

YESTERDAY

DESERT SPANISH

The timeless allure of a desert Spanish home begins with a beckoning entry through a wrought iron gate.

In the desert, before the sleek sexy vibe of midcentury modern design burst on the scene, the soulful romance of California Spanish prevailed. The desert's heritage of this early California architecture still remains strong and distinctive, very much shaped by the climate. Today, you can see stellar examples of adobe and Spanish-inspired buildings still valued because they are not only perfectly adapted to the extremes of weather, but are also evocative of a golden age.



OUT OF SAN DIEGO

In 1774, two years before the American Revolution, Spanish explorer Juan Bautista de Anza trekked through the mountains immediately to the west of the Coachella Valley, seeking to forge an easy trail to California's coast. But more than a century would pass before white settlers would arrive in the desert below, settling and building simple board houses or pitching tents on wooden floors.

Replacing these shacks in the 1920s, Spanish Colonial Revival style—a substantial architecture, an architecture of concrete and adobe brick—gradually took root as it became fashionable, and as more affluent wintering visitors arrived.

But the catalyst that really made Spanish Colonial Revival popular was the Panama-California Exposition of 1915, which celebrated the opening of the Panama Canal. Set in San Diego's Balboa Park, where the historic structures remain today, the exposition was the genesis of this style in California, superseding the initial Hispanic influence exerted by California's then-decaying mission structures and remaining early California hacienda homes.

The exposition building's magnificent porticos, fanciful stucco embellishments, painted ceilings, hewn beams and brightly colored decorative tiles conjured up another more gracious era and place, and the style became all the rage in the West.

Fueled by the prosperity of the 1920s, fashionable houses in Los Angeles, Pasadena, San Marino, Santa Barbara, Santa Monica, all over Hollywood—and even Scotty's Castle reached only across the remote expanses of Death Valley—were built and lavishly decorated with colorful tile, wrought iron and painted hand-hewn beams.

Tile companies sprung up throughout California, notably in the south in Malibu and on Catalina Island, to meet the demand for

this new building craze. Glaze formulas for tiles, decorative oil jars and pottery were highly guarded secrets. Seemingly the embodiment of Southern California itself, these buildings conveyed depictions of life in the West through the warm glow of sunshine on red-tiled roofs and pale stucco walls.

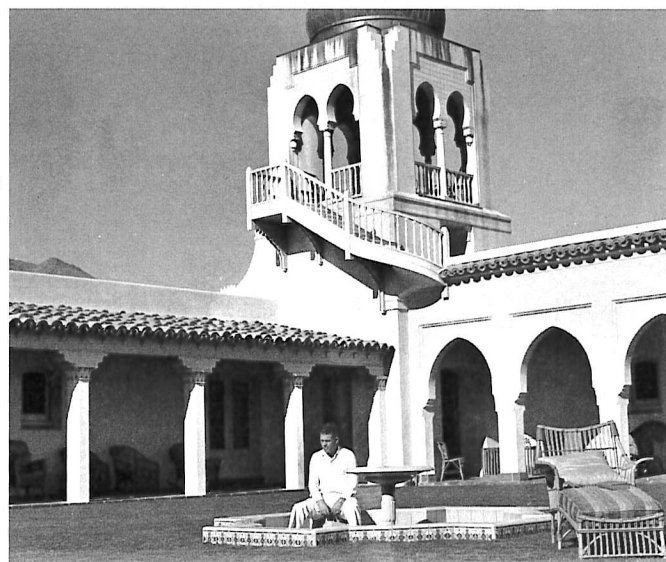
LAUNCHED BY INNKEEPERS

The quintessential story of the valley's acceptance of Spanish Colonial Revival architecture is told in the transformation of The Desert Inn, located where the moribund Fashion Plaza is being razed today. Owner Nellie Coffman, who had arrived in the desert at the end of 1908, wanted to upgrade her clapboard and tent accommodations. She borrowed \$350,000 from hotel guest Thomas O'Donnell. In return, Coffman leased O'Donnell 15 mountainside acres behind the inn and agreed to build him a house on the site. She supervised construction of both the inn and the house on the hill, to be called Ojo del Desierto, or Eye of the Desert.

By the beginning of 1925, the house was finished after an exhausting effort against gravity that required blasting out the mountain to build the pad. The Desert Inn below was updated with Spanish-style casitas scattered among lawns and cactus gardens, surrounding a grand central lodge—itsself encircled with deep porches to provide pleasant afternoon shade. Nellie's initial project subsequently inspired others to build in the Spanish architecture, not only fashionably in style, but also

so perfectly adapted to life in the desert.

At the east end of the valley, San Francisco businessman Walter Morgan purchased some 1,400 acres where he envisioned a tranquil retreat that would convey the ease and grace of Spanish hacienda-style living. Morgan enlisted architect Gordon Kaufman and began construction in adobe brick topped with hand-made red clay tiles. The resultant house—and the stylistic foundation for the subsequent city of La Quinta—quickly

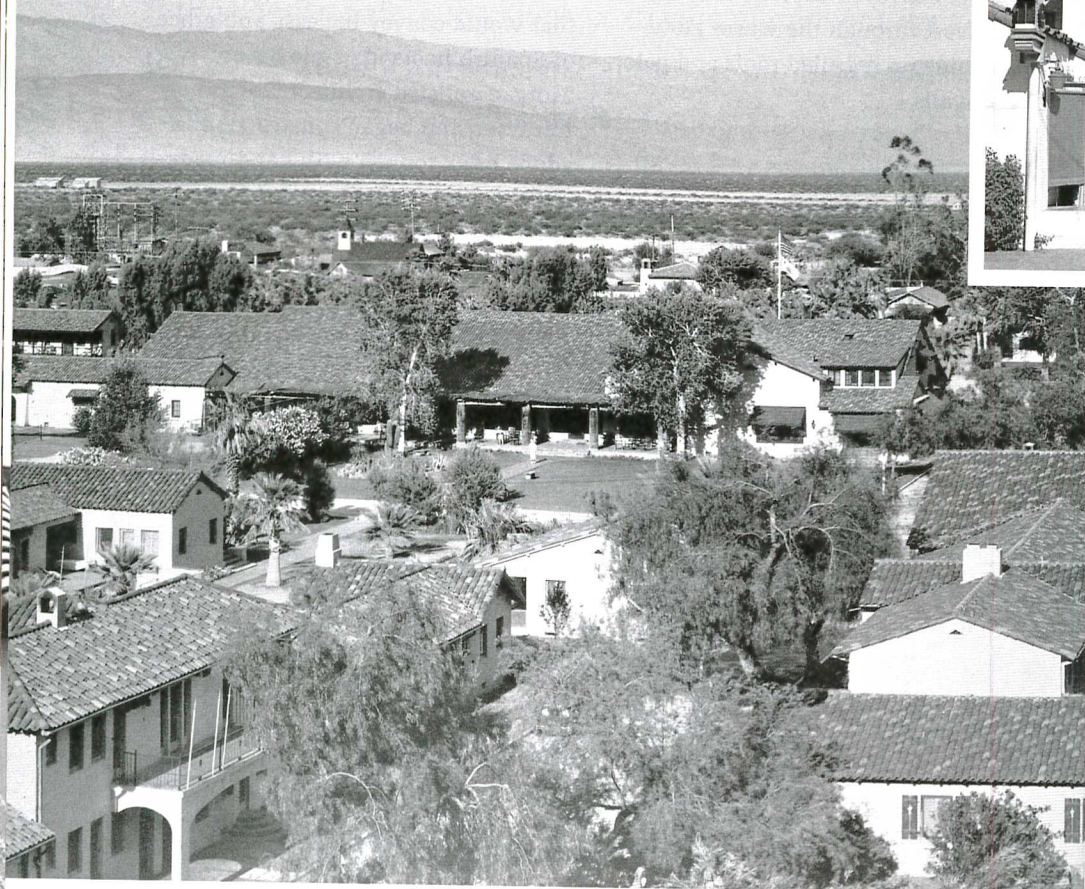


In the late 1920s, this onetime private oasis in the desert showcased the style's Spanish-Andalusian influence, with the Moorish horseshoe arches in the gallery on the right and atop the viewing tower.

drew the hotelier's friends and the Hollywood set, with luminaries like Greta Garbo and Frank Capra becoming regulars. The house continues to serve as the center of the resort today.

In 1927, Prescott Thresher Stevens, a well-to-do, fearless land developer from Colorado, built a hotel in Palm Springs that he felt would not only lure visitors but also entice buyers to nearby Las Palmas where his lots were laid out along gently curving lines. El Mirador was set to compete with the Desert Inn as an elegant resort with all the amenities. Remote from the center of town, El Mirador boasted an imposing tower, Olympic-size swimming pool, golf course and tennis courts. Hollywood

YESTERDAY



Above: The Desert Inn's campus included Spanish-style casitas set amid lawns and desert plantings. Top, right: Earle Strebe's Plaza Theater, now home of the Fabulous Palm Springs Follies. Above, right, The famed El Mirador tower, now incorporated into Desert Regional Medical Center.

personalities promptly found the hotel and soon the Barrymores, Marlene Dietrich, Charlie Chaplin, Paulette Goddard, Ginger Rogers, Ralph Bellamy and Charles Farrell, (the latter two founding the famed Palm Springs Racquet Club a few years later) could be found poolside or playing tennis.

ART AND COMMERCE

Commercial buildings in the village's downtown were also erected in the style during the 1920s and '30s. Julia Carnell, a Dayton, Ohio philanthropist of National Cash Register wealth, is responsible for both the Carnell Building and La Plaza. The latter is distinguished historically as the first mixed-use project in California, with shops on the ground level and modest living quarters above. Other commercial structures in the immediate area included Earle Strebe's Plaza Theater, known as the home of the Fabulous Palm Springs Follies today.

Architect Paul R. Williams' Palmar, later called Casa Palmeras, organized flats around a central courtyard.

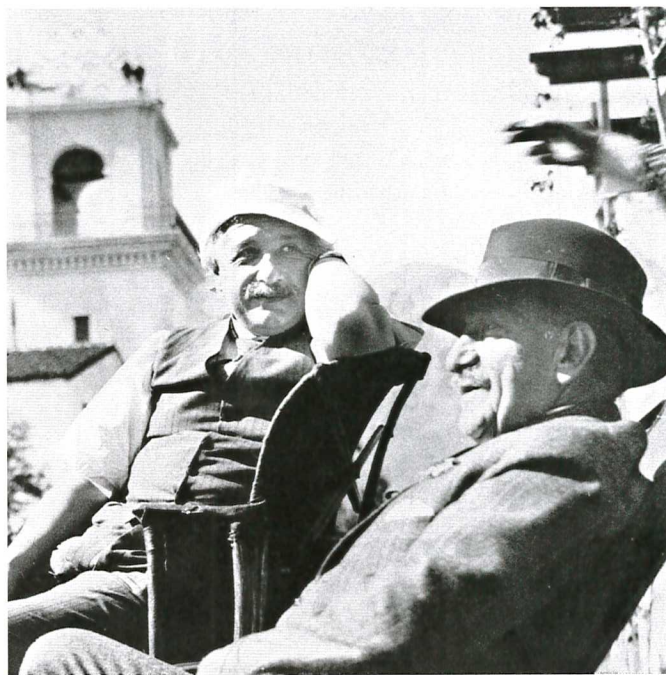
This gracious arrangement was followed in many bungalow apartments throughout the valley. A new high school was erected in Palm Springs which might have passed for one of Father Serra's missions.

ESTANCIAS IN THE SAND

Visiting tycoons, lured by the comforts and warmth of these Spanish Colonial Revival-style hotels—so different in ambiance than their new formal Tudor- and chateau-style mansions at home—were building their own getaway places in the new style. Samuel Untermyer, a famous New York attorney, bought a magnificent house and invited his friend Albert Einstein, who subsequently stayed for three weeks at the El Mirador. Alvah Hicks, the first builder in Palm Springs with his own cement mixer, paid homage to his wife with his Villa Theresa, later the home of Liberace. Eventually countless film and stage stars, as well as businessmen of note, from Eddie Cantor to King Gillette, Cary Grant to the Wurlitzers, would all own Spanish homes in the desert.

ADIÓS

By the end of the 1940s, another architectural style which also responded to the desert's particular setting and environmental challenges but with machine-made simple industrial materials began to displace the hand-made barrel tile-covered roofs and decorative elements so carefully crafted by individual artisans. Mayor Frank Bogert, watching this transition, lamented the change. He wanted the whole valley to be built Spanish, as he thought it more attractive. Over the middle decades of the century, however, the midcentury modern architecture would eventually supplant Bogert's preferred style, redefining the built environment of the desert from soulful to sexy.



Albert Einstein, who stayed for three weeks at El Mirador Hotel, seen in the background, relaxed in the desert's warmth with his friend New York attorney Samuel Untermyer.

DETAILS

Visit some of the finest residential examples of Spanish Colonial Revival Style in the valley over Desert Spanish Weekend, March 23–25. The weekend's honorary chairperson is actress, director and author Diane Keaton who is renowned for her work in California architectural preservation. The weekend's events include a free lecture, an all-day Saturday house tour, concluding with a party at the last home, as well as a cocktail party at the historic Thomas O'Donnell House. (760) 837-7117; pspreservationfoundation.org.

Tracy Conrad is a board member of the Palm Springs Historical Society and also of the Palm Springs Preservation Foundation. She has served on the Historic Site Preservation Board for the city of Palm Springs and is currently a Palm Springs Planning Commissioner.

DESERT HORIZONS
Country Club
at INDIAN WELLS

Indian Wells At Its Finest

For Membership Information:
(760) 340.4646
For Property Information:
Indian Wells
Real Estate Associates, Inc.
(760) 568.0207