



MOD MIRAGE

THE MIDCENTURY ARCHITECTURE  
OF RANCHO MIRAGE

MELISSA &  
JIM RICHE



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PHOTOGRAPHY BY JIM RICHE  
FOREWORD BY BRAD DUNNING

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*MOD MIRAGE* showcases the architecturally innovative homes and communities that sprang up around the historic Thunderbird and Tamarisk Country Clubs from 1950 to 1970, in what is now the city of Rancho Mirage, California.

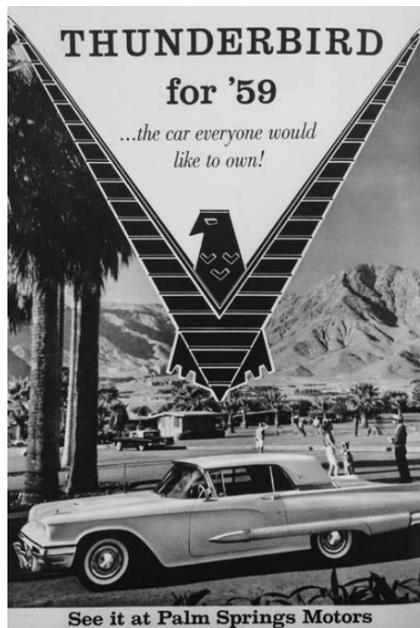
Some of the midcentury's most distinguished architects, including Welton Becket, William Cody, Richard Harrison, Hugh Kaptur, William Krisel, William Pereira, Val Powelson, Donald Wexler, and E. Stewart Williams, designed private homes and resort-style communities. Investors like the Marx Brothers and Art Linkletter spurred future growth, as "Dunes Today became Dollars Tomorrow." Celebrities including Frank Sinatra, Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz, Bing Crosby, Phil Harris, and Alice Faye seized the opportunity to own a home on a fairway lot with privacy and panoramic views built in.

This is the first book to focus solely on Rancho Mirage's rich architectural heritage, but it also highlights the impact of this oasis of influence that the rich and famous called home.



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**TOP:** Another early 1950s view of the desert looking east. This image features Thunderbird Country Club (center right) and early Rancho Mirage houses (near top right). **FAR RIGHT:** Electric golf carts were introduced at Thunderbird Country Club. **RIGHT:** The four-seat Thunderbird was launched at the club; its two-seat version was named for the club.



## EARLY HISTORY

In the 1920s, the area now known as Rancho Mirage was mostly empty desert dotted with grape and date ranches. In 1928, the Southland Land and Realty Company purchased 160 acres and masterminded a subdivision based on the recreation of the Nile—with access planned via camel. They planned the streets and gave them African-themed names like Tangier, Tunis, and Sahara Roads.

The crash of '29 stopped the development in its tracks for a few years until a Los Angeles real estate man, Lawrence Macomber, bought the nascent subdivision plus several hundred more acres spanning the highway about 11 miles east of Palm Springs. Together with local Realtor Don Cameron, Macomber started selling acreage advertised as “15 minutes from Palm Springs.” They attracted a few solitude-seeking types, including the area’s first celebrity, actor Frank Morgan (*The Wizard of Oz*), who built one of the first half dozen adobe-style homes there, which is still standing today. With the onset of World War II, development once again ground to a halt.

In 1944, Major A. Ronald Button, who was an entertainment lawyer, politician, and entrepreneur, purchased several hundred acres from Macomber. “It was halfway between Indio and Palm Springs and was the most completely wind-free area I could find in the desert,” he stated (*Palm Springs Life*, November 1962, p. 55).

The area’s potential also caught the attention of Hank Gogerty, who

created an airstrip in the desert in 1946 across the highway from Button’s subdivision. Gogerty opened the Desert Air Hotel and Airpark, favored by visitors from Los Angeles or San Diego who arrived in their small planes. A polo field was created alongside the airstrip with warning signs to pilots painted on the field when a game was in progress. That same year, neighboring Eleven Mile Ranch was turned into the White Sun Guest Ranch.

Button encouraged celebrity friends to buy property in his new development. By 1948, nearly 100 homes were under construction or completed, and the local paper, the *Desert Sun*, reported that Rancho Mirage was becoming a “Filmland annex,” with recent purchasers such as Ray Milland, Fred MacMurray, Jeanette MacDonald, and Hedy Lamarr. Realtor Don Cameron promoted the area in the local paper via a gossip column and ads for “Palm Springs’ Favorite Suburb.” The title quickly caught on. Eventually, Button partnered with Art Linkletter to grow the subdivision with hundreds of homes, and the name “Rancho Mirage,” featured at the entrance to the community, was later adopted by the entire city.

Meanwhile, back in Palm Springs the game of golf was growing in popularity, but the city had just one golf course: a nine-hole course built in the 1920s by Thomas O’Donnell, which is still there today. The golf course’s annual event was the Palm Springs Amateur Invitational, which attracted some of the nation’s top players, as well as stars like Bing Crosby. The course’s size and limitations helped plant an idea in the mind of top amateur golfer Johnny Dawson.



Arthur Elrod's design for the living room. Photo by George Szanik. Courtesy of UCLA Library Special Collections.



This October 1958 *Palm Springs Life* photo helped unravel the mystery of the Tamarisk Country Club's designers. Photo by George Szanik. Courtesy of UCLA Library Special Collections.



At either side of the front door, jalousie windows contrasted with the deep vertical ribs of the solid wood door. When the amber-red door opened, visitors immediately understood why the Charneys built their desert home. In front of them, down shallow terrazzo steps, was a ceiling-height picture window providing a stunning view to the pool, terrace, fairways, and mountains—all in one take. To the right of the terrazzo entry steps was an indoor desert garden that seamlessly continued through the glass to the shaded terrace under the deep overhang. The living room was a step to the left of the picture window, so that the drama at the entrance was unhindered.

Palm Springs's favorite young interior designer at the time was Arthur Elrod. In his early thirties, he had been in business on his own for three years when he designed the interiors for the Charneys. Elrod's modern, informal style was very much in keeping with the new architecture in the desert. A black marble fireplace and seating ledge took up the entire left wall of the room. Along the adjoining wall, walnut paneling contrasted with the opposing wall of glass that looked out to the pool and beyond. The dark wood wall was the perfect backdrop for paintings and a counterpoint to lighter furnishings: the deep-pile, cloud-white rug, and the sheer,

hand-loomed, white draperies. A pass-through from the kitchen was concealed behind panels in the walnut wall.

Walls of glass were repeated in the dining area and kitchen breakfast nook, creating an overall feel of space and light.

The home's other wing comprised the guest bedroom suite and the master bedroom and bathroom with sunken terrazzo bathtub, custom terrazzo walls, and poured terrazzo countertops. Sliding glass doors in the bathroom led to an adjoining, private, enclosed patio area with mountain views. A separate patio opened out from the master bedroom.

The Eckbo, Royston and Williams drawings revealed a striking hardscape plan around the house that, with its geometric shapes, could have been based on a Kandinsky abstract painting. Terrazzo terraces surrounded the pool and extended to the built-in barbecue and outdoor dining spot, set behind a low, rough-hewn perimeter rock wall, adjacent to the indoor dining area. The landscaping looked simple with its low-maintenance desert plants, palm trees, and jacarandas, but its success lay in the design of the hardscape. By positioning terraces, steps, and walkways at sharp angles around the house, along with the angles of the pool and the symmetrical



**TOP:** Slim supports for deep overhangs resulted in unobstructed views; the overhang aperture allowed extra morning light to the master bedroom and the planter. **RIGHT:** The post-and-outrigger-beam construction covered the entry walkway and included opaque screening to a private garden.



# KENASTON RESIDENCE

THUNDERBIRD HEIGHTS  
ARCHITECTS: EGGERS & WILKMAN  
INTERIOR DESIGNER: T. H. ROBSJOHN-GIBBINGS / 1957



**LEFT:** A stone wall provides a backdrop for the fireplace; on the outside it's the backdrop for the pool. **BELOW:** The master bedroom features a sculptural wall made from different lengths of wood.



# HARPO MARX RESIDENCE

ARCHITECT: WALLACE NEFF / 1957

THE HOUSE THAT NEFF DESIGNED FOR HARPO MARX AND HIS family bore similarities to the Richards/Skelton Residence just down the road. Known as “El Rancho Harpo,” it was a long-gabled home with walls of glass on the front and the back and substantially larger than the Richards/Skelton Residence, nearly 7,000 square feet, to accommodate Harpo and Susan Marx and their four children. The large living room had high, open-beamed ceilings and was Harpo’s chosen spot for playing his harp—when he wasn’t painting or playing golf.

A *Palm Springs Life* article from 1958 described the home as “Harpo’s haven, almost within putting distance of Tamarisk Country Club’s 14th green is the rambling, luxurious house that laughter built.” The article described Harpo as “a man who has eagerly surrendered his soul for the gratification of an unabashed addiction to golf.” Zeppo and Gummo Marx had homes built on the fairways at Tamarisk in 1957. Zeppo’s was also by Neff, Gummo’s by Val Powelson. Groucho subsequently bought at Tamarisk Ranchos. But Harpo was the only brother to commit himself and his family to the desert full time. In a *Palm Springs Life* interview with his wife, Susan, she explained:

*We used to live in Beverly Hills and maintained a small weekend house at Wonder Palms, but as the smog increased in Los Angeles, the length of our weekends increased. Finally, one of the children said, “Mother, you spend so much time in Palm Springs—why don’t we just move there?”*

*We took a vote and everyone agreed it was a great idea . . . we purchased eight acres of land overlooking Tamarisk Country Club.*

Harpo corrected her: “We bought eight acres of sand.” Susan continued, “Harpo dug a well and all six of us cut slips from the neighbors’ oleanders. We have 250 trees and everything—except for four grapefruit trees—we did ourselves.” Harpo dug all the irrigation pipes. The house was built by George and Sol Forman, designed by Wallace Neff, but mostly, Harpo added, “it was designed by Susan.”

Sadly, Harpo only got to enjoy the house for a few years. He died following heart surgery in 1964 on his 28th wedding anniversary. The house is still there today, remodeled but recognizable, on a reduced lot. It has historic site status from the city of Rancho Mirage.



**TOP:** El Rancho Harpo as it exists today. **BOTTOM LEFT:** El Rancho Harpo near Tamarisk. Photo by Maynard L. Parker. Courtesy of The Huntington Library, San Marino, California. **BOTTOM RIGHT:** The Harpo Marx family at El Rancho Harpo. Courtesy of *Palm Springs Life*.

# LUCILLE BALL AND DESI ARNAZ RESIDENCE

THUNDERBIRD COUNTRY CLUB  
ARCHITECT: PAUL R. WILLIAMS / 1954

LUCILLE BALL AND DESI ARNAZ WERE AT THE HEIGHT OF THEIR fame with the success of *I Love Lucy* when they built their Thunderbird Country Club home in 1954 as a getaway for their young family. They were among the early birds at Thunderbird (Arnaz was rumored to have won their lot at a poker game) and committed themselves to the desert as much as their TV schedules would allow. They chose famed architect Paul R. Williams to design them a comfortable six-bedroom, 4,400-square-foot home.

By then, Williams was designer to the stars in Los Angeles, and he had designed several buildings in Palm Springs dating back to the 1920s, including Deep Well Ranch and the 1940s remodel of the Tennis Club with A. Quincy Jones. For Lucy and Desi, he designed an elegant ranch-style house with exposed beam ceilings overlooking the 17th fairway. The house was built on a slight curve with two angled wings, one with a floating roof that shaded the carport. It was one of the first new homes to be completed at the club.

Williams gave them a wide, shaded lanai to make the most of the outdoor lifestyle, and of course walls of glass to take advantage of the views. He incorporated decorative, natural stonework inside and outside the home: around the fireplace, on either side of the entry, and for the wall around the pool. Paving stones in desert colors were used for the front door pathway and for the pool terrace, laid in triangular shapes that were replicated in the structure of the lanai. Modernist touches were added with contemporary entry screens on either side of the front door, repeated in front of the living room windows. A shadow block wall to one side of the carport added another texture. Interior designer Arthur Elrod created the home's colorful and contemporary interiors—one of his earliest projects for his new Palm Springs design company.

When Lucy and Desi divorced in 1960, she kept the house and Desi kept his Thunderbird Country Club membership. The house has been substantially remodeled.



**TOP:** Photo by Julius Shulman. Copyright © J. Paul Getty Trust. Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (2004.R.10). **ABOVE:** The home's rear covered terrace had fairway and mountain views. Photo by Julius Shulman. Copyright © J. Paul Getty Trust. Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (2004.R.10). **RIGHT:** Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz with their children, Lucie and Desi Jr., at the entry to their Thunderbird Country Club home. Courtesy of Desilu, too, LLC.

## JEFF CHANDLER RESIDENCE

Jeff Chandler was a big movie star at the height of his fame in the mid-1950s, with an Oscar nomination for his lead role in *Cochise*. In March 1957, the *Desert Sun* reported that he and his wife were putting the finishing touches to their home on Tangier Road. The house is featured in a vintage postcard and is, thanks to a new owner, in excellent and original condition.



**FACING TOP:** A vintage postcard of Jeff Chandler's Linkletter home shows that little has changed since he purchased it in 1956. **FACING BOTTOM LEFT:** Recently restored, the home's classic '50s features include the fireplace wall of desert rock and original windows. **FACING BOTTOM RIGHT:** A shaded atrium was a cool, shady spot for indoor/outdoor entertaining. **ABOVE:** Linkletter homes were post-and-beam construction, and featured walls of multipaned windows looking out on desert views.



## TIERRA DEL SOL

ARCHITECT: RICHARD R. LEITCH

DEVELOPER: ROBERT MCCULLOCH / 1956

Tierra Del Sol was the brainchild of Robert McCulloch, who was an influential member of Thunderbird Country Club and built his famed “push-button house” at the club (see page 201). McCulloch was a multimillionaire industrialist and founder of McCulloch Engineering.

Tierra Del Sol was a community of 39 individual homes built on private roads off Rio Del Sol—now Bob Hope Drive. Tierra Del Sol featured a community pool and recreation center in landscaped grounds. The modest-sized homes presented an alternative to the mobile home park at Blue Skies: stylish, air-conditioned, modern houses in a resort community setting. There were several different models of one-, two-, and three-bedroom homes.

McCulloch commissioned Los Angeles-based architect Richard R. Leitch to master plan the community and design the homes. Leitch was a young designer, not long graduated from USC School of Architecture. His aesthetic was modernist and readily adaptable to large-scale housing developments.

Leitch joined with McCulloch to create the Desert Sun Development Corporation to build Tierra Del Sol. They broke ground in August 1956 on the \$500,000 development. Four model homes were ready by November, priced from \$18,500 to \$28,000.

Homes featured a General Electric kitchen and laundry center comprising five major appliances in one compact unit for space saving under a stainless-steel work surface. Natural hardwoods were used in cabinets and doors. Folding accordion-type hardwood doors and shoji sliding screens gave interior spaces more flexibility. Exteriors featured redwood siding, natural stone, and mosaic tile. Covered porches, broad overhangs, and a screened lanai extended outdoor living space.

The Tierra Del Sol plan resulted in an AIA award for Richard Leitch in 1957. Although the community has suffered losses over time, with a few homes being remodeled or replaced, many of the homes have been restored and tastefully modernized so that the character and the award-winning site plan of the original development remains intact, with the individuality of each home still apparent.



“It’s been a delightful journey down memory lane to rediscover some of the houses and communities that I developed in Rancho Mirage, thanks to Melissa Riche’s enthusiasm for the area’s history.”

—Robert Marx, developer and designer of several homes and communities on and around Tamarisk Country Club, including his father Gummo Marx’s “Sputnik” house

“Rancho Mirage contains many architecturally significant homes and Melissa Riche, a superb writer and researcher, elucidates the extent of this architectural legacy and provides us insight and appreciation of these midcentury gems.”

—Sidney Williams, founding curator of the Palm Springs Art Museum Architecture and Design Center

“Rancho Mirage was the location for many of my father’s early important projects, including Thunderbird Country Club, with his designs for the first residential community on a golf course, followed by Tamarisk Country Club, and prominent residences at both clubs. Thanks to Melissa Riche’s passionate and diligent research, several William F. Cody treasures have been rediscovered.”

—Cathy Cody Nemirovsky, architect William F. Cody’s daughter

**MELISSA RICHE** is a writer, researcher, architecture enthusiast, and preservationist. She has written about architecture and design for more than twenty years, including articles for the magazines *Atomic Ranch* and *R/M*, the *Desert Sun* newspaper, and historic nominations for the Palm Springs Preservation Foundation. She is the founder and president of Preservation Mirage, a nonprofit group dedicated to education and advocacy for preserving important architecture in Rancho Mirage.

**JIM RICHE** graduated from Rochester Institute of Technology with a BFA in fine art photography. Since then he has worked in visual effects for film and TV while pursuing his love for photography. His photographs have won numerous awards, and are regularly featured in juried shows and international publications. Samples of his work can be found at [www.jimriche.com](http://www.jimriche.com). Melissa and Jim live in Tamarisk Ranchos, a 1958 William Krisel-designed community in Rancho Mirage.

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