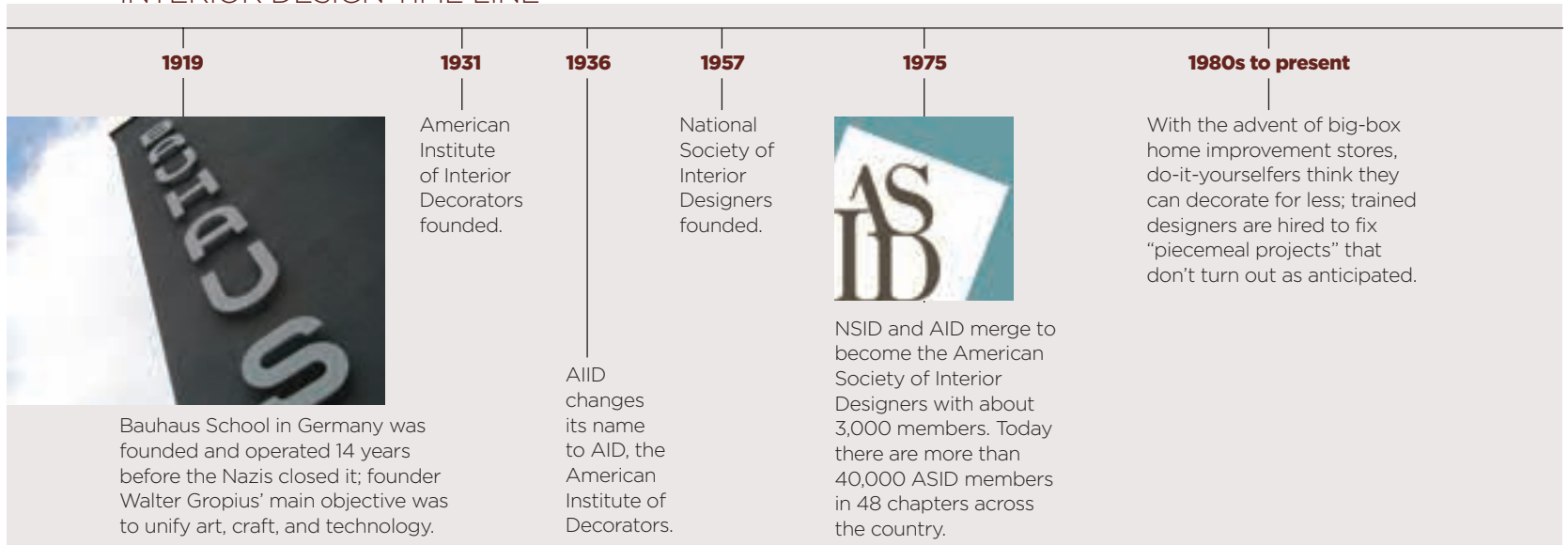
Those in the know say Chase’s torch passed to one of his protégés: Jeffrey Jurasky, ASID member and past chapter president. Jurasky says his novice years working with Chase were an extension of design school, and the exterior environment and the architecture of the home drove his work. “My work today, as it was with Steve, is very architectural, clean, colorful, and textural,” he says.



Steve Chase

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## INTERIOR DESIGN TIME LINE



Jeffrey Jurasky and Associates tends to be identified with desert contemporary style, but the founder says that doesn't define his body of work, which includes Southwest contemporary, Tuscan, and traditional, among others. "A formally trained designer should be versed in 'good design,' which can then be applied to any 'style.' Most styles are decorative when you get down to the aesthetic. ... Good design is good design."

These designers say that architecture doesn't end when interior design begins. "My inspiration, John Lautner, designed homes and integrated interior design using natural components like rocks," Patel says. "I do the same and sometimes turn those rocks into a fireplace, a shower, nightstands, or even carve them into a bed."

"The outside/inside seamless finish direction of our projects has always been a feature of our design work," Jurasky says. The future use of wood, stone, and metal simply evolve with technique. "The really big opportunity is how technology will impact how we create and what we create over the next several years."

Robert Imber, Palm Springs' architectural savant, calls modernism the "tipping point" that influenced and informed architects and designers and changed how we lived. Imber, who operates PS Modern Tours, makes his living sharing information about our



Narendra Patel's John Lautner-inspired master bedroom in this Bighorn Golf Club residence welcomes the outside in as boulders become interior design pieces.

town's modern roots with a new crop of devotees. "People came here and saw these forgotten jewels and restored and refurbished them. The movement sort of fed on itself. When you get to midcentury design, it all becomes integrated: the architecture, furniture, furnishings, fashions, the lifestyle." ■

Channel your inner modernist during Modernism Week (Feb. 12-21), which tips its hat to the icons, the torchbearers, and a green future.

"ASID members must have continuing education and go through a testing process to become credentialed. There is a degree of accountability. Your body of work must exhibit your competence," says local ASID President Jeffrey Jones. For a list of local ASID members, visit [www.palmspringslife.com](http://www.palmspringslife.com).

#### Late 1980s to early 1990s

Jim Moore, creative director of *GQ* magazine, buys an Alexander steel house designed by Donald Wexler, restores it, and starts conducting photo shoots in Palm Springs. Albert Frey's tramway gas station becomes Palm Springs Visitor Center. Richard Neutra's Kaufmann House is restored by Marmol Radziner+Associates of Los Angeles. *Vanity Fair* publishes an article about Palm Springs modern design.



#### 1994



U.S. Green Building Council establishes Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design rating system.

#### 2001

Inaugural Modernism Show takes place in Palm Springs.

#### 2006



The Modernism Show leads to the first Modernism Week in Palm Springs.

#### 2010

The Fifth Annual Modernism Week grows to 10 days, Feb. 12-21.