

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

National Register of Historic Places Multiple Property Documentation Form

This form is used for documenting property groups relating to one or several historic contexts. See instructions in National Register Bulletin *How to Complete the Multiple Property Documentation Form* (formerly 16B). Complete each item by entering the requested information.

New Submission Amended Submission

A. Name of Multiple Property Listing

Architecture of Albert Frey, The

B. Associated Historic Contexts

(Name each associated historic context, identifying theme, geographical area, and chronological period for each.)

Desert Modern Design in the Coachella Valley, 1934-1965

C. Form Prepared by:

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D. Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this documentation form meets the National Register documentation standards and sets forth requirements for the listing of related properties consistent with the National Register criteria. This submission meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR 60 and the Secretary of the Interior's Standards and Guidelines for Archeology and Historic Preservation.

Signature of certifying official

Title

Date

State or Federal Agency or Tribal government

I hereby certify that this multiple property documentation form has been approved by the National Register as a basis for evaluating related properties for listing in the National Register.

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

The Architecture of Albert Frey
Name of Multiple Property Listing

California
State

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Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C.460 et seq.).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 250 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, PO Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Project (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

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E. Statement of Historic Contexts

SUMMARY STATEMENT

This Multiple Property Submission (MPS) covers the many property types associated with the work of architect Albert Frey in the Coachella Valley from 1934-1965. Each property that meets registration requirements is eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion C at the local level of significance. Under Criterion C, each property embodies the distinctive characteristics of the specific property type associated with architect Albert Frey as his designs evolved over a thirty year period in response to the desert environment of the Coachella Valley.

Historic properties associated with this MPS may be nominated for their embodiment of the architecture of Albert Frey under the context: Desert modern design in the Coachella Valley, 1934-1965.

INTRODUCTION

Frey’s work evolved from formal abstract European modernism to a new, indigenous desert modernism specific to the Coachella Valley. Frey’s mature style is distinct and immediately recognizable. His characteristic use of terracotta-colored concrete block and corrugated metal has weathered harsh desert conditions with little upkeep. The terracotta tone of the concrete block is complimentary to the desert’s colors. Frey’s buildings, both before and after World War II, were important contributors to placing Palm Springs on the map as a new frontier for the modern movement. Albert Frey’s architecture helped define desert modernism in the Coachella Valley. Desert modernism is the adaptation of modern architectural concepts to the climatic extremes of the Coachella Valley while embracing the area’s unique natural setting of mountains and open vistas.

Albert Frey arrived in America as a disciple of the European modern movement believing in the concepts of form following function and a rejection of applied ornamentation and historical references. He also favored modernism’s usage of flat roofs and open floor plans, and the idea of indoor-outdoor living. After establishing himself permanently in Palm Springs in the late 1930s, Frey utilized these modernist concepts as a starting point, enthusiastically experimenting with new materials and construction methods in addressing the conditions he found there. He used corrugated aluminum as exterior sheathing for walls and roofs because of its ability to reflect the sun and rapidly shed heat. Deep overhangs—and hoods for his emblematic porthole windows—were precisely calibrated to address the angle of the desert sun. Frey’s extensive use of plate glass for windows and sliding doors wholly embraced the concept of indoor-outdoor living and captured dramatic views of the mountains and desert sands. Frey perfected a sandblasted terracotta-colored concrete block as a method of construction and for its distinctive aesthetic qualities. Frey had the blocks custom-made for the local environment—unpainted, fully exposed, and color tinted to complement the desert soil.

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There was a clear evolution in Frey’s architecture from his early designs to those that appeared after World War II. For example, his 1934 Kocher-Samson Building lacked sufficient overhangs to deflect the harsh desert sun, and employed stucco as an exterior finish. After World War II, Frey’s designs fully addressed these shortcomings through the use of extended eaves, metal cladding, hooded porthole windows, asbestos cement-board, and fiberglass. Frey’s imaginative and original use of these construction methods and materials made his mature style distinct and immediately recognizable. The work of his partner, John Porter Clark, shared some of these characteristics such as the use of corrugated metal for exterior cladding in the projects for which he was the primary architect. Other local architects’ buildings did not appear similar to Frey’s, particularly in the choice of materials and their use.

Frey’s architectural impact in the Coachella Valley was enormous. It is revealed in the sheer number of his built projects: houses, schools, a fire station, churches, shopping centers, hospitals, a yacht club, restaurants, hotels, and apartments. It is revealed in the prominence of some of his buildings: Palm Springs City Hall, the Tramway Gas Station, the Palm Springs Aerial Tramway Valley Station, and Frey Houses I and II. It is revealed in the respect for his work as reviewed in the architectural press throughout Frey’s life and, later, by scholars and architectural aficionados drawn to the Coachella Valley to celebrate Frey’s design legacy.

Albert Frey’s work helped place Palm Springs on the map as a new frontier for the modern movement. As early as 1935, Frey’s Kocher-Samson Building was featured in the Museum of Modern Art’s exhibition “Modern Architecture in California,” along with the work of Richard Neutra, R.M. Schindler, William Wurster, and A.C. Zimmerman. Frey’s Cathedral City School was reviewed in *Progressive Architecture*, July 1953. Frey House I appeared in *California Arts and Architecture*, July 1945; *Architectural Forum*, May 1947; *House and Garden*, January 1948; *Progressive Architecture*, July 1948; and *Architectural Forum*, August 1950. Frey House II has been critically discussed since its completion in 1964 as documented in the many references included in this nomination. Since the mid-1990s, Frey’s oeuvre has served as a catalyst in the extraordinary revival of interest in Palm Springs’ modern architecture.

Although Albert Frey designed buildings of a wide variety of property types, the property types associated with this nomination are single family residences, commercial buildings, civic buildings, and religious buildings. Eligible properties qualify for individual listing in the National Register under Criterion C at the local level of significance.

CONTEXTUAL FRAMEWORK AND PERIOD OF SIGNIFICANCE

The comprehensive biography of Albert Frey by the scholar Joseph Rosa is the basis of the contextual framework utilized in this Multiple Property Submission for understanding the significance of the architect’s work.¹ Rosa is the foremost authority on Frey, having conducted

¹ Joseph Rosa, *Albert Frey, Architect* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1999; originally published: New

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extensive archival research and interviews with the architect and many of his colleagues between November 1986 and December 1987.²

In documenting the evolution and distinguishing features of Albert Frey’s work for this nomination, a representative selection of Frey’s designs from 1934 to 1965 is presented here. This approach reveals the relationship of environmental influences to the development of Frey’s distinctive style, approach to architectural type, and method of construction. Influences such as extremes of the Coachella Valley’s desert climate; natural features such as mountains, boulders and alluvial plains; and the presence of natural resources such as native flora.

The period of significance for this Multiple Property submission begins in 1934, when Albert Frey’s first building was constructed in Palm Springs, and ends in 1965, when the Tramway Gas Station was completed and the firm of Frey and Chambers dissolved. From 1966 to his retirement in the 1980s, Frey worked alone. During this latter period of less than fifty years, Frey’s commissions consisted primarily of additions and alterations to houses in Smoketree Ranch. It does not appear that any of these buildings would meet National Register Criteria Consideration G for exceptional importance.

Attribution of Designs to Albert Frey

Architecture is a collaborative enterprise with various individuals contributing to the successful completion of a project. Outside of architects working alone, partners in an architectural practice typically share in the credit assigned to the completed building. Within a practice architects often focus on certain types of buildings to which they are attracted or especially adept. This can also apply to architectural style. Albert Frey was in partnership with John Porter Clark from 1935-37 and 1939-57. Robson C. Chambers joined the firm in 1946 and was made a partner in 1952. After 1965, Frey chose to work alone.

Over the decades, Frey and his partners also collaborated on large projects with other local architects including E. Stewart Williams and his brother Roger. As a result, it can be difficult to attribute the design of an individual building to a specific architect. Scholar Joseph Rosa, in preparing his biography of Albert Frey, carefully researched each project ascribed to the architectural firms of which Frey was a partner. Rosa also spent considerable time with Albert Frey in 1987, compiling a list of projects and built works based on Frey’s job lists from his various associations.³ As for attribution, Rosa wrote:

York, NY: Rizzoli International, 1990).

² Joseph Rosa is director of the University of Michigan Museum of Art. Previously he was the chief curator of architecture and design at the Art Institute of Chicago. Prior to that, Rosa was the Helen Hilton Raiser Curator of Architecture and Design at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, curator of architecture at the Heinz Architectural Center at the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh, chief curator at the National Building Museum in Washington, D.C., and director of the Columbia Architecture Galleries in New York.

³ Rosa, 141.

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The following list is comprised solely of buildings and projects that Frey was responsible for designing as a firm partner or employee. The list does not include all of the works of his partnerships with Clark and Chambers; it includes only those works that were designed by Frey and not buildings designed by his partners.⁴

All of the buildings included in this nomination were those identified by Rosa as Frey designs or designed primarily by Frey on the building list referenced above.

California’s Coachella Valley

California’s Coachella Valley is part of the vast Sonoran Desert that stretches from the east side of the San Jacinto Mountains deep into southwestern Arizona and south through Baja California. In this desert, temperatures can range from below freezing in winter to 125 degrees in the summer. Generally exceptionally dry, monsoonal flow from the Gulf of California brings humidity and thunderstorms to the area from July through September. The typical climate in the winter months is dry and pleasant, which accounts for why the region has been a winter getaway for American and Canadian “snowbirds” since the 1920s.

The Coachella Valley itself stretches southeast for 45 miles from Palm Springs to the north end of the Salton Sea. In addition to Palm Springs, the Valley includes the communities of Cathedral City, Rancho Mirage, Palm Desert, Indian Wells, La Quinta, and Indio. Although only 100 miles east of Los Angeles, the Coachella Valley’s topography and climate are dramatically different and more extreme.

Palm Springs

Palm Springs is the ancestral home of the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians who lived in the greater Coachella Valley for centuries before white people began colonizing the desert in the late nineteenth century. Initially promoted as a sanatorium for sufferers of lung disease, Palm Springs transformed into a winter resort in the early 1920s due to its proximity to Los Angeles and accessibility to the rest of North America via transcontinental railroad. Sprawling Palm Springs resort hotels were built in the years prior to the Great Depression, with more modest construction projects continuing through the 1930s when Albert Frey began working there.

Palm Springs was incorporated in 1938. A few years later as America entered the war, the Coachella Valley became a training site for desert tank warfare. Palm Springs’ El Mirador Hotel was transformed into the Torney General Hospital for the war’s duration. Following World War II, America’s growing prosperity led to a building boom in residential and

⁴ Ibid.

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commercial construction in Palm Springs and the entire Coachella Valley. Celebrities, industrialists, and ordinary visitors in rapidly increasing numbers chose Palm Springs as their winter destination.

Prior to World War II, in addition to Albert Frey, several prominent modernists completed projects in the Coachella Valley. Rudolph Schindler designed the Popenoe Cabin in 1922 (demolished), Lloyd Wright the Oasis Hotel (1923, only a remnant remaining), William Grey Purcell, a disciple of Louis Sullivan, his own house (1933, extant), and Richard Neutra the Grace Miller House (1937, extant).

In the postwar era, visiting modern architects who received important Coachella Valley commissions include A. Quincy Jones, Paul R. Williams, John Lautner, Rudy Baumfeld of the Victor Gruen office, William Pereira, Welton Becket, and, again, Neutra and Schindler.

Among the prolific Palm Springs-based architects who demonstrated exceptional talent in the postwar years—in addition to Frey, Clark and Chambers—were William Cody, E. Stewart Williams, Donald Wexler, Richard Harrison, and Hugh Kaptur. Los Angeles-based William Krisel of the firm Palmer & Krisel designed sleek, modern tract houses in the desert for the Alexander Construction Company that would number in the thousands by the mid-1960s. Other than Krisel, most of these architects did not consider themselves modernists but as designers responding to client needs and desert conditions. It just so happened that the functional, elegant buildings they produced would later be categorized as Desert Modern.

In the mid-1990s, Palm Springs was rediscovered by the interior design and fashion industries, using the city’s modern architecture—especially Frey House II—as the location for numerous photo shoots. In 1998, Kurt Anderson wrote a lengthy photo essay for the *New Yorker* magazine on the renewed appreciation of Palm Springs’ mid-century vibe.⁵ This was followed by a cover story in the June 1999 issue of *Vanity Fair* about the rediscovery of Palm Springs by a younger generation.⁶

Albert Frey, Early Years 1903-1930

Albert Frey was born on October 18, 1903 in Zurich, Switzerland to a creative family educated in the arts. Frey’s father had wanted to be an architect and, instead, settled into the family lithography business. It would be his only son, Albert, who would become the architect, one who would have a lasting impact on a desert community far from Europe—Palm Springs.

Frey earned his architectural diploma at the Institute of Technology in Switzerland in 1924. After learning about the burgeoning modern movement in Brussels and the Bauhaus, Frey moved to Belgium and was hired by an architectural firm prominent in modernism, Eggericx

⁵ *New Yorker*, February 23, 1998.

⁶ Bob Colacello, “Palm Springs Weekend” in *Vanity Fair*, June 1999, 192-211.

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and Verwilghen. There he worked on several large housing complexes designed in the modern idiom. Frey was strongly influenced by Le Corbusier's book *Towards a New Architecture* and became determined to work at the master's atelier in France. In late 1928, Frey relocated to Paris, presented his portfolio, and was hired as an architect in Le Corbusier's office.

During the ten months of Frey's association with Le Corbusier he worked on some of the master's most influential commissions including Villa Savoye in Poissy, France and the Centrosoyus Administration Building in Moscow. For the Villa Savoye, Frey was responsible for many of the construction drawings, including an unusual sliding glass door that hung from a track on the ceiling. The design was influenced by barn door track hardware that Frey discovered in the *American Sweets Catalog*, a catalog of off-the-shelf building products that Frey found inspirational as his ideas about modern technology and construction methods evolved.

Having applied for a visa to work in America, where Frey believed the most innovative modern architecture was being built, he received word of its approval in the winter of 1929. Prior to Frey's emigration, he returned to the firm of Eggericx and Verwilghen for ten months as their chief designer, earning sufficient funds to establish himself in America.

Introduction to America and Palm Springs 1930-1939

Soon after arriving in New York City in September 1930, Albert Frey began working with the modernist architect A. Lawrence Kocher in a partnership that lasted until March 1935, and again in 1938. Kocher was also the managing editor of *Architectural Record*, a publication that he had turned into a forum for modern design. According to Joseph Rosa,

Kocher and Frey were a perfect team; each possessed what the other may have lacked. Frey did not have to concern himself with specifications, clients (of which there were few), or promoting their work. He was left to design, with Kocher playing the role of critic. Throughout his career, Frey's partners would fill a similar role, allowing him to remain private and out of the public eye.⁷

Together, the Kocher-Frey partnership produced only four buildings. The numerous articles they co-authored on urban planning, modernism, and technology for *Architectural Record* were also published internationally "establish[ing] theirs as one of the most innovative and influential partnerships in America during the early 1930s."⁸ Frey had arrived in the United States at a time when advances were being made in American technology that enabled him to take the ideas of the European modern movement and build on them through the use of new materials.

⁷ Rosa, 21.

⁸ Ibid.

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Perhaps the most important commission that Kocher and Frey received was for the design of an experimental dwelling to be erected at the annual Allied Arts and Building Products Exhibition of 1931 in New York. For it they designed the Aluminaire – A House for Contemporary Life. This full-scale house was sheathed entirely in ribbed aluminum over insulation board covered with building paper. Aluminum posts and lightweight steel beams with non-loadbearing exterior walls supported it. Aluminum washers and screws held the house together. All window sashes, doors, and frames were steel. Built-in furniture provided efficient use of space.

Open for only one week, the Aluminaire was visited by tens of thousands and extensively covered by the press who dubbed it the “Magic House” and “Zipper House” on account of its rapid ten-day construction. *Time* Magazine in their review, described the house as “a complete three-story affair of polished aluminum and glass, designed to take the place of the rows of jerry-built Olde Englysshe cottages for families of modest means which speckle U.S. suburbs.”⁹

Following the building’s disassembly and relocation to pastoral acreage in Long Island, the Aluminaire continued to be influential. It was only one of two residences constructed in America to be represented at the acclaimed *International Exhibition of Modern Architecture* curated by Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson at the Museum of Modern Arts in 1932. The other house was Richard Neutra’s Lovell Health House of 1927-29 located in Los Angeles. Traveling for two years to fourteen locations in the United States, the exhibition played a large role in the development of the American modern movement.

Kocher-Samson Building, 1934 (extant, modified)

In 1934, Albert Frey departed for Palm Springs. Kocher & Frey had obtained a commission from Kocher’s brother, Dr. J.J. Kocher, to design a mixed-use real estate/insurance office with a second story apartment on Palm Springs’ main thoroughfare. It would be called the Kocher-Samson Building with Samson referring to the name of the man operating the insurance business. J.J. Kocher suffered from pulmonary disease, having relocated to the dry desert climate years earlier for his health. No longer practicing medicine, Dr. Kocher would run the real estate office.

Frey had driven across the country two years earlier in 1932, bypassing Palm Springs on his way to Los Angeles to see the modernist work of Rudolph Schindler, Richard Neutra, Kem Weber, and J.R. Davidson. This time, Frey’s cross-country destination was the burgeoning winter resort village of Palm Springs that had established itself as an upscale getaway for Hollywood celebrities and East Coast and Midwest industrialists.

Early modernist tenets stressed universality of design freed from historical references. Under

⁹ “Two Years Architecture” *Time*, April 17, 1931.

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this philosophy, a building designed according to the principles of the modern movement would succeed wherever it was placed, whether residential, commercial, institutional, religious, or any other building type. The 1920s and early 1930s designs of Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe illustrated this philosophy, which was dubbed the International Style because the architectural designs arising from the movement would be suitable anywhere in the world.¹⁰ “Frey, however, would never identify his work with the International Style, feeling that the word ‘style’ implied a period and not a new vision of architecture.”¹¹

When sent to Palm Springs to design the Kocher-Samson Building, Frey brought with him the recent experience of the Aluminaire and other projects influenced by the modern movement. Thus it was no surprise that the building Frey presented to Dr. Kocher was distinctly modernist in its design. Based upon a series of rectangles and squares, the building has a flat roof, glass walls, smoothly finished exterior surfaces, pipe posts and railings, and minimal overhangs. Situated on a narrow elongated lot, Frey created a checkerboard layout with four small offices that originally looked out on enclosed gardens. A covered passageway links the volumes down the center. On the second story is a rectangular volume that serves as an apartment with an adjacent terrace enclosed by a pipe railing. The apartment projects outward towards the street providing limited shelter to the office entrance below.

The Kocher-Samson Building was conceived in New York and executed in Palm Springs. It did not take into account the need for deep overhangs that would prove necessary to protect local buildings from the intense desert sun. It was also finished in stucco, a material that Frey came to believe was prone to cracking and was an ineffective means of deflecting heat. This was Frey’s first project in the Coachella Valley. Over time his designs evolved in response to the unique demands of the desert environment.

Upon completing the Kocher-Samson Building, Frey decided to remain in Palm Springs instead of returning to New York. Said Rosa of Frey’s decision, “Palm Springs had become the new frontier for Frey; here he could be a pioneer with a raw landscape.”¹²

In addition to Frey’s fondness for Palm Springs’ mountain setting that reminded him of his native Switzerland, there was no work for Frey back east. Following an amicable break-up of the Kocher-Frey partnership, Frey began what would be a long association with John Porter Clark, one of the first architects to live and practice in Palm Springs. At that time neither Clark nor Frey were licensed to practice architecture in California, so for several years they worked under the auspices of the Pasadena-based architectural firm of Van Pelt & Lind where Clark had previously been employed.

¹⁰ Curators Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson coined the term International Style when describing the progressive architecture of the modern movement that they featured at the Museum of Modern Art’s seminal *International Exhibition of Modern Architecture* held in 1932.

¹¹ Rosa, 30.

¹² Rosa, 51.

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Clark and Frey initially worked together from 1935 to 1937. Joseph Rosa assigns eight completed projects to Frey during these two years.¹³ Generally, when the client was open to modern design, Frey would take the project; when traditional buildings were desired, Clark took the lead.¹⁴ Each assisted the other with plans and detailing when necessary. Referring to their later partner Robson Chambers, Rosa wrote, "His role in the office was similar to Clark's."¹⁵

In the spring of 1937, Frey was summoned to New York to work as a designer on the prestigious Museum of Modern Art project in the office of Philip L. Goodwin. Upon completion of the museum, Goodwin offered Frey a partnership. Frey chose to return to Palm Springs to rejoin his friend Clark who had by then received his license and was winning public commissions there. In 1939, Frey returned to Palm Springs and resumed his professional association with John Porter Clark, a partnership that lasted for almost twenty years.

Prior to his return to the Coachella Valley in 1939, Albert Frey wrote *In Search of a Living Architecture* published by the Architectural Book Publishing Company of New York that year. Frey elaborated on the ideas that would be the basis for his life's work as an architect in Palm Springs. Several paragraphs are telling:

Continuation of conventional solutions that have become obsolete only retards natural progress in the establishment of expressive contemporary design. Acceptance of the inevitable change is slow because new designs demand intellectual effort while conventional patterns possess the advantage of familiarity based on habit....¹⁶

It is by studying the forms of nature, which have always inspired mankind, and those of traditional architecture, which have endured beyond practical usefulness, for theories of idea and structure that we will discover the basic principles which guide the creation of shape, space, and composition and be able to build a living architecture that not only provides us with physical comfort but with spiritual enjoyment as well.¹⁷

Frey House I, 1941 (demolished)

In 1941, just prior to World War II, Frey designed and built a very small house for himself in

¹³ Rosa, 141. Brandenstein Study, Guthrie House, San Jacinto Hotel, Farwell House, Halberg House, Kellogg Studio, La Siesta Court, Mason House.

¹⁴ Rosa, 53.

¹⁵ Rosa, 88.

¹⁶ Albert Frey, *In Search of a Living Architecture* (New York: Architectural Book Publishing Co., 1939), 8.

¹⁷ Frey, 9.

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Palm Springs. Said Frey, “The enclosed area was only 320 square feet, but because I had the walls extend beyond out into the landscape and had a generous roof overhang, it made the house look much larger than it was.”¹⁸ In addition, the extended walls served as screens to separate different outdoor activities. When interviewed many years later, Frey stated that it was Mies van der Rohe who inspired the design of Frey House I, “He helped me with the idea of expanding a house out into the landscape. And Schindler too.”¹⁹

Similar to the Aluminaire, the exterior surfaces of Frey House I were sheathed in corrugated metal, which Frey preferred over stucco because metal did not crack.²⁰ While metal was not especially good for insulation, houses in the Coachella Valley were occupied primarily in the winter where they could be cheaply heated by electricity.²¹

The roof of Frey House I was flat with deep eaves shielding the sun. Interior walls were colored asbestos cement board or floor-to-ceiling fixed or sliding glass. Many years later John Porter Clark, Frey’s architectural partner, commented of the design, “[Frey’s use of] glass walls with sliding glass doors for residential architecture of the time was almost unknown. Windows were small holes punched in the wall.”²² For Frey, an important result of glass walls and doors was that it brought the outdoors in and the indoors out, making large interior spaces less necessary. Said Frey of his design, “The Japanese developed the sliding panels such that when opened the garden becomes part of the inside of the house.”²³ For the next 15 years, Frey would use his own house as a laboratory to explore new ideas and materials.

Seven years after his house was completed, *Progressive Architecture* published a photo essay about Frey’s residence. He described living there, commenting “I am thrilled every day by the varying spectacle of the natural views that are part of it, changing with light and color, wind, rain, stillness, and sunshine.... I believe, however, that a full understanding of this type of house will come only gradually because most people’s reflexes are conditioned by the conventional, closed-in houses in which they have grown up.”²⁴

Loewy House, 1946 (extant)

Frey used many of the ideas that he experimented with in his own home in subsequent dwellings that he designed after the war years. One of the first was for famed industrial designer Raymond Loewy for whom Frey designed a winter house in 1946.²⁵ Frey convinced

¹⁸ Jennifer Golub, *Frey 1 + 2* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1998), 76.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Prickly Pears oral history project, Palm Springs Public Library, videotaped interview with John Porter Clark and Albert Frey, 1986, 1:03:00.

²¹ Prickly Pears, 1:04:00.

²² Prickly Pears, 36:20.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ “House, Palm Springs, California,” *Progressive Architecture*, July 1948, 63-67.

²⁵ Prickly Pears, 47:00, Frey states that he was responsible for the Loewy House.

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Loewy that he could design a house for him that took advantage of an extensive boulder pile sitting on the property that had been pushed there during the construction of an adjacent road. Similar to Frey House I, Loewy House utilizes extended wall planes clad in corrugated metal, capped by a flat roof with extended eaves. Unlike Frey’s own house, Loewy’s is L-shaped in plan with bedrooms and bathroom on one wing, and the living room, servants’ quarters and kitchen on the other. At the inner elbow is the entrance where, as one steps into the house, one encounters the unusual feature of a large boulder and a portion of the swimming pool entering the space. This served to dramatically blur the distinction between the outside and inside. According to John Porter Clark, the indoor/outdoor pool was pure Loewy. In addition, Loewy specified the pecky cypress (worm eaten wood) used around the pool area.²⁶

Additions to Frey House I, 1948 and 1953 (demolished)

In 1948, to his own house Frey added a combination living room/sleeping area with an open circular fireplace and skylight set above the bed for stargazing. A folding partition was used to seal the living/sleeping area off from the rest of the house. At the end of the addition, Frey installed an indoor/outdoor pond inspired by the swimming pool that he designed for the Loewy House. Lushly planted with stepping-stones, the pond was enclosed by a tall curved wall that projected out into the desert. As with the original design, corrugated metal sheathed the exterior wall. On the inside was irregularly sanded pine wood paneling. A screen over the pond created a solarium. As in Loewy House, a sliding glass door over a portion of the pond closed off the living area.

An article in the August, 1950 issue of *Architectural Forum* described the dwelling as “an exciting example of how imaginative handling of industrial materials and low cost building techniques can produce richness and individuality in a small house.”²⁷ Adding, “As Frey’s year-around bachelor quarters, the house is designed for maximum adaptability to the local climate.”²⁸

In 1953, Frey desired a second story bedroom with 360-degree views. His solution was to create a circular space punctuated by porthole windows sheltered by round metal hoods of various depths corresponding with the location of the sun. The bedroom’s exterior surface was sheathed in diamond-patterned metal; interior walls were covered in tufted yellow fabric. This turret like room with its telescopic porthole awnings was distinctly futuristic. Other experimental elements incorporated into the 1953 remodel were the indoor staircase and dining room table that were both suspended from the ceiling with ¼-inch diameter aluminum rods. To enclose the swimming pool, Frey designed a curvilinear wall of multi-colored corrugated fiberglass and metal. Frey used his metal-clad porthole concept and suspended stairs on two other buildings of the 1950s, the Premiere Apartments in Palm Springs (1957-1958) and the North Shore

²⁶ Prickly Pears, 50:00.

²⁷ “Desert House,” *Architectural Forum*, August, 1950, 88-91.

²⁸ Ibid.

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Yacht Club at the Salton Sea (1958-1959). Of Frey’s choice of materials, architectural critic Neil Jackson concluded “Frey’s aesthetic decisions [were] closely aligned to a deep appreciation and understanding of his materials’ functional and structural qualities.”²⁹

Smoke Tree Ranch

In 1936, Palm Springs’ Smoke Tree Ranch was established on 400 acres of desert land south of the village center. This private, gated colony consisted primarily of wealthy industrialists and other American aristocrats who desired a casual, rustic retreat from their otherwise formal lives. In enforcing this philosophy, a strict set of architectural guidelines was established by the “colonists” to ensure that dwellings would be modest in size and ranch in style. These guidelines remain in force today. Over the decades, Albert Frey and John Porter Clark would design many homes for Smoke Tree colonists. Smoke Tree’s requirement of Ranch style houses with pitched, shake-covered roofs led to designs that were not typical of Frey’s work outside the colony’s boundaries and, therefore, are not included in this MPS.

Public Schools, 1940–1958 (demolished)

Albert Frey obtained his California architect’s license in 1943 during World War II, John Porter Clark having been licensed three years earlier in 1940.³⁰ With their licenses came public commissions and larger projects such as schools and commercial buildings. Writes architectural historian Alan Hess, “Equally important to Frey’s reputation are his public buildings. As a local architect, he designed nearly anything that came into his office: churches, banks, gas stations, schools, apartments, fire stations, stores.”³¹

The Palm Springs Unified School district was for many decades responsible for all of the schools in the Coachella Valley. The first commission granted by the district to Clark and Frey was for an elementary school in Cathedral City, an unincorporated town adjacent to Palm Springs. The design proposed by the architects was modern, which had not been specified by the client and was considerably less expensive than the typical Spanish Colonial Revival style schools previously constructed for the district.

When interviewed together in 1986 for the Palm Springs Public Library’s “Prickly Pears” oral history video project, John Porter Clark and Albert Frey agreed that Clark focused on the relationship with the school board and Frey worked at the design table.³² Said Clark, “That was the usual arrangement.”³³ Responded Frey, “John was much better with dealing with the

²⁹ Neil Jackson, “Desert Pioneer,” *Architectural Review*, September 1992.

³⁰ Frey was made a Fellow (in design) of the American Institute of Architects in 1957.

³¹ Michael Stern and Alan Hess, *Julius Shulman: Palm Springs* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 2008), 52.

³² Prickly Pears, 20:30-20:47.

³³ Ibid.

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[school] boards” to which Clark added, “And Albert was better at the design.”³⁴

The Cathedral City Elementary School of 1940 that Frey designed was a one-room, flat-roofed rectangular stucco box with detached bathroom. A broad covered walkway with pipe supports fronted the schoolroom on the south elevation and connected to the bathroom structure on the west. Large windows faced north. Clark and Frey’s second school—Cahuilla Elementary School in Palm Springs—contained three classrooms in a stucco clad rectangular building with clerestory windows on the south elevation and large multi-pane windows on the north. It was designed in 1941. This time instead of a covered walkway supported by posts, shade for the south elevation was achieved by extending the flat roof far enough out to provide sufficient shelter for the building and walkway.

Clark and Frey stated that there was no strong resistance from the school board regarding modern design because school buildings were less subject to personal taste versus residential architecture.³⁵ The architects also had their trump card. “As a last resort we could always fall back on the costs [laughter].”³⁶

The modular design of Frey’s school buildings led to easy, cost effective expansion in subsequent years. Indeed, within the school district, Frey was responsible for designing numerous additions of identical buildings at campuses throughout the Coachella Valley. Each building was connected by a covered walkway that served as a circulation spine and shading device. In 1949, Palm Springs’ Katherine Finchy Elementary School opened for students. It was the largest Frey-designed school to date and consisted of twelve classrooms in four separate buildings, a kindergarten, an administration building, and a cafeteria. The campus rapidly expanded in the following years with covered walkways connecting each new element. During the 1950s, Frey worked on the designs for various schools and school additions culminating with the Nellie Coffman School Multi-Purpose and Administration Building in 1958, and additions to the building in 1960.

Desert Hospital, 1950-1951 (demolished)

An excellent example of Frey’s postwar institutional work was the Desert Hospital in Palm Springs of 1950-1951. The one-story building incorporated Frey’s characteristic flat roof that extended to become a deep overhang, large north-facing windows, metal *brise-soleils* painted sage green, pronounced horizontality, and rectangular massing.³⁷ It also was constructed of sandblasted terracotta-colored concrete block that became a hallmark of Frey’s designs in subsequent years. Of this concrete block, architectural critic Alan Hess wrote, “Inspired by the

³⁴ Prickly Pears, 20:30-20:47.

³⁵ Prickly Pears, 21:05.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Brise-soleil: “A screen, usually of louvers, placed on the outside of a building to shield the windows from direct sunlight.” Francis D. K. Ching, *A Visual Dictionary of Architecture* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1995), 227.

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mottled textures of the desert mountains, Frey treated concrete blocks as an ever-evolving aesthetic experiment in capturing sunlight to decorate the walls of his buildings. A popular vernacular building material in the desert, easily moldable in the fabrication process, blocks were used by Frey to play with surfaces, to create patterns that would catch the sun and define a volume. He would specify blocks mixed with reddish pulverized stone to give his buildings a pink or tan hue, the better to match the desert. They make his buildings hard, rocky, solid, like the natural landscape.”³⁸

Consistent with the importance that Frey placed on integrating nature with architecture, at the center of the hospital was a large enclosed outdoor patio for patients to view the mountains.

Banning Library, 1954-1955 (extant, sympathetic additions)

The Banning Library of 1954-1955 is one-story with the flat roof forming extended eaves on the east and south elevations. The recessed elevations are characterized by expanses of multi-pane windows and decorative brick. The most notable element, is the prominent corner cylindrical portion that projects outward towards the end of the overhang. It houses the children’s area of the library.

Says Rosa of this period in Frey’s career,

These institutional buildings reveal the transition from Frey’s earlier functionalist ideology to a more lyrical approach, a process that had already occurred in his residential works. This lyricism, which initially expressed itself only in plan, continued to grow and eventually emerged as an expressive sense both of plan and enclosure in the later institutional and commercial work.³⁹

Palm Springs City Hall, 1952-1956 (extant)

Palm Springs City Hall was one of Clark, Frey and Chambers’ most important public buildings. Although a collaborative effort with the local architectural firm of Williams and Williams, the building’s initial phase was primarily the design work of John Porter Clark and Albert Frey.⁴⁰ City Hall incorporates many of Frey’s ideas and choice of materials. The one-story flat-roofed building is divided into two distinct sections, a symmetrical office portion with a wing extending from the rear of the main entrance, and a large council chamber that projects outward toward Tahquitz Canyon Way. The primary construction material is sandblasted terracotta-colored concrete block, but in this case every two rows are aligned so that the appearance from a distance is of offset squares.

³⁸ Alan Hess, *Palm Springs Weekend*, 58.

³⁹ Rosa, 103.

⁴⁰ As stated by John Porter Clark in *Prickly Pears*. 1:00:00

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The office portion exhibits a low horizontal profile with the flat roof extending southward to form deep eaves. The portion connecting the offices to the council chamber becomes a covered walkway sheltered by a series of distinctive angled cylindrical metal *brise soleils* painted sage green. Each *brise soleils* shelters floor-to-ceiling glazing of the offices. Flat metal fasciae contrast with corrugated metal exterior ceilings colored light blue.

The projecting council chamber is taller than the office portion, differing substantially in its design. The flared walls of the concrete block chamber appear telescopically stepped toward the north. As such, the chamber seems windowless when viewed from the west, south, or east. Each flared elevation actually contains a north-facing window that provides light for the interior. An unusual detail of the council chamber is its corner treatment consisting of projecting concrete blocks cut at a diagonal at every other paired row. This element catches light and shadow, giving dynamism to the composition. It is a distinguishing detail that appeared in more elaborate form in the firm’s Tramway Gas Station of 1965.

What makes the composition so extraordinary, is the design of the freestanding entrance canopies of the office portion and council chamber. The office canopy is a flat-roofed square of corrugated metal supported by posts; an open circle punctures the center. The words “Palm Springs City Hall” are written across the fascia. The council chamber canopy consists of a concrete circular disk—supported by posts—with a diameter equal to the void of the office canopy. On its fascia are the words “The People Are The City.” Each canopy is its mirror opposite.

At the end of 1956, John Porter Clark left the firm to establish a solo practice focusing on large commercial, public, and institutional buildings. Frey remained interested in a variety of building types, especially residential for which he held a particular affinity. In their non-residential work, the remaining partnership of Frey and Chambers “developed a greater fluidity, with each project expressive of its function.”⁴¹

Cree House II, 1955-1956 (extant)

With Clark’s departure, Frey’s residential work began to change. For the Cree House II, located up a steep hill in Cathedral City on the border with Palm Springs, Frey incorporated a strong vertical element, a natural stone fireplace with its chimney located at the dwelling’s northeast corner. The chimney anchors the house to the rocky site and contrasts with the typical horizontality of Frey’s work that is also expressed in this modest house. Deep eaves are extensions of the flat roof. Exterior elevations are clad in sage green asbestos-cement board with steel posts supporting the north-facing portions that hover above the steep slope. Floor-to-ceiling windows and sliding glass doors offer spectacular views. Slender steel posts support a large, projecting deck over the hillside with the area below the deck serving as a carport. Contrasting yellow corrugated fiberglass encloses the deck. The use of asbestos-

⁴¹ Rosa, 107.

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cement board sheathing, corrugated colored fiberglass, and structural steel posts is seen in other residential projects designed by Frey.

Carey House, 1956 (extant)⁴²

With the Carey House of 1956, Frey applied the lessons learned at Cree House II. Also perched on a slope covered in boulders, Frey raised the wood-framed house above the ground using steel posts. The house steps up the rocky hillside at the rear; however, a single sloped roof covers the stepped elevations as viewed from either side. Like Cree House II, colored asbestos-cement board clads the exteriors. In this case, the projecting deck becomes an enclosed room supported by steel posts angled to stabilize the house in case of an earthquake, and to allow sufficient space for a two-car carport. Except for the slender posts, the curved concrete staircase leading to the entrance is the only visual element that anchors the house to the ground.

Premiere Apartments, 1957-1958 (demolished)

L-shaped in plan, the two-story Premiere Apartments took advantage of character defining features of the 1952 additions to Frey House I and more recent projects. Appearing again were the dimpled metal exterior sheathing to reflect the sun, corrugated metal fascia, and porthole windows shaded by round metal hoods. By deeply recessing pool facing and rear elevations beneath the flat roof and floor, shaded patios and balconies were created poolside, and covered corridors at the rear. Enclosing each unit's poolside exterior spaces were variously colored corrugated fiberglass panels similar to those that surrounded the pool area at Frey House I. Of concrete block and plywood construction, the Premiere Apartments was successfully moved across the street at a later date to a new site with the same orientation, directly west of the original location. The building was subsequently destroyed by arson in 2007.

North Shore Yacht Club, 1958 (extant)

North Shore Yacht Club at the Salton Sea is evocative of a ship with its curved prow, tall central mast, and porthole windows facing the water. By this time, Frey's palate of materials and their application were generally established. Sandblasted terracotta colored concrete blocks are used for ground floor construction, corrugated metal sheathes exterior surfaces on the second story, thin eaves supported by slender steel posts provide shade on the second story terraces, brightly colored fiberglass panels are used as railings, and porthole windows with protruding round metal hoods offer telescopic views from the crow's nest lounge. To this Frey added periodically spaced square openings between concrete blocks to let in light, and, just as in Frey House I, interior metal stairs suspended from metal rods. The result is

⁴² Also known as the Carey-Pirozzi House on account of the long-term occupancy of the Pirozzi family.

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“expressive and lyrical in both plan and elevation.”⁴³

Said Alan Hess of Frey’s design,

Frey warped both the concrete-block base and the fiberglass and metal bridge of the yacht club to give it the billowing dynamism of a speedboat plowing through the waves. The nautical derivation of the porthole windows and a central mast are obvious. But it is his wholly original translation of these images into a new form and vocabulary that marks his real skill.⁴⁴

Renowned architectural historian David Gebhard wrote that Frey House I and the North Shore Yacht Club “...are two of America’s great odes to the romance of the machine. [Frey’s] vision of the machine was not that of the high-art abstractions of Le Corbusier and others, nor that of the everyday-encountered machine. Frey’s machine images express a sense of enjoyment, delight, and play more akin to the popular science fiction of the comic strip than to the world of high-art modernism.”⁴⁵

Palm Springs Aerial Tramway Valley Station, 1949-1963 (extant)

Conceived in the late 1940s and not begun until 1961, the Palm Springs Aerial Tramway was a joint venture of Frey and Chambers with Williams, Williams & Williams. John Porter Clark served as coordinating architect. The Aerial Tramway became one of the Coachella Valley’s most popular tourist attractions taking passengers from the arid lower station at 2,600 feet to the upper station at 8,500 feet, a mountainous area of pine trees and snow. The Williams team, with E. Stewart Williams as lead designer, was responsible for the upper tramway station that is evocative of a mountain chalet. The tramway valley station was designed by Albert Frey using a New England style covered bridge as its inspiration.⁴⁶ It is an excellent example of Frey’s integration of architecture and structure.⁴⁷

A dry streambed that could become a raging river at certain times of the year was the challenging location chosen for the valley station. Hence, Frey’s decision to straddle the streambed with a building utilizing a structural truss design. A shed roof with its upward slope paralleling the slope of the mountain covers the building. By inserting glass between the trusses of this lightweight structure, spectacular views looking up the mountain at the tram are afforded waiting riders.

⁴³ Rosa, 115.

⁴⁴ Alan Hess, *Julius Shulman: Palm Springs*, 52.

⁴⁵ David Gebhard, Introduction, Rosa. David Gebhard (1927-1996) was a preeminent scholar of California architecture and the founder and curator of the University of California at Santa Barbara Art Museum Architectural Drawing Collection.

⁴⁶ Prickly Pears, 58:00.

⁴⁷ Rosa, 122.

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Frey House II, 1963-1964 (extant)

For Albert Frey, Mount San Jacinto was an imposing presence that, in his architecture, demanded to be addressed. It was the western view to which buildings in the alluvial basin of Palm Springs were designed to face. By the late 1950s, after 25 years of looking up at the mountain, Frey decided he would live there and look down.⁴⁸ It took five years to find the right parcel, which was purchased from a man who thought it too steep to build on.⁴⁹ Known as Frey House II, it soars 220 feet above Palm Springs. Begun in 1963 and completed in 1964, the house exemplifies Frey’s design philosophy that a building should meld into its desert environment.

Located on a steep slope with natural rock outcroppings, Frey House II consists of two distinct elements. A retaining wall of poured concrete and terracotta-colored concrete block presses against the hillside, forming a platform containing a swimming pool and a space below for a carport. Typical of his post-World War II designs, the double-stacked concrete blocks are aligned and, at the carport, corners are cut at a diagonal at every other paired row. Steps lead from the driveway to the deck, which is enclosed by a concrete block railing interspersed with square openings.

In contrast, the house itself is light and airy, a pure rectangle of steel-frame construction and plate glass, with corrugated metal used for the roof, overhang, ceiling and walls. The house is set precisely on an east-west axis. The thin shed roof angles downward toward the south, capping the composition, its slant precisely calibrated to take advantage of the angle of the sun.⁵⁰ Said Frey of the deep overhangs, “The plan was designed so that, for instance, the glass walls are not exposed to the sun in the heat of summer. That’s what determined these overhangs. In winter, when the sun is much lower, it comes in and helps heat the house. I never need any heat after the sun comes up because the sun warms it.”⁵¹ As for his use of metal, “The weather is too hot for wood. Metal doesn’t retain heat—it cools off in minutes.”⁵²

Inside the house, the concrete floor—dyed to match the local soil—steps up from the bedroom to the dining/living area following the slope of the terrain. Separating these two areas is an enormous boulder that penetrates the house anchoring it to the environment. North facing glazing traces the rock’s contours. Frey noted, “Its gray granite probably took thousands of years to make this color. I have very strong opinions about the connection between

⁴⁸ Prickly Pears, 1:07:00.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ In 1935, John Porter Clark and Albert Frey planted a 10-foot pole and measured the angle of the sun for an entire year.

⁵¹ Golub, 74.

⁵² Adele Cygelman, *Palm Springs Modern* (New York: Rizzoli International, 1999), 134.

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architecture and nature.”⁵³

Consistent with Frey’s belief in economy of space, the house contains seating, a dining area, and storage that are all built in.⁵⁴ Careful attention was paid to color. Said Frey, “I used a blue ceiling because it blends with the sky. It makes it very restful. And then, as you see, the yellow curtains are like the blossoming encilia flowers.”⁵⁵

In response to an interview question in 1986 about how his use of color was lost in the black and white photography that represented the house in publications of the time, Frey replied “Yes, color is so important because it ties in with the surrounding nature. For instance, these technical materials, like metal, become more dramatic when you look at the rock behind me which is natural. It makes a rather exciting contrast.”⁵⁶

The ethereal nature of Frey House II differs greatly from the Arthur Elrod Residence designed four years later by John Lautner at a similar elevation across the basin in Palm Springs’ Southridge neighborhood. That house was built almost entirely of concrete, including the roof. Of it Frey later commented when queried, “The more weight you have, the more movement [in earthquakes]. Lautner’s is a very nice exciting house. He did a wonderful job with concrete. I prefer to use lighter materials.”⁵⁷

Frey built his second house on a restricted budget. “I’m much more interested to get the most for the least money” he said. “It’s a challenge that way. It’s easy to splash and spend a lot of money, but that’s not very interesting. Economy after all controls many things.”⁵⁸ This philosophy expressed itself in the buildings Frey designed in the Coachella Valley from the 1940s through the 1960s. Frey avoided using expensive materials such as marble because he believed that they were inappropriate for the desert environment.⁵⁹ “Materials should be used in a simple way,” he said, “and not try to pretend to be more than what [they are].”⁶⁰

Critical commentary regarding Frey House II

About Frey’s second dwelling, historian David Gebhard stated:

Frey’s own house (No. 2) of 1963-64 indicates how he could look back to the early 1920s experiments of Lloyd Wright and Schindler, link these concepts with

⁵³ Frances Anderton, “A Desert Prophet Wins New Disciples,” *New York Times*, Sept 17, 1998, F11.

⁵⁴ Frey was a strong proponent of built-in furniture, believing “Furniture is in the way most of the time. Dust gets behind it.” Golub, 78.

⁵⁵ Golub, 74.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 73.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 81.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 74.

⁵⁹ Prickly Pears, 1:10:00

⁶⁰ Prickly Pears, 1:14:35

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his own version of the machine image, and couple them with the simplicity of form associated with the California ranch house. This house plays two divergent games simultaneously: it sits within and is passively overpowered by the rock outcropping of the mountainside upon which it has been situated, but nonetheless, through its precisely delineated concrete garage, stairs, walls, and swimming pool terrace, the house asserts the unquestioned primacy of the man-made object.⁶¹

From Frey’s obituary in the *Los Angeles Times*,

Among Frey's greatest creations was a house that he designed for himself at a mountainside site overlooking Palm Springs, completed in 1964. The house is tiny—1,200 square feet—yet it encapsulates all of Frey's ideas about nature and the man-made, about the poetic beauty of living a life intimately connected to the human scale.⁶²

The house was designed as a narrow glass box and is set lengthwise along the side of the mountain. Frey used the tough industrial materials that marked much of his work—steel frame, glass walls, corrugated metal roof. But the refined, Cartesian-inspired order of the house is intentionally distorted by the rugged mountain landscape. Inside, the house's floor is divided into two levels to reflect the mountain's steep slope, and a boulder seemingly crashes through the living room, cunningly separating living space from the lone bedroom. It is that tension—between the order of man and the order of nature—that came to define Frey's best work.⁶³

The house established Frey’s reputation as a leading figure of the Modernist avant garde. Yet its immediate ambitions were much more humble. This was still the postwar building boom, the architectural photographer Julius Shulman noted, “Young married couples could afford to build small houses,” Shulman said, “And this little house had a million ideas. He had designed space for everything, the compact kitchen, the bathroom that was oriented towards the morning light—everything he did was meticulously oriented towards design. It was the efficiency of the Swiss mind.”⁶⁴

In many ways, the image of Frey became entwined with the image of that house. High above the city, Frey, a vegetarian and nature lover who said that the clean mountain landscape reminded him of his native Switzerland, would regularly do his yoga exercises or wander outside to feed quail, squirrels and lizards.⁶⁵

⁶¹ David Gebhard, Introduction, Rosa book

⁶² Nicolai Ouroussoff, architecture critic for the *Los Angeles Times*, wrote Frey’s obituary for the newspaper, November 17, 1998.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

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From Frey's obituary in *Architecture* magazine,

Frey lived his last 34 years in the second extraordinary glass-and-metal house he designed in Palm Springs. There, he personified the same qualities found in his buildings: elegant, simple, streamlined, and clever. Even his wardrobe demonstrated a sensual notion of esthetic frugality. He wore shirts, trousers, and socks in a strictly limited palette of white, powder blue, salmon, pale yellow, and beige. For Frey, Modernism was not merely a stylistic issue, but a philosophical way of life.⁶⁶

From Frey's obituary in the *New York Times*,

In a career that spanned more than 65 years, Mr. Frey remained true to the principle that architecture should make the most of the least.⁶⁷

Frey bequeathed his home to the Palm Springs Art Museum upon his death in 1998. Since that time the museum has been an admirable steward, allowing visiting scholars to occupy the residence for extended stays.

Tramway Gas Station, 1965 (extant)

Since 1965, the first major building one encounters when entering Palm Springs from Highway 111 is the Tramway Gas Station. For it Frey chose a roof form that would come to symbolize mid-century design, the hyperbolic paraboloid. The program for the service station was minimal: shelter for six gasoline pumps, an office, two storage rooms, a pair of restrooms, and three automobile service bays. These requirements were elegantly met in a compact ovoid building covered by a dramatically soaring roof.

Constructed of ribbed galvanized steel panels resting on steel beams, the roof is held aloft by only six steel pipe posts. The roof's downward sloping edges are anchored to stepped, triangular piers built of Frey's trademark sandblasted terracotta-colored concrete block. For the building, the concrete block is stacked so that every two rows are aligned giving the appearance of offset squares. As with Palm Springs City Hall, the gas station's piers and main building feature corner treatments where the concrete blocks are cut at a diagonal at every other paired row. Floor to ceiling plate glass windows and doors face the pumps; plate glass faces the mountains at the rear.

The Tramway Gas Station was closed for many years. Finally, in the late 1990s, it was

⁶⁶ Susanna Sirefman, architect and author of *New York: A Guide to Recent Architecture*, obituary from *Architecture* magazine January 1999 [Magazine of the AIA, now called *Architect*].

⁶⁷ Julie Iovine, "Albert Frey, a Modernist and Minimalist Architect, Dies at 95," obituary, *New York Times*, December 3, 1998, B15.

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rehabilitated for use as a sculpture gallery, transforming to its use as the Palm Springs Visitors Center a few years later. The building “still serves as a landmark at the edge of the desert and expresses the pioneering spirit of this resort community.”⁶⁸

Frey on His Design Philosophy

Albert Frey participated in an oral history project of the Palm Springs Public Library. “Prickly Pears: Portraits of Historical Palm Springs” consisted of videotaped interviews with over sixty local residents, including several architects, in the mid-1980s. On November 8, 1986 Frey and John Porter Clark were interviewed together as they sat on the patio of the house Clark had designed in 1939. Frey was asked to reflect on his career and design philosophy. Responding to the interviewer’s comment that his work was not that of a formally austere modernist, Frey replied, “No, you have to have your fantasy going, too. After all, that’s what life is. When you think what nature produces in fantastic forms, in birds and animals and everything. That’s where creativity comes in.”⁶⁹

Frey was consistent in his modernist belief that architecture should be constructed of simple, inexpensive materials to meet the needs of ordinary people. He said, “So much of traditional architecture was built to impress you. Wealth or prestige. If you were a king or whatever. A façade. It’s the people who are inside who are important.”⁷⁰

Frey was asked to state his design principles. “Respect nature. Establish certain principles. Take advantage of the modern techniques, manufacturers, and what the engineers invent. Because the arch was an invention. Or the vault. Or the beam. It’s been that way through history.”⁷¹ Summarizing his approach to design as relates to the environment, he said. “I try not to have a preconceived idea about a building, but to see what the setting is and of course the functions and so on and then put it all together and make architecture out of it. I try to work with nature. You see, I don’t violate it. I respect it. Nature is very beautiful. After all, we come from nature. We grew up for millions of years in contact with nature. That’s one of the reasons why I live out here.”⁷²

Preserving Albert Frey’s Architectural Legacy

Albert Frey died in 1998 at his mountainside home in Palm Springs. He was 95. Fortunately, Frey lived long enough to savor the renewed appreciation for his desert modern designs that arose initially from Joseph Rosa’s research in the late 1980s. Writes Rosa, Frey “was able to witness the next decade of vast interest in his architecture and his life. Frey had become

⁶⁸ Rosa, 124.
⁶⁹ Golub, 77.
⁷⁰ Ibid., 79.
⁷¹ Ibid.
⁷² Ibid., 81.

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equated with the modern idiom of the desert, and was a valuable source for many looking to understand the modern architecture of the region.”⁷³

Despite renewed appreciation for Frey and his work, there have been several preservation battles for buildings that he designed. A 1995 proposal to demolish the Tramway Gas Station was initially thwarted when preservation advocates convinced the Palm Springs City Council to designate the building as a local landmark. The designation was quickly rescinded, only to be reinstated seven years later by the City. In the interim, the building had been purchased by San Francisco artists who restored it for use as a sculpture gallery. In 2003, the Tramway Gas Station was rehabilitated for its use as the Palm Springs Visitors Center.

A proposal in 1999 by the City of Palm Springs to demolish Frey’s 1955 Fire Station #1 and replace it with a parking structure led to founding of the Palm Springs Modern Committee (PS ModCom), a preservation organization with a mission of advocacy and education for Coachella Valley buildings of the modern movement. Following an intense advocacy effort, the City Council abandoned its plan and, instead, designated the building as a local landmark.

PS ModCom’s second preservation effort was an attempt to save the 1961 Frey-designed Palm Springs (Alpha Beta) shopping center, which ended in failure. Alpha Beta was demolished for a new “Frey-inspired” shopping center in 2000.

Arson destroyed Frey’s Premiere Apartments in 2007.

In 2014, the Palm Springs Art Museum, steward of Frey House II, inaugurated its Architecture and Design Center (ADC) in the city center. The ADC is the home of a portion of the Albert Frey archive, with the majority of his papers stored at the Architecture and Design Collection, Art Design and Architecture Museum, University of California, Santa Barbara.

Conclusion

Albert Frey came to the United States filled with excitement about the modern spirit that was sweeping Europe. “As the first architect to build in America who had directly worked with the modern master Le Corbusier, a new world was open to him. He was eager to explore the new technological frontiers that America promised, but found another frontier he had not anticipated—a virgin desert landscape that was his on which to build.”⁷⁴ Frey began his career by designing buildings in the language of the European modern movement—as static objects that stood independent from their sites. In the Coachella Valley his designs evolved as a response to environmental conditions unique to the desert.

Wrote Frances Anderton in the *New York Times*,

⁷³ Rosa, 140.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 135.

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[Frey] moved here in 1939 and produced many landmark buildings ... all the while fashioning a modern architecture of organic curves, exposed desert rocks and unadorned exterior surfaces—an architecture superbly suited to the desert climate and landscape.⁷⁵

For Frey's obituary, architectural critic for the *Los Angeles Times* Nicolai Ouroussoff wrote,

During the 1940s, '50s and '60s, Frey designed a series of Modernist landmarks that eventually came to define Palm Springs as a hotbed of architectural experimentation ... meld[ing] the Modernist obsession with the machine and mass production techniques with a deep sensitivity to natural surroundings.⁷⁶

Regarding Frey's residential designs, Alan Hess concludes,

Frey's architecture is an unusual blend of the visionary and the everyday. He created the thin steel and glass tents that were a statement of Modern theory and Modern living, but his houses also were ordinary homes for living, with sinks and fireplaces and sliding aluminum doors—not always that much different than any other. This modest Modernism may have been a product of his place and his clients; he made a living with bread-and-butter commissions, but he still maintained his creative edge, exploring new ideas and new materials, investing these buildings for everyday life with vitality. Many architects played the role of the Great Man of architecture, creating an intimidating presence to bend a client to the will and logic of their architecture. But without the overwhelming desire for fame, Frey did not need that approach. He simply built one graceful house after another.⁷⁷

Albert Frey's distinct, unique, and immediately recognizable architectural style was based on a keen understanding of the desert's challenges and a deep love of its natural beauty. His architectural philosophy was to make the most with less, where truly less is more.

All of the buildings associated with Albert Frey that continue to meet registration requirements deserve the honor of inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places at the local level of significance under Criterion C.

⁷⁵ Frances Anderton, "A Desert Prophet Wins New Disciples," *New York Times*, September 17, 1998, F11.

⁷⁶ Nicolai Ouroussoff, architecture critic for the *Los Angeles Times*, wrote Frey's obituary for the newspaper November 17, 1998.

⁷⁷ Alan Hess, *Julius Shulman: Palm Springs*, 53.

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F. Associated Property Types

Property Type: Single Family Residence

Description

Over his multi-decade architectural career in the Coachella Valley, Albert Frey experimented with designs and materials in addressing the harsh conditions of the desert. The single family properties nominated under this National Register Multiple Property Documentation Form are eligible for listing under Criterion C. Each is attributed to Albert Frey and share distinctive characteristics. The buildings exhibit the tenets of the modern movement classified under the rubric of style, foremost among these being an absence of applied ornamentation and rejection of decorative historical references. Instead, emphasis is placed on form following function. Architectural elements include flat or shed roof forms with deep overhangs; an indoor-outdoor flow; an embrace of new materials or construction methods such as floor-to-ceiling plate glass, sliding glass doors, corrugated aluminum sheathing, fiberglass panels, asbestos-cement board cladding, slender steel pipe pilotis supporting the building above an open ground level, and terracotta-colored concrete block.

Generally, a maximum of flexibility was designed into the houses with open floor plans where dining and living areas merged. Kitchens, often quite small, were not enclosed or segregated but integrated with other common areas. Much of the furniture was built-in.

Significance

The historic context associated with this multiple property submission is “Desert modern design in the Coachella Valley, 1934-1965.” The Albert Frey-designed single family residence is a property type associated with this context. All of the single family dwellings attributed to Albert Frey that meet registration requirements qualify for listing in the National Register under Criterion C at the local level of significance.

Under Criterion C, qualifying dwellings embody the distinctive characteristics of residential architecture associated with the modern movement as interpreted by Albert Frey for the desert environment of the Coachella Valley. The houses share the modern qualities of flat or shed roofs, deep overhangs, open floor plans, extensive use of glass, and indoor-outdoor flow. Exterior sheathing includes such materials as corrugated metal, asbestos-concrete boards, or concrete block. The designs reject applied ornamentation or historical references. In addition, Albert Frey is known as a master architect within his profession.

Registration Requirements

In order to qualify for individual registration under Criterion C, a single family dwelling must be attributed to Albert Frey as included in the building list compiled by Joseph Rosa on pages 141-143 in his biography *Albert Frey, Architect* revised in 1999. The property must embody the distinctive characteristics of residential architecture associated with the architect. It must

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maintain enough physical integrity to be readily identifiable as the work of Albert Frey. To meet physical integrity requirements, the residence must possess a preponderance of original characteristics defining exterior features as documented by historic photographs and/or detailed plans. Original construction material should be evident or have been replaced in-kind in a manner consistent with the original design and materials. Character defining features include original exterior sheathing, overhangs, and roof slope. Windows should be original on the exposures visible from the public right-of-way, or, if replaced or altered, compatible with the original design.

Additions will not disqualify buildings unless they drastically alter the overall scale, substantially modify the character defining features of the dwelling, or clearly violate the documented intention of the architect. The addition of perimeter walls for security or privacy, and modifications to the original landscaping, will not disqualify buildings under Criterion C.

Property Type: Commercial Building

Description

The commercial properties nominated under this National Register Multiple Property Documentation Form are eligible for listing under Criterion C. Each is attributed to Albert Frey and share distinctive characteristics. The buildings exhibit the stylistic tenets of the modern movement, foremost among these being an absence of applied ornamentation and rejection of decorative historical references. Instead, emphasis is placed on form following function. Architectural elements include flat or shed roof forms with deep overhangs; an embrace of new materials such as floor-to-ceiling plate glass and corrugated aluminum for exterior sheathing, ceilings and fascias; and terracotta-colored concrete block. Some of the buildings utilize steel frame construction.

The single notable exception to the above is the Kocher-Samson Building of 1934. It is important and unique among the Frey-designed commercial buildings in that it was his first design in the Coachella Valley, is International Style in inspiration, and does not exhibit the key architectural features that would later come to define Frey’s work as adapted to the desert environment after World War II.

Significance

The historic context associated with this multiple property submission is “Desert modern design in the Coachella Valley, 1934-1965.” The Albert Frey-designed commercial building is a property type associated with this context. All of the commercial buildings attributed to Albert Frey that meet registration requirements qualify for listing in the National Register under Criterion C at the local level of significance.

Under Criterion C, qualifying buildings embody the distinctive characteristics of commercial architecture associated with the modern movement as interpreted by Albert Frey for the desert

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environment of the Coachella Valley. The buildings are of concrete block or steel frame construction and share the modern qualities of flat or shed roofs, deep overhangs, and extensive use of glass. Corrugated metal may be used for exterior sheathing. The designs reject applied ornamentation or historical references. In addition, Albert Frey is known as a master architect within his profession.

Registration Requirements

In order to qualify for individual registration under Criterion C, a commercial building must be attributed to Albert Frey as included in the building list compiled by Joseph Rosa on pages 141-143 in his biography *Albert Frey, Architect* revised in 1999. The property must embody the distinctive characteristics of commercial architecture associated with the architect. It must maintain enough physical integrity to be readily identifiable as the work of Albert Frey. To meet physical integrity requirements, the building must possess a preponderance of original characteristics defining exterior features as documented by historic photographs and/or detailed plans. Original construction material such as concrete block should be evident. Character defining features include original exterior sheathing, overhangs, and roof slope. Windows should be original on the exposures visible from the public right-of-way, or, if replaced or altered, compatible with the original design.

Additions will not disqualify buildings unless they drastically alter the overall scale, substantially modify character defining features, or clearly violate the documented intention of the architect. Modifications to the original landscaping will not disqualify buildings under Criterion C.

Property Type: Civic Building

Description

The civic buildings nominated under this National Register Multiple Property Documentation Form are eligible for listing under Criterion C. Each is attributed to Albert Frey and share distinctive characteristics. The buildings exhibit the stylistic tenets of the modern movement, foremost among these being an absence of applied ornamentation and rejection of decorative historical references. Instead, emphasis is placed on form following function. Architectural elements include flat or shed roof forms with deep overhangs; an embrace of new materials such as floor-to-ceiling plate glass and corrugated aluminum for exterior sheathing, ceilings and fascias; and terracotta-colored concrete block.

Significance

The historic context associated with this multiple property submission is "Desert modern design in the Coachella Valley, 1934-1965." The Albert Frey-designed civic building is a property type associated with this context. All of the civic buildings attributed to Albert Frey that meet registration requirements qualify for listing in the National Register under Criterion C at the local level of significance.

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Under Criterion C, qualifying buildings embody the distinctive characteristics of civic architecture associated with the modern movement as interpreted by Albert Frey for the desert environment of the Coachella Valley. The buildings are of concrete block construction and share the modern qualities of flat roofs, deep overhangs, and extensive use of glass. Corrugated metal may be used for exterior sheathing. The designs reject applied ornamentation and historical references, the primary exception being the Council Chambers of City Hall where a classically inspired *tholos* is placed in front of the entrance.⁷⁸ In addition, Albert Frey is known as a master architect within his profession.

Registration Requirements

In order to qualify for individual registration under Criterion C, a civic building must be attributed to Albert Frey as included in the building list compiled by Joseph Rosa on pages 141-143 in his biography *Albert Frey, Architect* revised in 1999. The property must embody the distinctive characteristics of civic architecture associated with the architect. It must maintain enough physical integrity to be readily identifiable as the work of Albert Frey. To meet physical integrity requirements, the building must possess a preponderance of original characteristics defining exterior features as documented by historic photographs and/or detailed plans. Original construction material such as concrete block should be evident. Character defining features include original exterior sheathing, overhangs, and roof slope. Windows should be original on the exposures visible from the public right-of-way, or, if replaced or altered, compatible with the original design.

Property Type: Religious Building – Criteria Consideration A

Description

The religious buildings that may be nominated under this National Register Multiple Property Documentation Form are eligible for listing under Criterion C. Because each nominated building derives its primary significance from architectural distinction as evaluated under Criterion C, it meets Criteria Consideration A: Religious Properties. Each building shall be attributed to Albert Frey and share distinctive characteristics. The buildings shall exhibit the stylistic tenets of the modern movement, foremost among these being an absence of applied ornamentation and an emphasis on form following function. The buildings may include traditional religious references. Architectural elements typically associated with religious buildings associated with Albert Frey include flat or shed roof forms with deep overhangs; an embrace of new materials such as floor-to-ceiling plate glass and corrugated aluminum for ceilings and fascias; and terracotta-colored concrete block.

Significance

⁷⁸ Tholos, also known as a beehive tomb: “a stone-built subterranean tomb of the Mycenaean civilization consisting of a circular chamber covered by a corbeled dome and entered by a walled passage through a hillside.” Francis D. K. Ching, *A Visual Dictionary of Architecture* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1995), 248.

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The historic context associated with this multiple property submission is “Desert modern design in the Coachella Valley, 1934-1965.” The Albert Frey-designed religious building is a property type associated with this context. All of the religious buildings attributed to Albert Frey that meet registration requirements qualify for listing in the National Register under Criterion C at the local level of significance and meet Criteria Consideration A: Religious Properties.

Under Criterion C, qualifying buildings embody the distinctive characteristics of religious architecture associated with the modern movement as interpreted by Albert Frey for the desert environment of the Coachella Valley. The buildings are of concrete block construction and share the modern qualities of flat roofs, deep overhangs, and extensive use of glass. Corrugated metal may be used for exterior sheathing. The designs reject applied ornamentation but may include traditional religious references. In addition, Albert Frey is known as a master architect within his profession.

Registration Requirements

In order to qualify for individual registration under Criterion C, a religious building must be attributed to Albert Frey as included in the building list compiled by Joseph Rosa on pages 141-143 in his biography *Albert Frey, Architect* revised in 1999. The property must embody the distinctive characteristics of religious architecture associated with the architect. It must maintain enough physical integrity to be readily identifiable as the work of Albert Frey. To meet physical integrity requirements, the building must possess a preponderance of original characteristics defining exterior features as documented by historic photographs and/or detailed plans. Original construction material such as concrete block should be evident. Character defining features include original exterior sheathing, overhangs, and roof slope. Windows should be original on the exposures visible from the public right-of-way, or, if replaced or altered, compatible with the original design.

Additions will not disqualify buildings unless they drastically alter the overall scale of the building, substantially modify character defining features, or clearly violate the documented intention of the architect. Modifications to the original landscaping will not disqualify buildings under Criterion C.

To meet Criteria Consideration A: Religious Properties, the nominated religious building must be significant for architectural distinction under Criterion C.

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G. Geographical Data

Locations of properties associated with the desert modern design of architect Albert Frey in the Coachella Valley, 1934-1965 that meet registration criteria are as follows. A subset of this list, indicated in bold, is nominated concurrently with this Multiple Property Documentation Form. Additional properties may be nominated at a later time.

- **Frey House II: 686 Palisades Drive, Palm Springs, Riverside County**
- Cree House II: 66-389 East Highway 111, Cathedral City, Riverside County
- **Sieroty House: 695 East Vereda Sur, Palm Springs, Riverside County**
- **Carey House (also known as the Carey-Pirozzi House): 651 West Via Escuela, Palm Springs, Riverside County**
- **Loewy House: 600 Panorama Road, Palm Springs, Riverside County**
- **Palm Springs City Hall: 3200 East Tahquitz Way, Palm Springs, Riverside County**
- **Tramway Gas Station: 2901 North Palm Canyon Drive, Palm Springs, Riverside County**
- **Palm Springs Aerial Tramway Valley Station: 1 Tram Way, Palm Springs, Riverside County**
- **Palm Springs Fire Station #1: 227 North Indian Avenue, Palm Springs, Riverside County**
- **Kocher-Samson Building: 766 North Palm Canyon Drive, Palm Springs, Riverside County**
- Clark and Frey Office Building: 879 North Palm Canyon Drive, Palm Springs, Riverside County
- Nichols Building: 891-899 North Palm Canyon Drive, Palm Springs, Riverside County
- First Church of Christ Scientist: 605 South Riverside Drive, Palm Springs, Riverside County
- **North Shore Yacht Club: 99-155 Sea View Drive, Mecca (census designated place), Riverside County**

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H. Summary of Identification and Evaluation Methods

The multiple property submission, *The Architecture of Albert Frey*, was based on sources spanning the years 1931 to 2008. Background information for the development of the historic context statement included a wide variety of source materials relating to the history of the Modern Movement in general and desert modernism in particular. The work of Albert Frey was thoroughly documented and analyzed in Joseph Rosa's comprehensive biography, *Albert Frey, Architect* published in 1990 and revised in 1999. Rosa's book was the basis of the contextual framework utilized in this Multiple Property Submission for understanding the significance of the architect's work. Rosa, the foremost authority on Frey, conducted extensive archival research and interviews with Frey and many of his colleagues between November 1986 and December 1987.

Many articles, reviews, and much critical commentary regarding Albert Frey and his architectural legacy have been published since the 1930s and are referenced in the context statement and listed in the bibliography.

The nomination was researched and prepared by Peter Moruzzi, architectural historian. It was funded by contributions from John Boccoardo, L.J. Cella, Brad Dunning, Trina Turk and Jonathan Skow, Joe and Kim Zakowski, and grants from Modernism Week and the Palm Springs Modern Committee, both of which are non-profit 501(c)(3) organizations.

Mr. Moruzzi is an authority in the area of mid-century modern resources. As an architectural historian, he conducts historic resources surveys for municipalities, writes historic assessments and technical reports, conducts CEQA and NEPA analyses, and conducts plan reviews. He was the primary author of the National Register of Historic Places Multiple Property Submission for the *Case Study House Program: 1945-1966* listed in 2013. He authored the successful nomination of the El Cortez Hotel & Casino in Las Vegas also listed in the National Register in 2013. In addition, Moruzzi authored the successful nominations of the 1958 Johnnie's Broiler in Downey (architect Paul Clayton) listed in the California Register, and the 1949 Bob's Big Boy restaurant in Toluca Lake (architect Wayne McAllister) listed as a California Point of Historical Interest. He has been a lecturer and panelist on issues surrounding the preservation of mid-century modern resources. Mr. Moruzzi was chairman of the Los Angeles Conservancy's Modern Committee from 1992-1997, and is the founding president of the Palm Springs Modern Committee established in 1999. In 2002, he received the Presidential Public Service Citation from the American Institute of Architects for work in the preservation of Modernist architecture in Southern California. In 2012, the California Preservation Foundation presented Moruzzi with its President's Award for his "extraordinary work to protect modern resources and preserve California's rich cultural heritage."

Between August 2014 and March 2015, Mr. Moruzzi evaluated each of the ten individual properties nominated in association with this Multiple Property Submission. He applied the

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Registration Requirements detailed in Section F to determine whether the resource met integrity requirements under Criterion C.

The individual properties nominated as part of this Multiple Property Submission meet the established eligibility requirements under National Register Criterion C. Additional properties meeting these requirements may be nominated in the future.

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