

AMAZING GRACE: THE ARCHITECTURE OF PAUL REVERE WILLIAMS

Essay by Brooke Hodge

The story of Paul Revere Williams (1894-1980) is punctuated by many firsts—that he was the first Black architect to practice West of the Mississippi is but one of them—and spans a career of fifty years during which he built more than 3,000 buildings. Despite these, and many other, remarkable accomplishments, Williams and his work are, dishearteningly, underrecognized today. Architecture has been, and largely remains, an elitist profession that is predominantly white and male, with female and minority practitioners often overlooked. However, a dedicated cadre of determined women has set out to rectify that and to give Williams his rightful place in architectural history as one America’s most talented architects.

Karen E. Hudson was the first to bring her grandfather’s story to a greater public in 1993 with the publication of *Paul R. Williams Architect: A Legacy of Style*¹, the first monograph devoted to his work. As the director of his archive Hudson was instrumental in its recent joint acquisition by the University of Southern California (USC) School of Architecture and the Getty Research Institute. This major acquisition will provide future generations with access to Williams’s papers and drawings, leading to significant new scholarship on the architect and his work.²

The Los Angeles-based architect Barbara Bestor knew of Williams and was dismayed that there had never been an exhibition devoted to his work. In her role as director of the Julius Shulman Institute at Woodbury University in Burbank, Bestor sought to illuminate this important chapter of L.A.’s architectural history and in 2016 invited Janna Ireland, an emerging L.A.-based artist, to photograph some of Williams’s buildings. As Ireland recounts, “...I jumped at the chance, even though Barbara was a stranger, Williams’s name was only vaguely familiar, and my knowledge of architecture was limited...At its core, my work is about the expression of Black identity in American culture, and I felt an immediate connection to Williams’s story.”³ Ireland embraced the invitation with gusto and determination and her photographs resulted in the 2017 exhibition “There is Only One Paul Williams: Photographs by Janna Ireland,” curated by Andrea Dietz and Audrey Landreth for the Shulman Institute and in the recently publication Regarding Paul R. Williams: A Photographer’s View. Her work to capture Williams’s architecture is now an ongoing project.

While Ireland’s initial body of photographs focused on Williams’s work in Southern California, Carmen Beals and Ann Wolfe, curators at the Nevada Museum of Art, were aware that the architect

had also completed a number of buildings in their state. In 2021 they offered the photographer a residency to study and photograph Williams's Nevada work for an eventual exhibition. Ireland was awarded the Peter E. Pool Research Fellowship from the Museum's Center for Art + Environment to undertake her year-long research and photography survey in Nevada.

EARLY YEARS

Paul R. Williams was born in 1894 in Los Angeles to parents who had migrated there from Memphis in search of a better climate. Williams was orphaned in 1898, his parents having died of tuberculosis two years apart, and he and his brother were placed in separate foster homes. While not much is known about his foster parents, it's evident that they recognized the importance of a good education and instilled strong community values in the young boy. Williams was the only Black student in his class at Sentous Avenue School on L.A.'s Pico Boulevard and, according to Hudson, he drew continuously and became known as the class artist.⁴ He first became interested in architecture and construction when he made the acquaintance of a local builder who recognized his talent at drawing. In high school, he pursued his interest by enrolling in an architecture course. Williams discovered that his abilities could perhaps be outweighed by his skin color when the teacher of his architecture course offered not encouragement but a dose of reality by asking him "Who ever heard of a Negro being an architect?"⁵ He was told that African Americans could never afford an architect and that white people would not hire him. However, Williams was nothing if not determined and, rather than giving in to what he referred to as "blank discouragement," he took on the challenge and courageously decided to pursue his interest in architecture despite the many societal obstacles that had existed, and would continue to exist, for years.

In addition to being determined, Williams was also strategic about his education. His foster parents had raised him to believe that he had to strive not only to excel but to be better at his chosen field than everyone else, just so he could compete at the same level as his white colleagues. He understood that his expertise at drawing alone wouldn't be enough and set out to equip himself with all the skills he thought he would need to become an architect. He enrolled in the Beaux-Arts Institute of Design Atelier in Los Angeles to refine and expand his drawing skills. The initial exposure he received there to the architecture of Europe would prove to be influential throughout his career. After winning first prize in 1914 at the age of twenty for his design for a neighborhood civic center in Pasadena, he enrolled in architectural engineering at the University of Southern California (USC) and became the university's first Black graduate in 1919.⁶ Over several years, Williams methodically pieced together an education that exposed him to all aspects of his chosen field: from landscape

and interior design to engineering and city planning. To supplement what he was learning at USC, he attended evening classes at five different schools of architecture, each with a different approach.

Williams deployed the same strategic thinking when seeking employment that he used for his education, consciously taking jobs to build his portfolio in different areas. During his initial job search, not unsurprisingly perhaps, he was offered only low-paying positions as an office boy. Rather than being discouraged, Williams decided to accept a nonpaying job with Wilbur D. Cook, Jr. Cook's office had designed the master plan for the city of Beverly Hills and was recognized as one of Los Angeles's important architecture firms of the time. Cook was the first trained landscape architect and city planner to practice in the Los Angeles area and in his firm Williams would gain valuable experience in those areas.⁷ His passion, drive, and talent impressed his employers during his first week on the job and they offered him a small salary.

Following his stint in Cook's office, Williams went to work for Reginald Davis Johnson to hone his skills in residential design. Johnson specialized in designing English and Mediterranean-style homes for wealthy clients in Montecito and Pasadena, where his practice was located. He was later recognized for his progressive ideas about housing, which he put to use in his designs for the planned community of Baldwin Hills Village (1932) and the Rancho San Pedro public housing project of 1939. Baldwin Hills Village is praised as an exemplary community of inexpensive modern homes.

At these firms, Williams was not only exposed to different types of architecture but also to the civic and community values of his employers. Rather than limiting himself to one arm of architectural practice, he strove to verse himself in all types of architecture in order to assemble the most expansive and complete portfolio possible. Having gained experience in landscape design, city planning, and residential architecture, he joined the firm of John C. Austin to add municipal, civic, and commercial work to his portfolio. Austin, who was born in England, migrated to the U.S. in 1891, working first for a firm in Philadelphia. In 1895 he moved to Los Angeles and became one of the city's leading architects, designing some of its most notable buildings including Los Angeles City Hall (with John Parkinson and Albert C. Martin, Sr.), Griffith Observatory, and the Hollywood Masonic Temple. During Williams's three years with Austin, the firm designed and constructed more than thirty schools in the Los Angeles area. Williams also worked on several major civic and community projects in the office, including the Shrine Auditorium, the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce, and the First Methodist Church.⁸

In 1916, Williams placed third for the Sperling Prize, a prestigious national competition, and continued to enter competitions while working for Cook, Johnson, and Austin. Winning three competitions in a row for the design of small homes gave him the visibility, and the confidence, he needed to establish his own practice. In 1922, after passing the state architecture exams and receiving his professional license, he opened an office in the Stock Exchange Building in downtown Los Angeles.

PAUL R. WILLIAMS, ARCHITECT

From the 1920s to the early 1940s, post-Gold Rush and between the two World Wars, as the Great Migration pushed westward, California was developing its modern identity. Hollywood, as we know it today, was born, and rural areas and wilderness gave way to cities and industry. Nineteen-twenties Los Angeles was a boom town with a hunger for new and different kinds of buildings. Although it was an opportune time to launch an architectural practice there were many challenges for Williams to overcome as a young Black architect. Large well-established firms received the bulk of the city's commercial commissions while most of the residential commissions were given to architects with social connections. However, working for Austin had not only provided the young architect with invaluable experience but proved to be fortuitous in other ways when in 1922 Austin passed along to him a \$100,000 commission for a house in Hancock Park as a starter job.⁹ Since Williams had never been in a home that cost more than \$10,000 to build, Austin sent him to Montecito to visit some of the large homes he had designed there.

That Williams was a gentle, gracious man, well-liked by classmates, colleagues, and employers alike, is underscored not only by Austin's referral but by a commission in 1922 from his former classmate Louis Cass, who was one of the original underwriters of the Automobile Club of Southern California, to design his house in the new community of Flintridge. In addition to these two projects, Williams had obtained over half a dozen residential commissions, including three other homes in Flintridge and one in West Los Angeles by the time he opened his own office.

The home Williams designed for Cass was in the English Tudor style complete with stucco and half-timbering and was characteristic of the architect's early designs, which were traditional in nature. Williams had learned the importance of a carefully organized and functional floor plan from working with both Austin and Johnson and for the Cass residence he broke down the mass of the home by creating central halls and distributing the rooms off the halls in a picturesque manner. Williams knew that he couldn't rely solely on his talent and became adept at networking and establishing social and

business connections. Many of Williams's early clients came to him on the recommendation of his former employers while others learned about him from a two-part 1923 article in *California Southland* about the John B. Browne house in the Los Feliz neighborhood of Los Angeles. The article, which referred to Williams as a "rising young architect," reveals that Browne, on the recommendation of the real estate editor of the *Los Angeles Times*, approached the architect with ideas about the house he wanted to build on a hilltop site.¹⁰ Like the Cass House, the John B. Browne House was English in style and featured an artful yet functional floor plan.

By the end of the 1920s, Williams had established himself as skillful sophisticated designer of homes for the upper-middle class and the wealthy, which were mainly located in what were then suburbs of L.A., including Flintridge, Beverly Hills, the Pacific Palisades, and Pasadena. The influence of both the residential work of his former employer Johnson and of buildings he had been exposed to in his drawing classes at the Beaux-Arts Institute is evident in these early projects. Most of his clients wanted large homes and Williams took inspiration from the manor houses of the English countryside and the chateaux of France. While the massing and the materials he used—stucco, brick, stone, and half-timbering—are drawn from these European precedents, Williams frequently stripped away extraneous details on both exterior and interior, creating a simplified, more modern version of the traditional styles of the past.

He was also sensitive to his clients' desire for privacy and sited his homes back from the street, with landscaped lawns and gardens in front. The rear facades of his buildings were more open and featured larger windows than the main facades and he often introducing splayed floor plans that embraced gardens and pools in the rear and provided the indoor-outdoor living that had become an integral part of the California lifestyle. Williams was talented at introducing light into interiors by using clerestories, French doors, and large windows that sat low to the floor. While his homes were large, they were never ostentatious, and his elegant interiors featured gracious entry halls that accommodated and welcomed the guests his clients would be entertaining. Williams accentuated his spacious foyers with what would become one of his signature design elements: a graceful, curved staircase that led to the second floor. His living rooms were often entered by descending a few steps off the entry hall and, while large, fireplaces lent them a comfortable, even cozy, feeling. It is remarkable that at such a relatively young age, Williams was designing homes that were so refined and resolved.

There was a lot of money and a lot of land in Los Angeles in the pre-war years, and Williams's architect peers—his former employer Reginald Johnson, Wallace Neff, Roland Coate, and H. Roy Kelley—were also receiving commissions for homes in the growing city's affluent neighborhoods. However, unlike his peers, Williams was designing homes for neighborhoods in which he, a Black man, could not live. The mid-city neighborhood of Hancock Park was established in the 1920s and although Williams received a series of commissions there, due to a restrictive covenant, like those governing other areas at the time, he couldn't have built his own home there.

It is striking that these wealthy clients engaged a Black architect during this period and David Gebhard has suggested that they sought him out not only because they admired his work but possibly because hiring him would demonstrate their liberal values and support of racial equality.¹¹ Ingaliil Wahlroos-Ritter, a Los Angeles architect and former dean of the architecture school at Woodbury University, has pointed out that "it was the non-conformist strain of Hollywood, filled with creative, self-made people willing to take risks, [that] opened the door for Williams's career."¹²

One such client was the actor Lon Chaney, Sr. Known as "The Man of a Thousand Faces," Chaney commissioned Williams to design two projects. The first was a cabin in the John Muir Wilderness, outside Big Pine, California (1929-30), and the second was a large home in Beverly Hills for him and his second wife Hazel in 1930. The Beverly Hills house, which hasn't been written about but which I was recently fortunate enough to visit, is a rectangular volume clad in white-washed brick. Set back from the street, a red brick walkway steps up a gentle hill to the front door, which is inset in a pared-down Neoclassical stone frame. Williams employed other abstracted or stripped-down Neoclassical details on the home's façade, including a frieze that runs the length of the main volume, delineating the home's two stories. Although the home is large, Williams's use of white-painted brick capped by a red tile roof lends it an air of modesty as do his simplified details. A low wall in white brick is capped with red brick to match the walkway and gives the house increased separation from the street below. The home's entry hall, which has arched openings supported by Corinthian columns, is the grandest space in the house yet, as was typical with the architect's work, it is neither ostentatious nor showy. The dark-paneled wood floor and beamed ceiling give it an almost rustic feeling. One of Williams's beautiful staircases leads to the second floor. A wider archway to the right of the entry hall opens to the living room, which also has a beamed ceiling. Large windows punctuate the room's side and front walls and French doors open to a covered outdoor terrace and the garden and pool beyond. A fireplace with a classical stone surround sits between the windows on the front wall.

Chaney was a very private man and he asked Williams to design a library/office for him off the entry hall. The room is cocoon-like, with hand-carved wood paneling wrapping around it. Its fireplace, capped by a triangular copper hood, adds to the cozy yet masculine feeling of the room. Because the house was built during Prohibition, Williams designed a bookcase that slides open to reveal a bar. To give the house a graceful open feeling, the architect used arched openings throughout. A shallow rounded arch encloses the tub in the master bathroom, which also features a faux window of five pieces of etched and reverse-painted glass, lit from reverse, that is set behind the tub. Sadly, Chaney passed away just before the home was completed and his widow was so grief-stricken that she put it up for sale immediately.

Fortunately, this beautiful home, and it should be noted that Williams referred to all his residential buildings as “homes” rather than “houses,” has a happy ending. In 1976, a young couple with several children moved into the home. Growing up there had a great impact on one of their daughters, who was ten years old when her parents bought the house. As an adult she knew that she wanted to live there again and when the house came on the market, she and her husband were able to buy it. They have since undertaken a major renovation, restoring the home’s original detailing, including replicating the wood paneling in the library, locating and restoring the fireplace’s copper hood to its rightful place, and stripping paint from the entry hall’s elegant columns. In a stroke of good luck, or genius, her mother had left the home’s original plans in a secret closet in the living room.

Entrepreneurial types, of which there were many in Los Angeles at the time, also gravitated to Williams when they needed an architect. E. L. Cord, an auto magnate, commissioned Williams to design a 32,000-square-foot home in Beverly Hills in 1930. Over time, the architect designed more than 300 homes and businesses in Beverly Hills. Early clients returned for larger homes or commercial buildings and the growth of Williams’s practice paralleled the fast-paced growth of Los Angeles. In 1932, ninety percent of Williams’s work was residential but by 1940, commercial projects accounted for sixty percent of his work.¹³

Because he was working with white clients, Williams developed several strategies to ensure that neither he nor they would be made uncomfortable when they were together. Most notably, he learned how to draw upside-down. This unusual skill enabled him to sketch ideas out for his clients who, because the norms of the day dictated that they not sit next to a Black man, sat opposite him at the desk or table. Not only was this a useful tool for Williams, but his clients found it most

impressive. While on construction sites, Williams helped put clients and contractors at ease by walking with his hands clasped behind his back so that they wouldn't be put in the awkward situation of wondering whether they should shake hands with him. While Williams developed these strategies out of necessity as a Black man operating in a white man's world, they also demonstrate his sensitivity toward his clients, which was perhaps a greater factor in his success as an architect than any other attribute or skill he possessed.

Williams founded his practice on an approach that was client-driven and strongly believed that his success and value depended upon listening carefully to his clients and giving them what they wanted. He had to work without ego and could adapt to meet each client's needs and demands. His respect for his clients, coupled with a shrewd business sense, meant that his practice was not limited in terms of either its range of clients or projects. In the late 1930s and early 1940s, before World War II, Williams received some of his most important non-residential commissions including the Music Corporation of America Building (1937), which he often cited as his favorite building, Saks Fifth Avenue in Beverly Hills (1939), and the Arrowhead Springs Hotel (1940).

POSTWAR WORK AND COMMUNITY SERVICE

Over the course of his long career, Williams would design several more hotels including the new Crescent Wing of the Beverly Hills Hotel (1947-51). Architect Barbara Bestor noted that the Crescent Wing, an elevated and undulating pink volume, signaled a major shift from the original hotel's Mediterranean style to "an informal and sensuous modernism [that came] to define postwar California luxury."¹⁴ In subsequent years, Williams was involved in an extensive program of renovations and new buildings at the hotel that allowed it to compete with newer hotels in the area. In addition to the Crescent Wing, he revamped the famous Polo Lounge to recapture the hotel's early glamour and he designed the Fountain Coffee Shop on the hotel's lower level. The coffee shop's curvaceous counter, echoed by the curved lighting soffit above and complemented by palm leaf wallpaper, imbued it with an elegance and glamour that was most definitely Californian in style. Indeed, the hotel remains one of the most glamorous buildings in the city.

In 1948, Williams and his former employee architect A. Quincy Jones completely redesigned the Palm Springs Tennis Club in Palm Springs, California. Situated tight against a mountainside, the two architects fused architecture with nature by nestling the building into the difficult site's natural topography, even using the natural rock formations for the rear wall of the building. Early photographs of the Tennis Club, which has since been remodeled, show an elegant, modern building

with elevated terraces for sunbathing and socializing. In the center of the main room was a chalet-like open fireplace surrounded by built-in circular seating. Williams and Jones worked together on several other projects in Palm Springs, including the Town & Country Plaza, an early mixed-use project in downtown Palm Springs that has been the subject of a lengthy preservation battle.

Williams was appointed to the Los Angeles Planning Commission in 1920, and as his practice flourished and his office expanded, he devoted more time and energy to community service. He served on the city's planning commission for many years, sat on the boards of other organizations in the city, and was appointed to state commissions, including the California Housing Commission and the California Redevelopment Commission, as well as to numerous national or Presidential commissions. Since education was such an important cornerstone of his own career, Williams also lent his support to historically Black universities and served on many of their boards.

As Janna Ireland has pointed out, Williams believed that everyone deserved a dignified place to live, and his work on public housing projects was another way he could serve others. With Hilyard Robinson he designed Langston Terrace in Washington, D.C. in 1936, the first federally funded public housing project. In 1943, he was appointed the chief architect of the Pueblo del Rio Defense Housing Project in southeast L.A. and worked with a team of other notable architects, including Adrian Wilson, Welton Becket, and Richard Neutra, on the design of the seventeen-and-a-half-acre project that provided 400 units for 1,350 people. Pueblo del Rio was the only one of the fifteen public housing projects that was planned and built in Los Angeles by that time that was open to African Americans.¹⁵ Williams also designed Nickerson Gardens in the Watts neighborhood of L.A. (1950-55). With 1,066 townhouse-style units, it is the largest public housing project west of the Mississippi and was named after William Nickerson, Jr., the founder and former CEO of the Golden State Mutual Life Insurance Company, once the largest Black-owned insurance company in the western U.S. Williams was also the architect of the insurance company's headquarters in L.A.'s West Adams neighborhood, which was completed in 1949, several years after its founder had passed away. The striking building is now the headquarters of the South Central Los Angeles Regional Center.

In 1951, Williams finally realized his dream of building a home for himself and his wife Della in Lafayette Square, an upper-middle class neighborhood in west central L.A. that had slowly begun to open up to African Americans. Planned as an "elegant residential park"¹⁶ in 1913, by the thirties the neighborhood included an eclectic mix of large homes in the American Craftsman and various

European Revival styles popular at the time. As the white upper-middle class began to move to more desirable areas on the west side of L.A.—including Beverly Hills, Brentwood, and Bel Air—and restrictive covenants were lifted, a small contingent of middle and upper-middle-class African Americans began to buy houses in the area and Williams was able to secure one of the few vacant plots of land.

Unlike the traditionalist homes most of his clients requested, the architect's own home was much more modern in style. The International Style four-bedroom home featured clean lines, a curved volume with ribbon windows, and a striking cantilevered deck on the second story. The flat roof had a deep overhang, providing shade for the deck. The home's open floor plan included an elegant staircase leading to the second floor, stone floors, curved walls, a striking ceiling with a honeycomb pattern, built-in seating, and numerous glass doors that opened the house to the secluded garden behind. Williams lived in the home until his death in 1980 after which it was occupied by his granddaughter. The home came on the market for the first time in 2017 and its new owners embarked on a significant renovation to restore it to its original condition.

Paul R. Williams was much sought after in his lifetime, but his work has not received the same attention as the modernist houses that have become so identified with Los Angeles architecture. While he designed his own home in the International Style, he was often criticized for not fully embracing that innovative style in his practice. Los Angeles is a city that is always in search of the newest thing and although Williams's buildings are beloved by their owners, they likely seemed traditional, old-fashioned, and staid in comparison to the experimental avantgarde projects of other architects including Rudolf Schindler, Richard Neutra, Pierre Koenig, and Frank Lloyd Wright. However, the architecture of Paul R. Williams is an enduring and important chapter in the story of Los Angeles. In the city's nascent years, Williams's gracious buildings shaped its architectural landscape. As his archive becomes successful and more of his buildings are saved from demolition and restored to their former glory, the fact that he accomplished so much, and did so with such amazing grace, will remain an inspiration for generations to come.

¹ Karen E. Hudson, Paul R. Williams Architect: a legacy of style (New York: Rizzoli International, 1993).

² The acquisition was made shortly before early 2020 when the Covid-19 pandemic necessitated closure of the Getty and has not yet been catalogued.

³ Janna Ireland, "The Architecture of an Icon," Regarding Paul R. Williams: A Photographer's View (Los Angeles: Angel City Press, 2020), 9.

⁴ Hudson, 11.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ See U.S. Modernist article on Williams at https://usmodernist.org/pwilliams.htm?gclid=CjwKCAjwoP6LBhBIEiwAvCcthM3OwhuBw8ZXGV0tU1LypNRFiNlpc8khiqXLqCj6p7V4gYyWYhiXEhOCZoAQAvD_BwE, consulted on October 29, 2021.

⁷ See report transcribed from SOS! Outdoor Sculptures Archives at the Architecture and Fine Arts Library, the University of Southern California, available at http://www.publicartinla.com/sculptures/beverly_gardens_register.htm and consulted on October 29, 2021.

⁸ Karen Hudson's thorough recounting of her grandfather's early years has been indispensable for this essay and I am indebted to her for sharing Williams's story. Since the Williams Archive, housed at the Getty Research Institute, is not yet catalogued, Hudson's monograph is still the primary, and indeed the only, source of detailed information.

⁹ The project was likely the Frederick Leistikow House, completed by Williams in 1923. See Hudson, 19.

¹⁰ Ellen Leech, "Building for a California Hillside," California Southland, October 1923, 23, and November 1923, 25; cited in David Gebhard, "Paul R. Williams and the Los Angeles Scene," in Hudson, 21.

¹¹ Gebhard in Hudson, 22.

¹² Ingalil Wahlroos-Ritter, "Paul R. Williams: Beyond Style," in Ireland, Regarding Paul R. Williams: A Photographer's View, 125.

¹³ Hudson, 14.

¹⁴ Barbara Bestor, "Afterword," in Ireland, 213.

¹⁵ See Gebhard in Hudson, 25.

¹⁶ See <https://www.paulwilliamsproject.org/gallery/residence-paul-r-williams-los-angeles-ca/>, consulted on 1 November 2021.