

A CORVETTE TOUR OF PALM SPRINGS

INTERIOR DESIGNER BRAD DUNNING TAKES A DRIVE THROUGH THE CLASSIC CALIFORNIA DESERT RESORT IN THE CLASSIC AMERICAN CONVERTIBLE.

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Photography by Theo Westenberger

Convertibles are perfect because you can drive around and not feel guilty about not lying by the pool," says interior designer Brad Dunning, gliding along the streets of Palm Springs in a 1999 red Corvette. "You blast the AC and feel irresponsible about the environment while looking at sprinkler-fed lawns, getting some sun, looking at architecture. It makes me happy."



Life is good. That is the promise of Palm Springs and the reason movie stars and socialites flocked there in the fifties and sixties. Only about one hundred miles east of Los Angeles, it provided a sybaritic getaway during the postwar boom. Vacation houses in turquoise and pink were built for fun, with simple lines and sliding glass doors that opened to swimming pools, golf courses or views of the desert.

By 1990 high-profile personalities like Bob Hope, Gerald Ford and Frank Sinatra had long since

moved on to the newer developments of Rancho Mirage or La Quinta, and Palm Springs' winter residents followed suit. When Dunning bought a post-and-beam house there three years ago, he discovered "a ghost town of modern architecture." John Lautner, Richard Neutra, A. Quincy Jones and Albert Frey, the big names of southern California modernism, all built houses in Palm Springs. Thanks to the slowed economy and an aging population, there had been little remodeling of such properties, making the city the Oak Park of southern California. (None are by Frank Lloyd Wright, though his son Lloyd Wright did the now defunct Art Déco Oasis Hotel; however, it is easy to see unadulterated examples of modern architecture by some of his numerous acolytes.)

Dunning's career in interior design evolved from his early interest in architecture, especially the residential experimentation of the fifties and sixties. "A large portion of my business involves bringing modern houses back to what they once were," he says. "In Los Angeles I'm working with Gucci designer Tom Ford on his Neutra house, as well as a house by A. Quincy Jones and one by Wallace Neff, who is less known for his modern period."

Growing up in Memphis, Dunning kept scrapbooks on architecture. He moved to Los Angeles in 1975 to pursue work in art and design. As far as he is

Interior designer Brad

Dunning, who has a house in Palm Springs, is an expert on the city's modern architecture.



JIM MCHUGH



concerned, driving around Palm Springs is a tour of the “modernism museum,” he says. “For one thing, it’s very safe, so there are seldom gates or walls, and there’s no dense foliage, so it’s excellent for curbside viewing of architecture. There are huge neighborhoods that are like the Twilight Zone. You can blink and think you’re back in 1962.”

“Frey struck a chord with me in a big way,” he continues. “It was a life-changing moment to find his work and meet him. He studied under Le Corbusier, and his off-the-shelf, low-cost modernism is now finding an audience. He got commissions for public buildings like schools, post offices and gas stations because his bid was the lowest. They’re made of simple concrete blocks, utilitarian, but handled in a way that elevates them above such work in lesser hands. His use of stacking and color gives them more character than most public buildings.”

On the northern outskirts of town, Dunning cruises the Corvette up to Frey’s futuristic Tramway Gas Station (now an art gallery by the same name), whose prowlike roof soars against the horizon.

Frey’s own residence can be seen in town, a few

miles farther south. “He set it on the side of a mountain, where Tahquitz Canyon Way terminates. It’s a succinct glass box built around a boulder, with an angled, corrugated-metal roof,” Dunning explains. As a member of the Historic Site Preservation Board, he lobbied in 1997 to establish class-one status for these and other Frey structures, along with other modernist landmarks in Palm Springs.

Dunning’s next stop is the Las Palmas neighborhood, where there is a wealth of architectural treasures, such as the 1946 house Neutra designed for Edgar Kaufmann, who had commissioned Wright’s Fallingwater. Subsequently owned by singer Barry Manilow, it was recently purchased by Brent Harris and his wife, Beth, an architectural historian. The couple spent three million dollars on a meticulous restoration with architects Leo Marmol and Ron Radziner. “It had a ripple effect—others were inspired to restore modern houses in the area,” says Dunning. (It was also the first postwar house to be awarded class-one status by the Historic Site Preservation Board.)

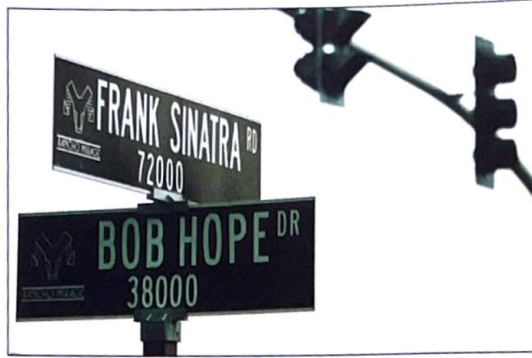
The house, on West Vista Chino, is identifiable by the stacked stone walls extending horizontally into the sparse landscape of boulders and cactus. A metal-trimmed observation deck supported by a

Dunning, in a 1999 Corvette, cruises by a palm-lined street. “The minimal and tranquil landscape is appealing in a modern way.”

louvered windbreak offers an uninterrupted view of sunsets and sunrises. Parked in front of the residence, Dunning remarks, "You get a sense of how crisp and clean and shiny these houses were. It's probably Neutra's best work."

Driving along the immaculate, empty streets, Dunning comes to Via Escuela and the Carey/Pirozzi house, also built by Frey, perched on stilts and featuring a façade of pale green asbestos board, used to withstand the harsh climate. The glazing reflects the vibrant sky. "This is one of Frey's oddest, quirkiest yet most interesting designs," Dunning observes, "and a brilliant example of his use of color in the context of the desert landscape."

On Ladera Circle is another of Dunning's favorites: an elaborate residence built by Robert Alexander, who developed the surrounding Las Palmas neighborhood. Elvis Presley once leased the hexagonal-fronted home with the angled roof.



Even some apartment house carports (below) have retained elements typical of 1960s architecture. Dunning (right) parks in the Indian Canyons. "Palm Springs is about lazy relaxation," he says.



"Palm Springs isn't about speed. I'm not driving, I'm touring. No matter what Corvettes look like today, they're still rooted in our memories of TV shows like *Route 66* and *77 Sunset Strip*," says Dunning.

Gossip columnist Rona Barrett lived next door. To avoid the paparazzi, Elvis and Priscilla Presley spent their honeymoon there after marrying in Las Vegas.

As the designer notes, the powerful Corvette, ideal for the freeway journey from Los Angeles, can be frustrated by the small-town pace. "You continually get stuck behind senior citizens going twenty miles an hour," he says. "Palm Springs isn't about speed, however. I'm not driving, I'm touring. No matter what Corvettes look like today, they're still rooted in our memories of TV shows like *Route 66* and *77 Sunset Strip*. The style hasn't changed that much, so it still has the same spirit as the architecture."

But before the golf courses and polo grounds, Palm Springs was a natural oasis, with mineral springs used by the Agua Caliente Indians. At the Indian Canyons, fifteen miles of trails are lined with towering two-thousand-year-old Washingtonian palms. Dunning stops to take a break, lying on one of the picnic tables and listening to the hot wind soughing through the fronds. "The sensuality of Palm Springs is overwhelming," he says. "You don't want to be working."

Returning to Highway 111, the Corvette speeds toward Rancho Mirage. Southern California's automotive fixation is at its most evident as Dunning pulls up to the area's renowned vendor of custom golf carts, Electric Car Distributors. For thirty-six

years they have been making small-scale copies of full-size cars: Thunderbirds, Rolls-Royces, Mercedeses. With a chuckle, Dunning points out, "In the sixties they had Chuck Barris design a golf cart in the shape of Bob Hope's head. You look through his sunglasses as windows, and the front has his ski-slope nose."

Directly across the street, Rancho Super Car Wash is announced by a sign picturing a pink elephant splashing itself with water, an image so popular with locals that it earned a variance from the law prohibiting neon. Like the script sign announcing Palm Springs itself, it's redolent of a free and easy era.

For weekenders, the hub of Palm Springs offers old-fashioned intimacy. Located a few blocks from the key corner of Palm Canyon Drive and Tahquitz Canyon Way is one of the city's most popular hotels, Doug Smith's Moorish-style Korakia Pensione (see *Architectural Digest*, May 1996). Guests can be seen relaxing by the pool or sipping martinis in the stylish courtyard. "It's a refuge where people can have drinks and talk," says Dunning. "No TV, no restaurant. It feels like a European pension."

"I love the intense artificiality of Palm Springs," Dunning says. "You get this weird sense of being in a crisis of authenticity: the hermetically sealed houses and cars, the artificial landscaping. I think of it as a cross between Mayberry and Las Vegas. And, since only forty thousand people live there, everything is easy. Parking? You just pull right in." □



