

History Comes Alive!

Tales From the City Archives



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Paul R. Williams
in 1951.

Paul Williams Flourishes

■ **In part two, noted African American architect Paul R. Williams comes into his own style and fame.**

Photos courtesy the Security Pacific and Herald-Examiner collections, Los Angeles Public Library photo archive, Christina Rice, Acting Sr. Librarian.

As stated two months ago, Paul R. Williams was one of the most well known 20th century African American architects. His early forte had been designing exceptional homes. In the 1950s and 1960s, he designed some of the most distinctive buildings in the Los Angeles area. PRW, as he was referred to by this time, was best known for designing the spidery, futuristic Theme Building at Los Angeles International Airport with William Pereira, another architect who was considered the "Dean of local architects in Los Angeles." They also worked on other projects together.

PRW had designed exceptional, glamorous homes, occasionally for famous movie stars. Within the next four decades, Williams' life was filled with glitz and glamour. He became known as the "architect to the stars." He designed homes for legendary celebrities including Frank Sinatra, Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz, Tyrone Power, Lon Chaney, Bert Lahr and Zsa Zsa Gabor, to name a few. PRW once made an interesting paraphrased statement about the bitter irony of his position during those times. He was allowed to design and oversee the construction, but on the deeds were included segregation covenants barring blacks from purchasing the properties.

Here are abstracted descriptive designs of homes of some of the above listed celebrities. Also included are institutional buildings familiar to most Angelenos.

Frank Sinatra residence in Trousdale Estates, 1956: This was a small functional home. PRW designed it as the consummate bachelor pad. It had push buttons galore, being able to give an indoor - outdoor effect with a sunken dining room and a tropical lanai style. The colors of the house were off-white and charcoal, with ebony wood set off by white fabrics.

Desi Arnaz and Lucille Ball residence in Palm Springs, 1954: This house was a perfect getaway from the rigors of the entertainment industry and the urban life. This weekend home for the two entertainers melds into the desert landscape. Its modernist interpretation gave way for functional planning without wasted space.

Los Angeles County Courthouse, circa 1950s: PRW designed the County Courthouse with other architects. He was the first African-American architect of a county structure in Los Angeles when he was commissioned to design a building at the County General Hospital.



A1958 architect's rendering of the County Courthouse downtown.

The famous, and previously noted, Theme Building, Los Angeles International Airport, circa 1960s: PRW, in association with other architects, designed new terminal facilities and the futuristic theme building at Los Angeles International Airport.



The LAX Theme Building, shown just after its completion in the early 1960s.

First A.M.E. Church, Los Angeles, 1963: Paul R. Williams took particular pride in the design of the First American Methodist Episcopal Church. This church is where he was raised and where he remained a devoted member throughout his life.

During the 1960s, PRW became an architect for major public buildings in Los Angeles and other places within the United States. During the same decade, he received licenses to practice in Nevada and Tennessee along with past licenses from New York, Washington, D.C., and of course Los Angeles. Notably:

St. Jude Hospital, Memphis, Tenn., 1961: Entertainer Danny Thomas envisioned a hospital for children of all races with critical illnesses. PRW shared the same feelings and donated his time and services for the first building of what is now a larger complex. Upon the death of PRW in 1980, the first building was dedicated to him for his generosity.

PRW received many memorable awards and commemorations during his adult life. But one relates to our City government. From 1953 through 1965, he served as a member and was president for 11 years on the Board of Municipal Arts Commissioners, precursor to the current Cultural Affairs Dept. I have a friend, Eddy Feldman, an attorney and an articulate spokesman, who was a member and served on the same board with Mr. Williams, but joined in 1963. Someone convinced PRW

that after being president for 11 years, he should give others an opportunity to have the position. Believe it or not, Eddy Feldman, my friend, became the next board president.

One of the most fascinating aspects of PRW's life comes from his granddaughter's volume, *Paul R. Williams, Architect: A Legacy of Style* by Karen E. Hudson. Throughout the book, Quotes from her grandfather's speeches and writings are woven throughout the book. The quotes that impressed me the most were his feelings about being black. I will quote from an article written by PRW in July 1937, entitled "I Am a Negro," in *American Magazine*.

"During the early years of my practice, prospective homebuilders frequently came into my office without being aware of my color Most of them were obviously serious in their intention to build. Yet, in the moment that they met me and discovered they were dealing with a Negro, I could see many of them "freeze." Their interesting discussing plans waned instantly, and their one remaining concern was to discover a convenient exit without hurting my feelings.



The Second Baptist Church, designed by Paul R. Williams, was built in 1924.

But I knew that the proposed cost, in each case, must seem to be a fortune I used that knowledge for a deliberate trick designed to startle my visitor "I am sorry," I would say, "but I have been forced to make it a rule never to do houses costing less than \$10,000 — but won't you sit down for a moment. Perhaps I may be able to give you a few ideas." ... Theatrical tactics? Of course—but I had to win a hearing.... The trick worked. Frequently it gave me needed clients."

Naturally, I encountered many discouragements and rebuffs, most of which were predicated upon my color. I survived a few financial hardships, which might have been avoided had my face been white. But I do not regret those difficulties, for I think that I am a far better craftsman today than I would be had my course been free."

Finally, the following is the last paragraph of a lengthy "A Letter to My Grandfather: *The Legacy*" by Karen E. Hudson:

"How could I have ever thought that this was my gift to you? Remembering your smile and gentle touch, you were always with me guiding the search. The people I have met, the



From 1953: Then-Mayor Norris Poulson (center) poses with the four new commissioners he appointed, from left: Arthur J. Rendon, Health Commission; Paul R. Williams, Municipal Art Commission; Poulson; Mrs. Rudolph Polk, Municipal Art Commission and Lloyd A. Menveg, Harbor Commission.

I came to realize that I was being condemned, not by a lack of ability, but by my color. I passed through successive stages of bewilderment, inarticulate protest, resentment, and, finally, reconciliation to the status of my race. ... However, as I grew older ... I found an inspiring challenge. Without having the wish to "show them," I developed a fierce desire to "show myself."

The weight of my racial handicap forced me, willy-nilly, to develop salesmanship. The average, well-established white architect, secure in his social connections, might be able to rest his hopes on his final plans; I, on the contrary, had to devote as much thought and ingenuity to winning an adequate first hearing as to the execution of the detailed drawings.

[Prospective clients would comment:] "Just shopping around a bit" ... "Really not intending to build right now" ... "Thinking of spending about \$8,000..." The average figure was low, for clients able to build expensive mansions were not yet patronizing my office.

places and the experiences, have confirmed the accuracy of my original thought that rainy day in 1980. Yours was a gift to be shared. And it was through the search that I realized that what I had naively believed was my gift to you had become nothing less than your gift to me. For all your gifts, I will be forever grateful."



A private residence designed by Paul R. Williams.