

nick of time

Paul R. Williams

if you know the name 'Paul R. Williams,' it's likely for his 1930s to '50s homes for the rich and famous—Frank Sinatra, Dave Chasen, Tyrone Power and others. Or you might be thinking of Paul Williams, the blond singer-songwriter of such hits as "Rainy Days and Mondays" and Kermit the Frog's "Rainbow Connection."

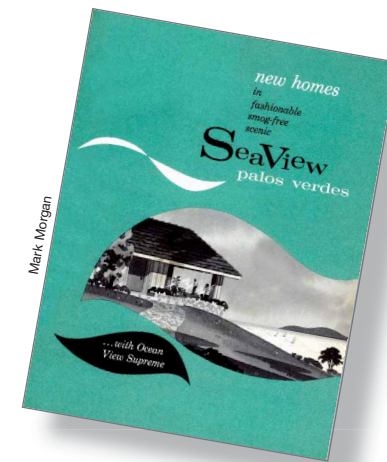
But this Williams is the respected architect who designed St. Jude Children's Research Hospital in Memphis, the La Concha Motel and the Guardian Angel Cathedral in Las Vegas, along with schools, airports, automobile showrooms, courthouses and other commercial buildings. Less well known are the midcentury tracts and custom homes for mere mor-

tals that helped fuel his 60-year career. The Paul R. Williams Project, a joint venture of the University of Memphis and the Memphis chapter of the American Institute of Architects, is working to publicize his achievements to a wider audience.

Orphaned at age 4, Williams pursued an architecture degree when the profession was almost exclusively white, becoming the first documented African American member of the AIA in 1923. By the time he retired 50 years later, he had designed more than 3,000 buildings, including Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz's 4,400-square-foot ranch house in Palm Springs. Williams also partnered with A. Quincy Jones on modernist designs for the desert town's Tennis Club and Town & Country Center, but his more modest homes are equally noteworthy.



Jim Brown (2)



SeaView

"Williams had the ability to utilize and synthesize his experience and skill from the designs of his larger noted houses for the Hollywood elite to the smaller, efficient modernist houses of the postwar era," comments Brad Grant, an associate dean and professor at Howard University. "He seemed to have hundreds of ideas for small, modern tract home designs and published pattern books during the mid-'40s. He felt that beautiful, integrated neighborhoods with beautiful, affordable homes utilizing the latest technology is how we should live, and designed the suburban homes to that utopian idea."

Targeted to veterans who qualified for government-backed loans, the 1960 SeaView tract in the hills of Southern

The middle school in Marina del Ray, Calif., is a Williams design from 1960. Thanks to research by the school's staff, it was recently repainted in period-appropriate colors and is under consideration for National Register nomination. Bottom and opposite: SeaView homes in Rancho Palos Verdes.



Courtesy of University of Memphis and Chris Fitzgerald, 2010

