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PALM SPRINGS LIFE

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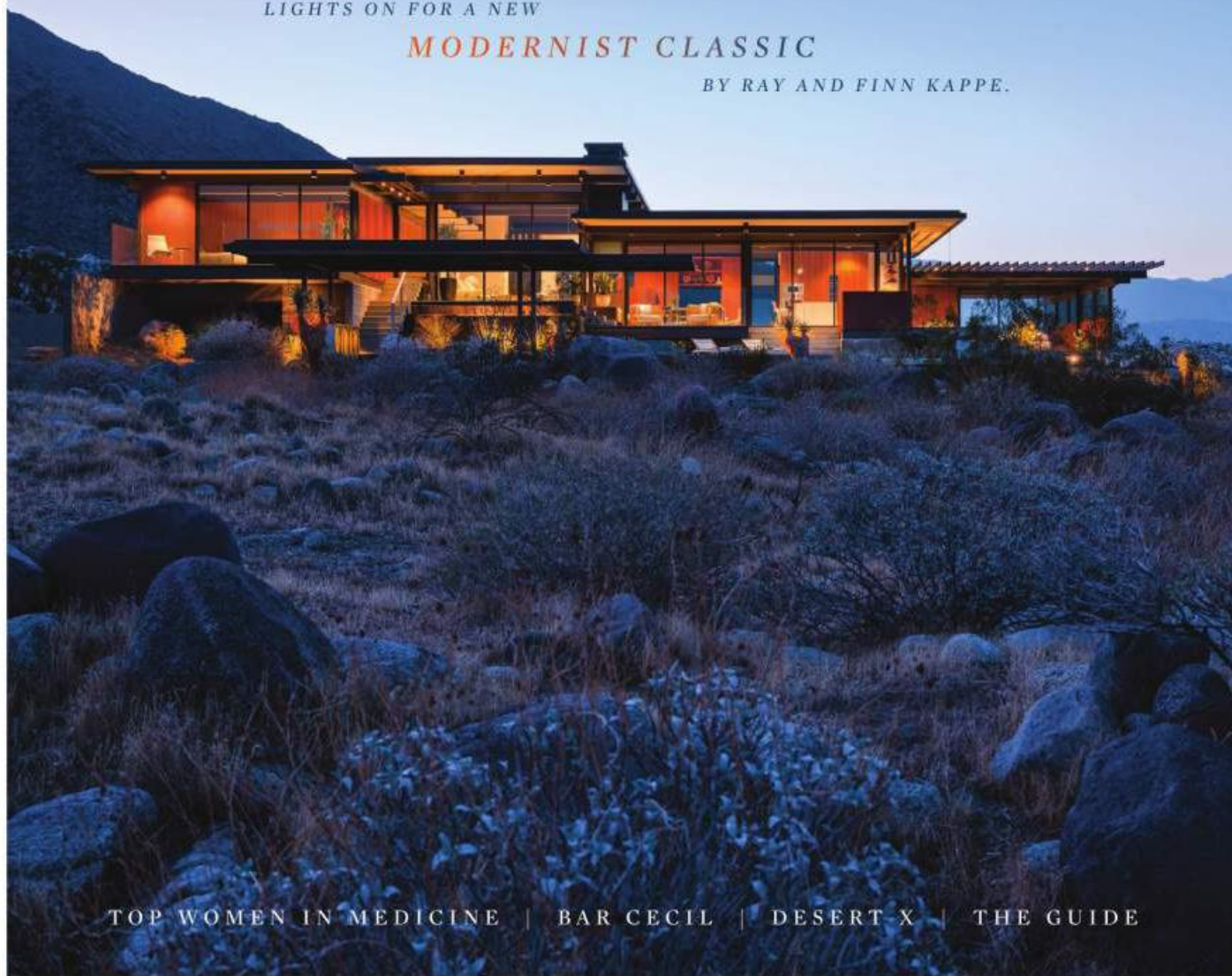
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LIGHTS ON FOR A NEW

MODERNIST CLASSIC

BY RAY AND FINN KAPPE.



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S I T E S P E C I F I C

One of the last home designs by the legendary architect Ray Kappe comes to life in Palm Springs' Desert Palisades community.



STORY BY ADAM HESS
PHOTOGRAPHY BY LANCE GERBER



Palm Springs has long been irresistible to Los Angeles' most original architects: John Lautner, Richard Neutra, Craig Ellwood, Lloyd Wright, and Paul Revere Williams have all been attracted to the creative challenges of building in this extreme yet inspiring desert environment. Now, another master Los Angeles architect has stepped up to the task: Ray Kappe.

Though Kappe died in 2019, his first house in Palm Springs — and one of his last designs to be built — has been completed in the Desert Palisades development at the west end of Racquet Club Road under the knowing eye of his son and architectural partner, Finn Kappe.

It's as modern as anything in Palm Springs: A prominent framework of steel columns and beams captures an abstract composition of roof planes, glass walls, and weathered steel panels.

Everything about the design reinforces Ray Kappe's reputation as a master architect. His name may not be as well known as Lautner or Neutra, but in the profession, his position as an architect's architect has long been established.

This is partly due to his founding and leadership of the Southern California Institute of Architecture, aka SCI-Arc. Started on a shoestring 50 years ago, it has become one of global architecture's cutting edge academies. Its proclivity for boldly addressing important social and technological issues comes directly from Kappe's own design DNA. The same spirit infuses his architecture, from custom designed residences to modular housing to visionary plans for mass transit in downtown Los Angeles.

Kappe's best-known design is his own house in Santa Monica Canyon from 1968. The design bursts with enough provocative ideas to inspire a dozen houses.

A spring runs through that house's steep, almost unbuildable property, rendering a standard foundation impractical. Kappe deftly

Kappe designed the structure of steel columns and beams and glass walls to follow the sloping site while appearing to float above it.





PALM SPRINGS' INNOVATIVE STEEL HOUSES

The Kappe House joins other famous houses as hallmarks of Palm Springs architects' ingenious use of steel, including:

- Richard Neutra's Kaufmann house (1946): acknowledged as one of his masterpieces.
- Donald Wexler and Rick Harrison's Steel houses (1962): a model of prefabricated mass-produced housing.
- Albert Frey's Frey II House (1964): an elegantly simple house perched on the rocky mountainside overlooking downtown Palm Springs.
- Albert Frey's Aluminaire House (1931): originally erected in New York and currently being reconstructed next to the Palm Springs Art Museum.

sidestepped the problem by concentrating the multi-level house's structure on just a few concrete towers, then bridging between them (and over the spring.) The floors are like trays set at different levels, creating a remarkably expansive home — one unified space, many distinct spaces for living, dining, working and relaxing.

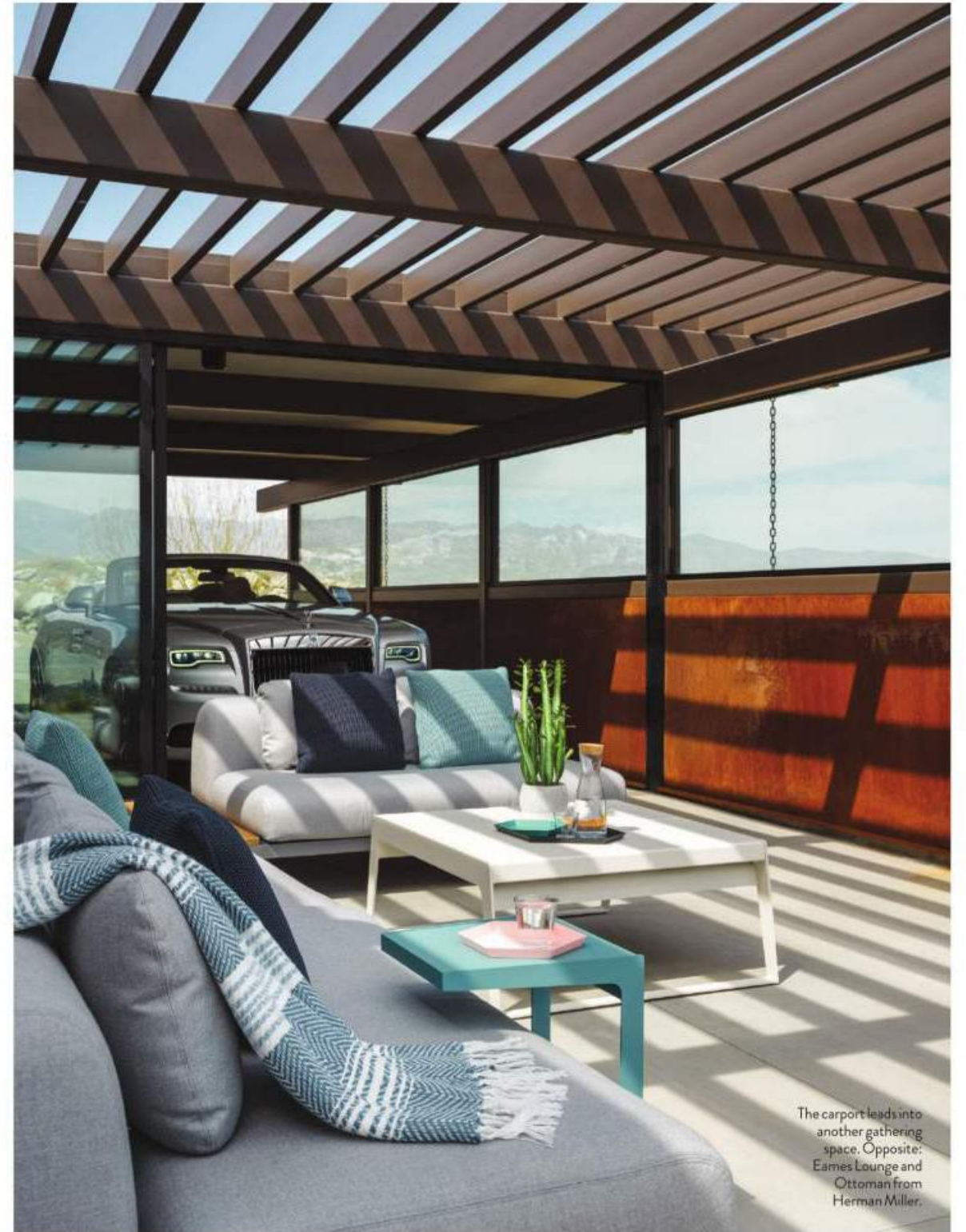
KAPPE BRINGS THE SAME imagination to the new Palm Springs house. Here, however, it's a hot, dry desert site that provides inspiration and practical solutions.

Desert Palisades unfolds on a sensitive natural and cultural site: several millennia of water flowing out of Chino Canyon has created an alluvial fan of boulders and ravines; Native Americans have inhabited the land for centuries. The development's roadways, flood control, and building lots wind around them.

The house is a light tubular steel framework that allows the structure to follow the sloping site while floating above it. Four flat roof planes hover overhead, while planes of glass and metal panels enclose the living areas and allow spectacular vistas on the south side looking out over the valley.

The desert inspired both aesthetic and practical considerations. The exterior walls clad in rugged steel panels weather to a warm, reddish brown tone to complement the colors of the landscape. Desert plants surround the house to blend with the natural surrounding.

Meanwhile, the wide roof overhangs block the fierce summer sunlight from the interior, and let it in the winter sun. The entire house is lifted above the ground on high concrete foundations that create compartments that trap the earth's cooler air beneath the floors to



The carport leads into another gathering space. Opposite: Eames Lounge and Ottoman from Herman Miller.

help moderate temperatures inside. Throughout his career, Kappe was a strong proponent of passive solar design principles. At the end of his career, this house upholds his commitment.

Inside, the floor levels step down in response to the topography. Like Kappe's own house in Santa Monica Canyon, the main living areas of the Desert Palisades property are open and spacious. Yet within this flowing space, careful variations and subtle details testify to the skilled hand of a mature modern architect. He subtly delineates the living, dining, and relaxing areas.

The dark lines of the exposed steel structure create a strong visual framework. The interplay of low and high ceilings reveal an architect who understood how to use proportion, plan, and light to compose a pleasurable architecture. High clerestory windows between the hovering roof planes balance light within the room. The polished concrete floors step down from the bedroom at the upper level to the dining and living areas in the middle and, finally, to the kitchen at the lowest level.

With subtle adjustments and refinements within this broad space, Kappe deftly carves out comfortable individual spaces for relaxing with the new, watching a flat-screen television, enjoying the gas fireplace, or dining — a shift in floor level here, a low wall sliding past

another there. The same desert color palette seen on the exterior's patinaed steel walls continues inside, though here the infill panels between the steel framework are teak wood.

Following California's modern tradition, these living spaces spill casually outside through the sliding glass walls to the pool terrace, a spa, a modernist gazebo, and an intimate fire pit where you feel virtually alone with the magnificent Coachella Valley panorama. Each level of the house has its own easy access to the outdoors.

THE BOLD CONCEPTS and well-crafted details of this house show the value of a seasoned architect. Kappe would say that his designs were simple, the obvious answers to the problem presented. That's modestly disingenuous. Yes, this design shows clarity and directness, but also a complexity that synthesizes multiple solutions into an elegant answer. The ease of moving from indoors to out, the experience of pleasurable views, the defining structure, the palette of materials married to the desert, the response to the climate are all woven together in a rich unity.

Throughout his career Kappe was always advancing and perfecting new concepts. This house is in many ways the capstone of that quintessential Southern California journey.



Interior furnishings include as the Striad Lounge Chair and Ottoman and a Nelson Thin Edge double dresser, both from Herman Miller.



The intimate fire pit flanking the pool offers a panoramic view of the Coachella Valley.

SPONSORS & PARTNERS

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KAPPE GETS DRESSED

Design firm Modern Hacienda teamed with the Raymond Kappe family, Desert Palisades, and *Palm Springs Life* to furnish the Kappe House for its unveiling during Modernism Week.

"It's important that the furnishings tie back to the overall vision of the house," says Modern Hacienda showroom manager Courtney Brown. "We spent a lot of time at the site to understand how everything would lay out and to embrace the architecture and the materials that were used. When people tour the house, they should see the full potential of the space architecturally as well as the full potential of the products."

Modern Hacienda co-owners Nicholas Hertneck and Lawrence Lazzaro composed a symphony of color, texture, and size.

Two brands in particular shine: Herman Miller and Carl Hansen & Son. Both feature prominently throughout the Kappe House, and each has its own designated bedroom.

Herman Miller represents legendary furniture designers like George Nelson and Charles and Ray Eames. Familiar pieces on display include an Eames three-seater sofa in the media room, Eames aluminum lounge chairs on the master patio, and a Nelson bed in the guestroom. "The products remain relevant and exciting and are perfectly at home within the modernist architecture of the Kappe House and its desert surroundings," says Kim Phillips, head of public relations and events for Herman Miller and Design Within Reach.

Carl Hansen & Son focuses on Danish design

and reissues the work of midcentury masters like Hans J. Wegner, Arne Jacobsen, and Ole Wanscher. "We imagine that back in the '50s, Raymond Kappe would have known these designers, and he would be delighted to see all these pieces of furniture in his home," says Sherri Simko, director of Carl Hansen & Son North America. "We feel the Kappe House and the spirit of Modernism Week speaks to our identity and our reverence for outstanding furniture craftsmanship."

Notably, Carl Hansen & Son will debut its first bed, based on sketches discovered in the archives of Børge Mogensen. Other pieces include a Wanscher colonial chair and foot stool and Jacobsen society table.

— Emily Chavous