

PALM SPRINGS MODERN

BY ADELE CYGELMAN. FOREWORD BY JOSEPH ROSA. PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVID GLOMB.

Contents

9 **Acknowledgments**

11 **Foreword** *Joseph Rosa*

17 **Forget Las Vegas**

Projects

28 John Porter Clark House

38 Raymond Loewy House

50 Edgar J. Kaufmann House

64 William and Clara Burgess House

72 Frank Sinatra House

86 William and Marjorie Edris House

94 Mari and Stewart Williams House

100 Various Projects by William F. Cody

124 J. J. Robinson House

132 Frey House II

140 Steel Development Houses

150 Samuel and Luella Maslon House

158 Max Palevsky House

168 Arthur Elrod House

180 Ambassador and Mrs. Walter H. Annenberg House

190 **Bibliography**

Arthur Elrod House, 1968

John Lautner, Architect

"After showing me the site, Elrod said, 'Give me what you think I should have on this lot.' As a very knowledgeable interior designer, Elrod was capable of designing something really good for himself, but he wanted the architecturally exceptional," the late architect recounted in *John Lautner, Architect*.

Construction on Arthur Elrod's house began in 1968 with the roof, a conical concrete dome that consists of two slabs separated by a layer of insulation. The house perches on a narrow, rocky ridge south of Palm Springs, looking west to Mount San Jacinto and north to the town, and Lautner devised a concrete structure that hugs the rocky spine of the ridge and then bursts outward in a massive circular living room sixty feet in diameter. Lautner controlled the light and views with blades of glass — clerestory segments in the roof that he described as "radiating from the center like a desert flower." The electronically controlled segments offer slices of snow-capped mountains and sky. A deep overhang protects the interiors from the sun. Concrete cylinders set in the overhang hold low-voltage uplights. At night, the black slate floor disappears and the city lights become the focus.

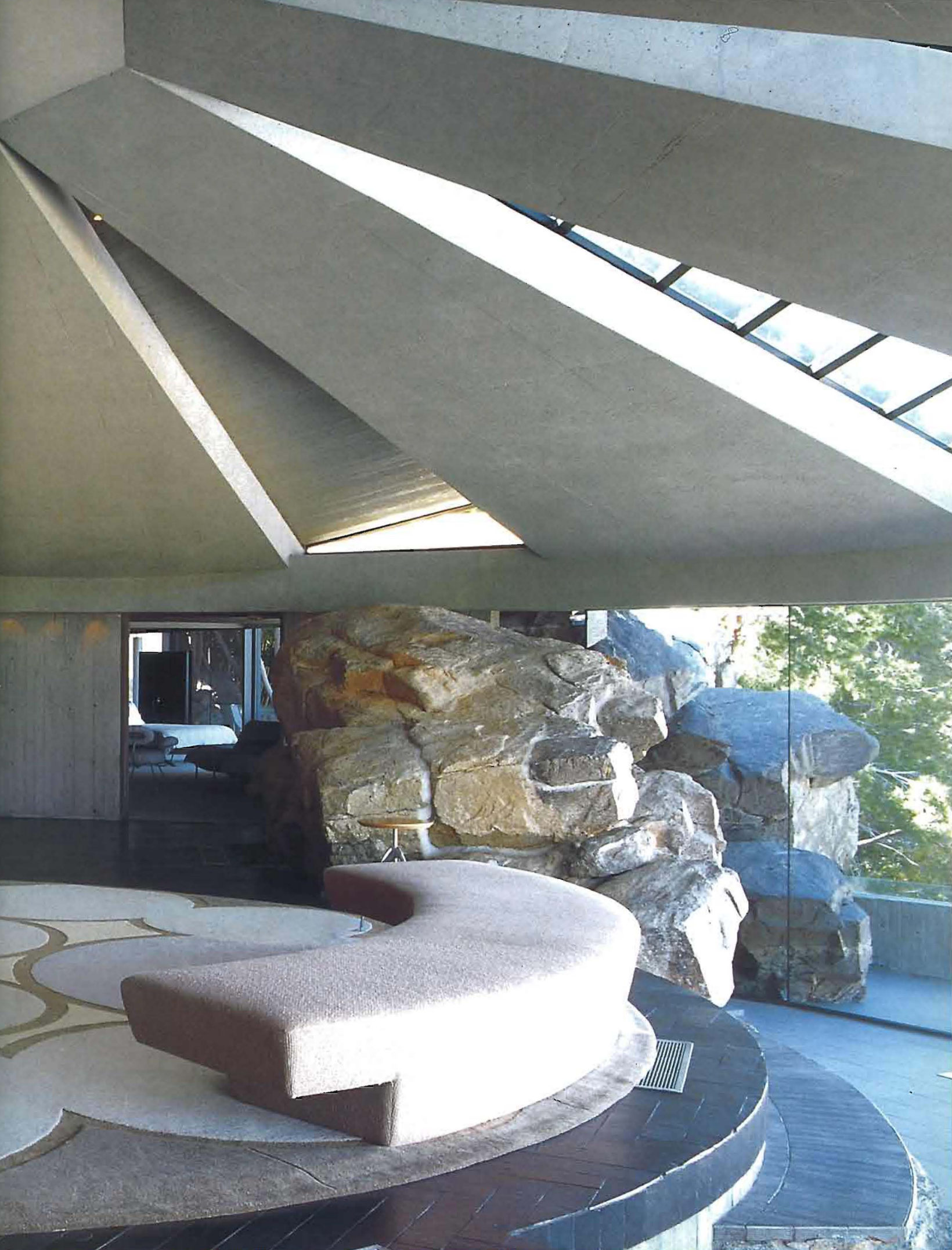
Elrod was born in Georgia, studied at Chouinard Art School in Los Angeles, then went to work in San Francisco at W & J Sloane, where he met Harold Broderick. In 1954 Elrod and Broderick relocated from Beverly Hills to Palm Springs and opened Arthur Elrod Associates on Palm Canyon Drive, a design studio and furniture and fabric showroom. Elrod became the design king of the desert. He did second houses, third houses, spec houses, country clubs, experimental houses, and hotels. Elrod was charming, handsome, and worked tirelessly for his A-list clientele. He hired talented associates — William Raiser and Steve Chase — and nurtured local artists and artisans.

For fifteen years Elrod had bought, renovated, and sold houses in the Las Palmas area, but he tired of that and finally decided to create something of his own. His design practice was flourishing — with the advent of jet travel he could expand his client base beyond the Palm Springs–Beverly Hills–Malibu axis to encompass Minneapolis, Houston, and Oklahoma. Now he was working on primary residences as well as the vacation houses. He had been named as one of America's top ten designers by *Time*. His projects were published extensively in shelter magazines. "Arthur was very correct and always called his clients Mr. and Mrs., at least until they paid him," says Paige Rense, editor-in-chief of *Architectural Digest*, where several of Elrod's projects were published in the 1960s and early 1970s, including his own house. "He was the one who persuaded them to look at their second or third house on a par with their primary residence. He made clients want to spend money on their weekend houses."

The curve of John Lautner's poured concrete roof looms out of a granite ledge on a ridge in the south edge of Palm Springs. "The more monolithic the better," Lautner said of the design.

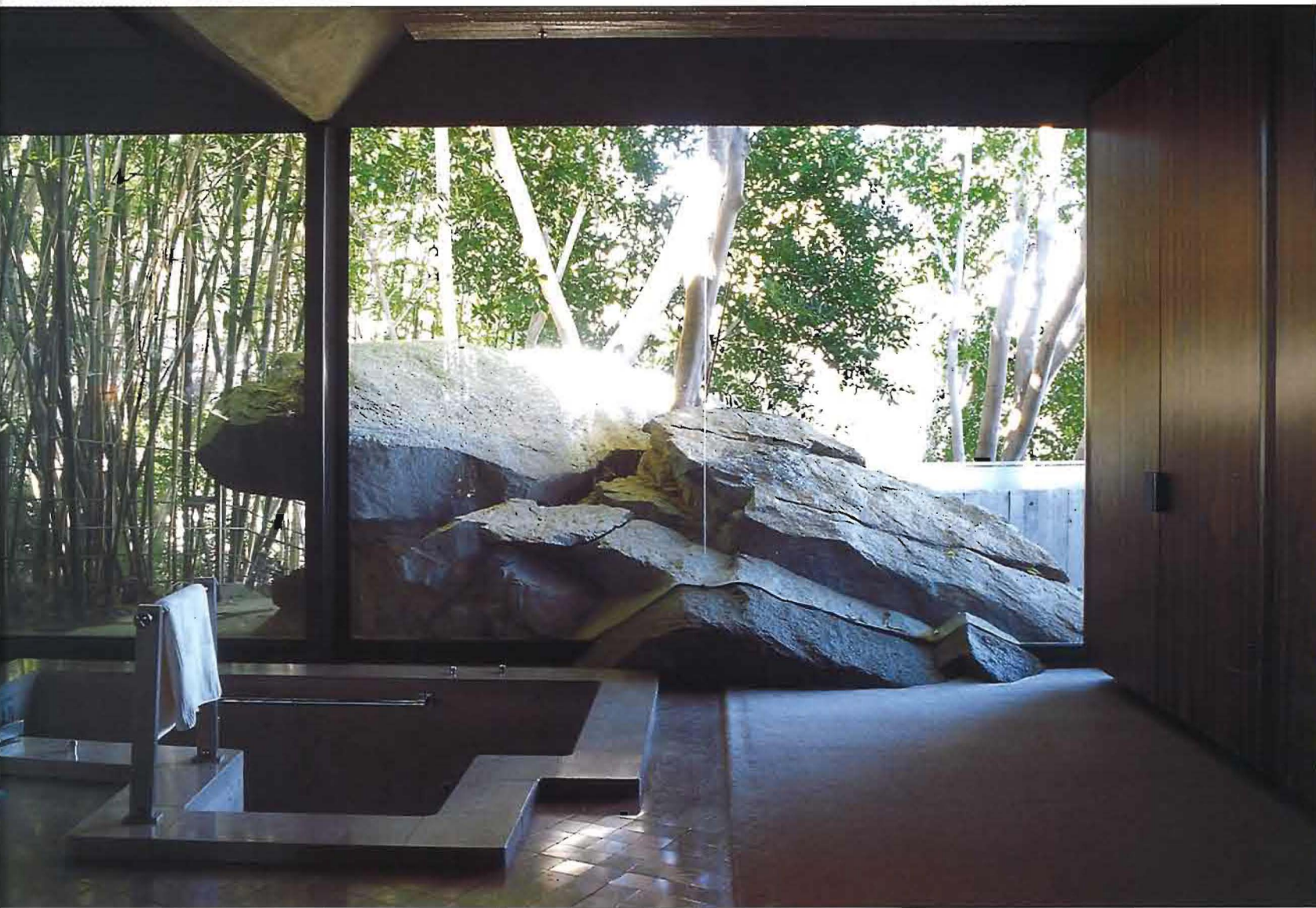
Pages 170–171: Nine massive concrete beams radiate out from the living room's thirty-foot-high dome ceiling. Interior designer Steven Heisler, who is in the process of renovating the house for its current owner, re-created the round Edward Fields carpet as well as the Martin Bratrud arced sofa and curved bench.











Above: A screen of bamboo was planted to shield the sunken master bath from neighbors.

Upper left: A smaller concrete canopy covers the steel kitchen.

Far left: The original owner, designer Arthur Elrod, requested that Lautner incorporate the ridge's boulders in the interiors. "It was natural for the main living room to look over the desert and the bedroom wing should be back toward the street," said Lautner. Bottom left: Rock and tile form the guest bathroom.

"Arthur wanted a party house, and he got one."

"Arthur was very friendly with the Indians," says Broderick. "We bought the lot below, which was Indian land, and they allowed him to landscape it." The dynamic between designer and architect was also one of mutual respect. "Lautner called it the best furnished of his houses," says Broderick, who continued the design practice after Elrod's death.

"Arthur had tremendous enthusiasm but at the same time he could concentrate on the business at hand and get things done," said Lautner in a 1974 interview in the *Los Angeles Times*. "This was great for everyone on a project. But there was more than that. My relationship with him was exceptional. He was everything a client should be. He had an understanding of architecture and he was always open to new ideas. He never wanted to do the safe thing. He accepted my design and my recommendations entirely, and there was no interference. I think he was still maturing and developing when he died."

Lautner's resulting structure — he would refer to it later as "a million dollar sculpture" — resembles a concrete-and-glass mushroom that hovers overhead like a spaceship. Beyond hangar-like semicircular glass windows, the desert spreads itself out in a 220-degree view. The furniture was a mix of modernist pieces by Knoll, Harry Bertoia, Warren Platner, Marcel Breuer, and custom designs. A circular Edward Fields carpet of concentric circles woven in shades of green grounded the living room. A twenty-eight-foot arced sofa and facing curved bench by Martin Bratstrud were covered in a Jack Lenor Larsen fabric stretched taut so that no seams showed. In the dining area the walls and buffet were of teak. Eight black leather and chrome chairs surrounded the dining table, which was six feet long with two sheets of three-quarter-inch black glass with hammered and polished edges on a glass-and-chrome base. "We had belly dancers performing on the table at one party," says Broderick.

A mitered glass wall that wrapped inside, around the living room's terrace, blew inward in a freak windstorm shortly before the house was to be used for the 1971 James Bond movie *Diamonds Are Forever*. "Doors flew off and the television set ended up in the middle of the Paul Jenkins artwork that had been specially stretched for the living room's arced wall," says Broderick. "We were supposed to be having a party for a hundred just two weeks after the storm. We ended up edging the floor with potted plants so that people didn't step off the rocks and into the pool." Lautner replaced the interior glass wall with massive electronic sliding glass doors suspended from the perimeter of the roof. The parties continued, and in fact became legendary. Bill Blass held a fashion show. *Playboy* did a feature. Elrod was photographed in his sunken bathtub afroth with bubbles. Neighbors included Steve McQueen and William Holden. "Arthur wanted a party house, and he got one," says Broderick.

Clerestory segments open the roof to slices of sky and allow the light to be manipulated. "Most people can't visualize what a house can be, so there's a lot of talk and changes and you lose the spark of your idea," said Lautner. "Here we talked maybe half an hour and I went ahead with it."





Above: Steps behind the living room lead past a Gene Flores water sculpture down to the guest wing, which was a later addition.

Right: From the master bedroom, stairs lead down to the pool. An original glass wall that wrapped inside blew out in a freak wind storm and was replaced by motorized glass windows suspended from the roof's perimeter.





Early one morning in February 1974 Elrod and his design associate Bill Raiser were driving to the office when their Fiat convertible was hit by a drunk driver. Both men were killed instantly. One of the projects they were working on at the time was a new house for Bob and Dolores Hope that Lautner had designed right above Elrod's. "The Hopes liked Arthur's house so much they built a larger version," says Broderick. "They would come to tea every Thursday for meetings. But the first house burned down and they had to start again."

Two years after Elrod died, Broderick, who still runs Arthur Elrod Associates, put the house on the market. It went through various owners and alterations until a recent restoration by Steven Heisler of Beckson Associates in Los Angeles returned much of its original spirit. •



Above: The sequence of circles starts at the circular motor court wall. The roof is covered with plants; underneath are service areas. Right: The sixty-foot living room floats above the desert, with a 220-degree view of the valley and the snow-capped San Jacinto Mountains.



Contents

9	Acknowledgments
11	Foreword <i>Joseph Rosa</i>
17	Forget Las Vegas
	Projects
28	John Porter Clark House
38	Raymond Loewy House
50	Edgar J. Kaufmann House
64	William and Clara Burgess House
72	Frank Sinatra House
86	William and Marjorie Edris House
94	Mari and Stewart Williams House
100	Various Projects by William F. Cody
124	J. J. Robinson House
132	Frey House II
140	Steel Development Houses
150	Samuel and Luella Maslon House
158	Max Palevsky House
168	Arthur Elrod House
180	Ambassador and Mrs. Walter H. Annenberg House
190	Bibliography