

La Concha Motel Lobby Report for Nomination to the city of Las Vegas Historic Property Register

The La Concha Motel was originally constructed in 1961 on the Las Vegas “Strip,” just south of the existing Riviera Hotel and Casino. The motel property included the free-form concrete shell lobby, and a rectangular two-story motel building attached to the rear of the lobby. The motel building was demolished in 2004 to make way for a new high-rise development, as yet to be built.

The La Concha Motel was designed by internationally known African-American architect Paul R. Williams (1894-1980), one of the foremost architects of southern California. He produced an incredible number of buildings in his career that spanned almost 60 years. Williams designed over 2,000 private residences and many major civic and commercial buildings in southern California and elsewhere.

Williams’ practice was based largely in Los Angeles and the southern California area. He began his studies at the Los Angeles School of Art and Design and the Los Angeles branch of the New York Beaux-Arts Institute of Design Atelier. He went on to attend the University of Southern California, designing several residential buildings there.

Williams served on the first Los Angeles Planning Commission in 1920, and became a certified architect in 1921. He was the first certified African-American architect west of the Mississippi. He opened his own office at age 28, and was known as an outstanding draughtsman.

Williams was the first African-American member of the American Institute of Architects (AIA). In 1939, he was awarded the AIA Award of Merit for his design of the MCA Building in Beverly Hills. In 1951, Williams won the Omega Psi Phi “Man of the Year” award, and shortly after, in 1953, he received the Springarn Medal from the NAACP for his outstanding contributions as an architect. In 1957 he became the first African-American to be voted an AIA Fellow. Williams also received honorary doctorates from Howard University, Lincoln University, and the Tuskegee Institute.

His most prolific work was designing private homes, most of which were in the Hollywood Hills and the mid-Wilshire section of Los Angeles. Modern interpretations of Tudor-revival, French Chateau, Regency, and Mediterranean were all within his vernacular and his most famous homes were for Hollywood celebrities. His client list included Frank Sinatra, Lon Chaney, Sr., Lucille Ball, Tyrone Power, Barbara Stanwyck, Bert Lahr, William S. Paley, Charles Cottrell, Will Hays, Zasu Pitts and Danny Thomas. One notable home of Williams design was later used for exterior scenes of the Clampett mansion on television’s “The Beverly Hillbillies.”

Among the buildings and projects designed (completely or in part) by Williams in Las Vegas are the Guardian Angel Cathedral (1963) on Cathedral Way, and the Berkley Square homes (1954) in West Las Vegas. Elsewhere in Nevada, Paul Williams is credited with designing the Basic Magnesium Townsite Homes (1942) in Henderson, and

in Reno, he designed several private residences in the 1930s, and the First Church of Christ Scientist (1938), now the Lear Theater. Williams designed or contributed to noted public buildings including the Shrine Auditorium, Hollywood YMCA, Los Angeles County Courthouse, Los Angeles County Hall of Administration, Saks Fifth Avenue (Beverly Hills) and the Beverly Hills Hotel.

The La Concha lobby is an example of Williams' later work, as he moved away from more traditional architectural styles to embrace Modernism. By the late 1950s, Modernism had begun to shake off its formal ninety-degree angles in favor of more playful, organic and expressive forms. A popular name for this type of architecture is "Googie," which describes a style that references a time when the United States was enthusiastically anticipating the future. Many of these buildings were designed with exaggerated tail-fin shapes, boomerang angles and free-flowing, parabolic concrete forms.

The Googie style of architecture thrived in the 1950s and early 1960s. It began as commercial architecture designed to make the most of strip shopping centers and other roadside locations. It fit the needs of the new California "car culture" and the dreams of the even newer space age. Googie has also been known as Populuxe, Doo-Wop, Coffee Shop Modern, Jet Age, Space Age and Chinese Modern. It is also sometimes identified as part of a larger overall movement of space-age industrial design.

Some of the more recognizable architectural elements of Googie architecture are upswept roofs, large domes, large sheet glass windows, starbursts, exposed steel beams, and flying saucer shapes. Googie architecture appears at once organic and abstract, with an improbable lightness. Often Googie buildings would incorporate the new materials of the time - sheet glass, glass blocks, asbestos, plywood and plastic. Other innovations allowed steel and cement to be used in new ways.

The La Concha lobby exhibits the Googie style with its exaggerated shell form, and thin, concrete structure seemingly held up by large plates of glass. The tips of the sweeping arches sour outward and upward, while balancing on narrow points at their bottom.

Although the Googie style of architecture was most prevalent in southern California, the La Concha lobby is one of the best examples of the stylistic influence from the Los Angeles culture. This influence helped to create some of Las Vegas' best commercial buildings during the 1950s and 1960s. Indeed, many of the more traditional Modern buildings located on or around Main St. in downtown Las Vegas were discovered to have been designed by architects from southern California during an historic resource survey of the area in 2004. However, very few, if any, examples of Googie architecture exist in Las Vegas.