

AIA Recognizes Legacy of African American Architect Paul R. Williams with Gold Medal Awarded Nearly 40 Years after His Death

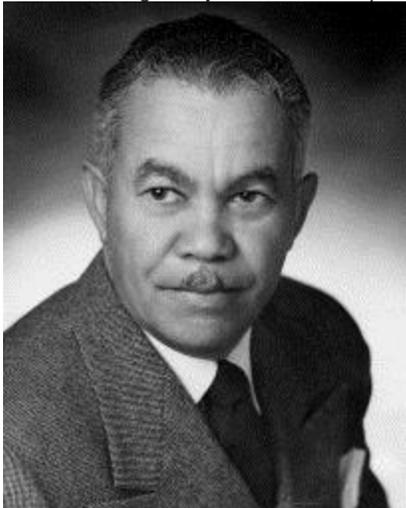
by VICTORIA L. VALENTINE on Apr 29, 2017 • 5:58 am



Residence in Hollywood, Calif., designed in 1928 by Paul Williams for banking executive Victor Rosetti.

STATELY AND GRACEFUL are the descriptors frequently invoked in [real state listings](#) for homes designed by architect Paul Revere Williams (1894-1980). The Williams name adds quantifiable prestige to prime properties on the most desirable streets in Beverly Hills, Hollywood Hills, Holmby Hills, and Hancock Park, homes often rendered in classic L.A. Beaux Arts style for which the African American architect is known.

One of the foremost architects in Los Angeles, Williams designed more than 2,000 residences including homes for the elite of Hollywood's golden age—Frank Sinatra, Bill “Bojangles” Robinson, Lon Chaney, and Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz, among many others. His imprint is in evidence throughout the city and the wider Southern California region.



He also worked on select projects in other parts of the country. In addition to homes, his portfolio features many schools, churches, civic buildings and commercial spaces. The list includes city landmarks such as LAX Airport, L.A. County Courthouse, and the Beverly Hills Hotel. He also designed many sites of cultural and social significance in the African American community, including First A.M.E. Church of Los Angeles, Angelus Funeral Home, and the headquarters of the black-owned Golden State Mutual Life Insurance Company.

Williams was the first licensed African American architect west of the Mississippi (1921). In 1923, he became the first African American member of the American Institute of Architects (AIA), and later the first black member to be inducted into AIA's College of Fellows (1957).

Following a career of firsts, Williams is still blazing trails, posthumously. Thirty seven years after his death, the pioneering architect was [honored with an AIA Gold Medal](#) at the organization's annual conference in Orlando, Fla. (April 27-29).

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Throughout the 1940s, Paul Williams designed additions and renovations for the Beverly Hills Hotel, updating the look and feel of nearly the entire Mission-style complex, including the Polo Lounge, Fountain Coffee Shop, and Crescent wing. The aesthetics he introduced largely remain today. | Photo by Alan Light, Creative Commons

ON THURSDAY, First Lady Michelle Obama appeared at the conference for a [midday conversation](#) with AIA President Thomas Vonier, FAIA. Williams was recognized later in the evening at an awards ceremony.

The Gold Medal distinction is bestowed upon “an individual whose significant body of work has had a lasting influence on the theory and practice of architecture.” Legendary architects Frank Lloyd Wright (1949), Le Corbusier (1961), Louis I. Kahn (1971), and I.M. Pei (1979) have also received the award. AIA’s 73rd Gold Medalist, Williams is the first African American to earn that recognition, too.

“This is a moment in our institute’s history that is so important to recognize and acknowledge the work of a champion,” said Phil Freelon, FAIA, who presented to the AIA Board of Directors in December 2016, lobbying on behalf of Williams to be selected for the honor. Managing and design director at Perkins + Will, Freelon served as lead architect of the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African American History and Culture. (Architect David Adjaye was lead designer of the museum.)

“It’s been many decades but Paul Williams is finally being recognized for the brilliant work he did over many years,” Freelon said.

[READ MORE of Phil Freelon’s presentation on behalf of Paul R. Williams Gold Medal candidacy](#)



A suite at the Beverly Hills Hotel named for Paul Williams is designed to be a luxe, comfortable space for long-term guests. | Courtesy AIA

CELEBRATED TODAY Williams overcame early challenges in his life and successfully navigated an unwelcoming field in the early 20th century. He persevered based on the quality and rigor of his work, his innovative and creative designs, and most importantly, his diplomatic skills.

Born in Los Angeles in 1894, by the time Williams was four years old both of his parents had died and he was placed in foster care, separated from his brother. His foster mother was caring and encouraging. He attended Polytechnic High School, where a teacher tried to dissuade him from pursuing an architecture career. She told him white clients would be loathe to hire him and that the work he garnered in the black community wouldn't be lucrative enough to sustain him.

Despite her warning, he pressed on and was able to gain experience at local design firms with architects including Reginald Johnson and John Austin. Williams became a certified building contractor in 1915 and attended the architecture program at the University of Southern California from 1916-1919.

Early in his career he was recognized in architecture competitions and with the real estate market booming in the early 1920s Los Angeles, he found his footing. He established his own firm, Paul R. Williams & Associates in the Stock Exchange Building in downtown Los Angeles. First licensed in California, he later became a registered architect in New York, Tennessee, and the District of Columbia, where he worked on multiple projects at Howard University, a joint venture with the practice of Hilyard Robinson.

A popular anecdote about his practice is that Williams learned to draw plans upside down to make white clients more comfortable. In so doing, they could sit across from him rather than having to be close by his side to see his renderings.

He viewed the skill as an attribute rather than a concession. In *The New Yorker*, Dana Goodyear noted, "...when Williams wrote about this skill, in an autobiographical essay called 'I Am a Negro,' published in *American Magazine* in 1937, he described it as an artistic sleight of hand. It was about making a dazzling first impression, so that people would think twice about judging him by the color of his skin."

Over the course of his career, he took on increasingly significant projects, working on high-profile buildings in throughout Los Angeles, while still designing homes and serving clients in the African American business community. A selection of projects included:

Saks Fifth Avenue (1939), Beverly Hills

A collaboration with architect John Parkinson and his son, Donald Parkinson, the Parkinsons designed the store's exterior and Williams "polished the basic look and styled the interior" giving it the "feel of an expensive mansion." The Saks location on Wilshire Boulevard was the first in Southern California.



The Saks Fifth Avenue building on Wilshire Blvd., was a collaboration. Architect John Parkinson and his son, Donald Parkinson, designed the store's exterior and Williams refined the overall look and styled the interior. | Photo by David Deng, L.A. Conservancy

Beverly Hills Hotel (1941)

Originally opened in 1912, new owners hired Williams and interior designers Paul Laszlo & John Luccareni and Harriet Shellenberger to redesign and update the lobby of the famed hotel. Throughout the 1940s, Williams designed additions and renovations, updating the look and feel of nearly the entire Mission-style hotel, including the Polo Lounge, Fountain Coffee Shop, and Crescent wing of the complex.

Golden State Mutual Life Insurance Company (1949), Los Angeles

The headquarters for GSM was a five-story modern building designed around the way the company operated (auditorium, media systems with lighting controls, space for in-house training) and to meet the needs of employees (staff lounge, cafeteria, and medical department with "recuperation" rooms). One of the largest black-owned businesses west of the Mississippi, the company closed in 2009. GSM had an extensive collection of works by African American artists that was auctioned at Swann in 2007.

Lucille Ball-Desi Arnaz Residence (1954), Palm Springs

Serving as a weekend retreat, this six-bedroom, 4,400 square foot ranch-style home features a swimming pool and lanai creating seamless and expanded interior and exterior spaces with views of the nearby desert and mountains.

Located near the 17th fairway of Thunderbird Country Club, the residence was the first completed in the club's development.

Founder's Church of Religious Science (1960), Los Angeles

Williams worked closely with The Founder of Religious Science, Dr. Ernest Holmes to produce the graceful mid-century 1400 seat sanctuary. The building is round to indicate the all-embracing nature of the philosophy of Religious Science.



Los Angeles International Airport (1961)

Williams collaborated with Pereira & Luckman Associates, and Welton Becket & Associates on the Los Angeles Jet Age Terminal construction project. The design transformed LAX from a field of landing strips to a series of modern terminals serving global airlines and international travelers.



The LAX joint venture team in front of airport's Theme Building. Shown, Pereira & Luckman, Weldon Beckett & Associates, and Paul R. Williams (second from right.) | via Hollywood's Architect

First A.M.E. Church (1965), Los Angeles

Williams designed the home of the oldest African American congregation in Los Angeles in the West Adams neighborhood of Sugar Hill. He was a member of the church, a late modern-style building where the architect's funeral was held when he died in 1980.

All told, his portfolio grew to nearly 3,000 projects over the course of his five-decade career. Eight buildings by Williams are listed on the National Register of Historic Places, including the 28th Street YMCA; Second Street Baptist Church; Angelus Funeral Home; First Church of Christ, Scientist in Reno, Nev.; and Goldschmidt House in San Clemente, Calif. In Memphis, Williams designed the St. Jude's Children's Research Hospital (1962), free of charge, for his friend Danny Thomas.



Golden State Mutual Life, Rendering by Paul R. Williams 1947. | Courtesy GSM Archive

SINCE THE 1990S, Karen E. Hudson, Williams's granddaughter, has documented these projects and shepherded the architect's legacy. She has published two coffee table books with lavish illustrations of his projects, served on the board of the Los Angeles Conservancy, and is a consult on "[Hollywood's Architect](#)," a forthcoming documentary, many years in the making, about Williams.

She says she is often asked how Williams chose architecture. She reminds people the city during that era was primed for development. "LA at that time was bean fields and orange groves. There weren't tearing down buildings to build new houses. He was looking at a blank slate and a vision in it," Hudson says.

Her efforts to preserve his legacy have been hobbled by [a tragedy](#) that ironically coincides with the Gold Medal honor. As the [Los Angeles Times cites](#), "Sunday will mark the 25th anniversary of the day the Broadway Federal Savings & Loan at South Broadway and 45th Street went up in flames during the violent protests and rioting that followed the 1992 verdict in the Rodney King beating. The fire not only destroyed the bank but a large chunk of Williams' archive."

The article continues: "Many of the architect's papers, including a significant trove of drawings and letters, wound up being kept at the bank after his death because Williams had been on its board and friendly with its founder, H. Claude Hudson. ...Williams also redesigned the Broadway Federal building itself, in 1955. The 1992 fire, in other words, claimed one of his landmarks in addition to all those drawings."

(Williams had two daughters and one married Hudson's son. Both the architect and founder of the bank are Karen Hudson's grandfathers.)



In 1952, Paul Williams designed a home for his own family in the Lafayette Square neighborhood of Los Angeles. His granddaughter Karen E. Hudson resides in the home today. | Photo by Floyd Bariscale via Flickr

DESPITE THE DESTRUCTION, his most potent legacy remains—an extensive portfolio of work. His landmark buildings and lavish residences ranging in architectural style from Hollywood Regency and Beaux Arts to Spanish Revival and mid-century modern, dot the landscape of Los Angeles. The projects ultimately earned him the AIA Gold Medal, which Hudson accepted on his behalf April 27.

Freelon concluded his presentation by citing the lack of diversity in the architecture field and within AIA in particular.

“Considering the AIA’s decades long struggle with diversity and inclusion, we can move our profession closer to the broad based participation that we know will make us stronger and ultimately improve the quality of our built environment,” he said.

I am thrilled at the possibility of this award not only for the Williams family and those who would be inspired by this achievement—but also for the potential upside this recognition would bring to the institute. I can’t tell you how many times an AIA colleague has commiserated with me about the lack of diversity in our ranks. Well my friends, today we can do something about this dilemma.”

The AIA honor comes with a permanent public tribute. Williams’s name will be chiseled into the granite Wall of Honor in the lobby of AIA’s headquarters in Washington, D.C. **CT**

BOOKSHELF

Architect Paul R. Williams authored two books in the 1940s that were re-issued in 2006—“New Homes for Today” and “The Small Home of Tomorrow.” Karen E. Hudson, the granddaughter of Williams, has published “Paul R Williams, Architect” and “Paul R. Williams: Classic Hollywood Style” with a foreword by designer Kelly Wearstler. The two coffee table books are rife with full-color images of the architect’s many projects.

Karen Hudson, Paul R. Williams's granddaughter, and architects William Bates, FAIA, and Phil Freelon, FAIA, share the story of Williams, the legendary Los Angeles architect who received a posthumous 2017 AIA Gold Medal. | Video by AIA



Designed by Paul Williams, the Shepherd Residence (1938) in Bel Air is an example of Neoclassical architecture with Regency Revival influences. In January 2017, the home was designated a Los Angeles Historic-Cultural Monument. | Photo by Adrian Scott Fine, L.A. Conservancy



Commissioned by Jay Paley, Paul Williams completed this Holmby Hills home in 1936. The property features one of the most fabulous pools in California with tiles imported from France that form a mosaic sunburst. | via Hollywood's Architect



First African Methodist Episcopal Church in the West Adams neighborhood of Los Angeles was completed in 1965. In addition to designing the building, Paul Williams attended the church, and his funeral was held there in 1980. | Photo by Ysa Adams, Incite Photography via Los Angeles Conservancy



Located in Holmby Hills, this residence designed by Paul Williams is currently for sale. | Photos by Gibson International Real Estate via Zillow

Sources:

<https://www.culturetype.com/2017/04/29/aia-recognizes-legacy-of-african-american-architect-paul-r-williams-with-gold-medal-awarded-nearly-40-years-after-his-death/>