

# PAUL R. WILLIAMS CLASSIC HOLLYWOOD STYLE

Karen E. Hudson

Foreword by Kelly Wearstler

*Rizzoli*  
NEW YORK



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藏书章

Karen E. Hudson

Photography by Benny Chan

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PAUL R. WILLIAMS





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**RIZZOLI**  
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I dedicate this book to my loving husband,

DON E.,

who shares my visions and allows me the  
freedom to pursue my passions



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## Foreword

Kelly Wearstler

WHEN I WAS FIRST ASKED TO WRITE the foreword to this beautiful book about the life and work of Paul Revere Williams, I felt deeply honored. I have long been an admirer of Williams's work, and have had the pleasure of visiting several of the private homes he designed for some of Hollywood's elite. His homes, to me, have always felt like iconic representations of the old-school glamour of Beverly Hills. I love the way he interpreted Georgian architecture, modernizing its more classical elements to suit the needs of his clients, and his attentiveness to scale and proportion. I have admired his entryways, which feel at once purposeful and emotional, and the way he realized those signature dramatic, winding staircases, skillfully making them what they should be, the soul of the house. His grand homes, though expansive, felt livable and functional, and at the same time delivered the luxury and opulence befitting his celebrity clients. I have admired too the way he created a seamless voice, from the interior spaces, with their beautifully considered room adjacencies, to the exterior spaces, which he also executed with great care. I have been inspired in my own projects by Williams's attention to detail, the beautiful panels in a living room, the craftsmanship on a ceiling molding.

But though I know all of these things about the prolific architect, in contemplating this essay, it became evident that I knew very little about the man himself. I am therefore grateful to the editors of this book for giving me the opportunity to learn still more about an architect, an artist, whom I have long admired. In so doing I have come to understand that he was equally committed to creating affordable homes to enrich his own community as he was to creating the homes of Frank Sinatra, Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz, and other stars. And while he struggled against prejudice, his determination never wavered. His homes have withstood the test of time and seem as relevant today as they did when first built more than a half century ago. The homes designed by Williams are living, breathing testaments to the architectural tradition and allure of Beverly Hills, and the other cities they inhabit, and as such they are truly worth preserving. Perhaps this book will inspire city officials to bestow upon these architectural gems the historic preservation status they so richly deserve.

Finally, to the man himself, I express my gratitude, for inspiring me as an interior designer, and as a resident of the city he so immeasurably impacted with his vision and his grace.





# Introduction

Karen E. Hudson

BORN IN DOWNTOWN LOS ANGELES IN 1894, Paul Revere Williams journeyed from orphan to world-renowned architect along a path that was long and arduous, tinged with luck and what he believed were incredible blessings.

Williams's parents, armed with southern fortitude and a belief that Los Angeles would be an idyllic setting for overcoming their tuberculosis, set off from Memphis, Tennessee, in the early 1890s hoping to find health and prosperity in their new home. While they found prosperity in a fruit stand on Olvera Street, both parents would succumb to their illness by the time Paul was four years old. Williams was then taken in by a member of their church, raised by a loving foster mother who encouraged his dreams.

Growing up, Williams's Los Angeles was one of bean fields and orange groves. He learned Chinese from the laundry man, and German from the new friends who were just beginning to move into the neighborhood. His afternoons were filled with wonder and exploration, and more often than not he and his playmates could be found catching quail with wheat soaked in whiskey.

As the class artist, young Paul found joy in the visual arts, and experienced his first rebuff when he expressed an interest in being an architect. His teachers told him he would never be an architect, because white people would never hire him, and black people built neither fine homes nor significant office buildings. Undeterred, Williams began his quest to influence the look and the built environment of his beloved Los Angeles, not just as an architect, but as the best architect he could be.

Understanding that our society still required African Americans to be better than anyone else just to play the game, he sought to level the playing field. He mapped out a plan that included attending various art schools that offered individual study in drafting, rendering, and design while also undertaking engineering studies at the University of Southern California.

Seeking employment among the finest architects in landscape, residential, and commercial design, Williams found work with Wilbur D. Cook, Reginald D. Johnson, and finally John C. Austin.

By the early 1920s, just as Los Angeles began to experience significant growth, Williams ventured out on his own, opening his own firm. A quiet, gentle man, he found his "voice" in his designs. When others attempted to silence him with racism, he "spoke" as others could not—for himself, and for his community. He also found his voice in community participation. Appointed to the first City Planning Commission of Los Angeles, in 1920, he understood the importance of civic responsibility and representation. From then on he would serve on city and county boards in the arts and planning, allowing him to again "speak" volumes whether selecting artwork for public buildings or laying the groundwork for public spaces.

His obstacles were great, but nothing could extinguish his brilliance. Unable to participate in the "old boys" network that boosted the careers of most architects of the day, he found ways to distinguish himself and garner clients. He believed that it was important to design "homes" rather than houses. His passion for residential design was coupled with his understanding of the importance of home ownership to the viability and substance of a community. Having mastered small homes, he realized his reputation would depend on his commercial "voice" and commissions. Williams felt strongly that people should work in environments that were as pleasing as their homes, and he began to build a reputation for incorporating residential design in commercial buildings. Perhaps his finest example of residential design in a commercial building is the Music Corporation of America (MCA) building in Beverly Hills. Designed in 1937, Williams would make additions and alterations forty years later when Litton Industries acquired it. Headquarters of Global Crossing for a short time, the building is now home to Platinum Equity.

From his first home in the La Cañada Flintridge area in 1922, when land deeds prohibited a black person from spending the night in the area, to his last home in the 1960s, just down the street from the first, he adapted and changed with the times and the wishes of his clients, designing homes for families that would last for generations. His style ranged over the years from the Spanish Mediterranean influence of early California to Georgian, Tudor, Colonial, Hollywood Regency, and postwar modernism and updated traditional. Over the years he has been thought to be less serious as an architect because he did not practice one identifiable style over others. One may be surprised by his multitude of styles, but, to him, his worth as an architect was his ability to listen and to please his clients. But, as one looks closely, attention to detail was the hallmark of all of his work and is found in each and every building of his design.

Perhaps he "spoke" loudest in the details. He labored over the design of a modest home with the same enthusiasm and attention to detail as he would a grand estate. When one wonders why there are hidden closets or short counters, the answer can always be found in the wishes and needs of the original owner. He understood the importance of first impressions and demanded that those working for him dress in a proper manner and carry themselves with grace and confidence. And the attention to detail permeated all aspects of his life. He may have seen a jacket in a window display of a closed haberdasher when traveling out of town, and, believing it was "perfect," would have his secretary order it upon his return. He did not carry a briefcase but rather took meticulous notes on personalized note cards he carried in his jacket pocket. He chose the palm trees to adorn a new residence for their height and shape, and consulted with homeowners on interiors as well as landscaping.

Williams enjoyed sharing ideas and welcomed a spirituality of positive thinking that served him all the days of his life. He relished conversations with religious leaders such as spiritual writers Lewis Browne and Ernest Holmes, both owners of homes designed by Williams. When



others may have been discouraged, Williams found strength in his personal beliefs. He faced racism head on, and, more often than not, won. When it was inappropriate for him to lean across the shoulder of a white person, he learned to draw upside down. This enabled him to sit on one side of the desk, with the clients firmly planted a safe distance away on the other side, and as he asked what you'd like in your home, he sketched it upside down, so it came alive before one's eyes. When clients entered his office not knowing he was black, they often made excuses to leave. He would ask, "How much are you planning to spend on your home?" And then he would shock them by saying he never took jobs for that little. With their interest piqued, he usually won them over with his talent and graciousness. Perhaps a bit Barnum and Bailey, but it allowed him to open doors for future architects.

Williams believed that his name on a home's plans was like the stamp of "sterling" on silver. He inspired excellence in others and continues to do so today through the examples he has left us.

Hollywood and Williams were a good match because for each imagination was everything.

Often referred to as "architect to the stars," Williams designed for such luminaries as Frank Sinatra, Barbara Stanwyck, Tyrone Power, Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz, Lon Chaney, Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, Bud Abbot, and Eddie "Rochester" Anderson, to name a few. Through the years, Hollywood stars have continued to enjoy the homes. Perhaps Pauletta Washington best conveys the feeling families have when living in a Paul Williams home:

When Denzel and I moved into our first home, we always admired another house and would make trips that would take us past that house for the two years we were in that neighborhood. Then we learned that the owner of that house was considering selling. We jumped at that opportunity. We learned at that time that Paul Williams had built the house. It then made sense why we so admired *that* house. We raised our four children in what we *all felt* was where we were supposed to call Home. I knew in my spirit that Mr. Williams was pleased to have us reside in his creation. We were able to share numerous happy, joyous times with many people while there. It remains our *dearest of times* and it all centers around our incredible, beautiful, comfortable, cozy, Paul Williams creation.

In a career that spanned over fifty years, and a portfolio that included nearly three thousand projects, Williams traveled the world and was licensed to practice in Washington, D.C., New York, Tennessee, and Nevada, as well as California, and he had offices in Washington, D.C., Los Angeles, and Bogotá, Colombia. He took particular pride in designing within the African American community.

Paul Williams was, and will always be, a gentle man with a dream.

## Quincy Jones Jr. Remembers

WHEN I THINK ABOUT YOUR GRANDDADDY, I think about my Daddy. They were two of a kind. My Daddy was a master carpenter; fiercely independent and armed with the most positive attitude of anyone you'd ever want to know. When I was growing up he wanted me to be an architect—he thought I should get a “real” job instead of being a musician—but as it worked out, he thought I did OK.

Honey, let me just speak from my heart. When Daddy would come to California for his annual visit, he never missed spending time with his hero and friend Paul. He was so proud of his accomplishments, and loved their time together.

You know music has the same sensibility as architecture. My friend Frank Gehry used to always say to me, “If architecture is frozen music, then music is liquid architecture.” And in architecture, as in music, you have to learn your craft and master the fundamentals. You have to work hard and accept obstacles as challenges, not roadblocks.

I was fifteen years old when I began my passion of wanting to score a movie, but I was thirty before I got the opportunity to finally write a score, for *The Pawnbroker*. Your granddaddy was the same way—he never gave up. He had the vision and the talent, and the way he drew upside down to deal with the social circumstances of the day . . . he was something else!

To this day, when I walk into the Beverly Hills Hotel I feel his spirit—the staircase, the coffee shop, the ballrooms, and the Polo Lounge—classic, elegant, absolutely timeless!

I've been to what seems like a million events at the hotel and used to eat at the coffee shop with Mike Nichols, Tony Bennett—all the guys. And I've partied with the best of them in Paul Williams's homes, especially with my friend Frank Sinatra. They all loved him!

The Beverly Hills Hotel, Saks Fifth Avenue, the Coconut Grove, Litton, the airport—I know his trademark by heart. He's a legend.

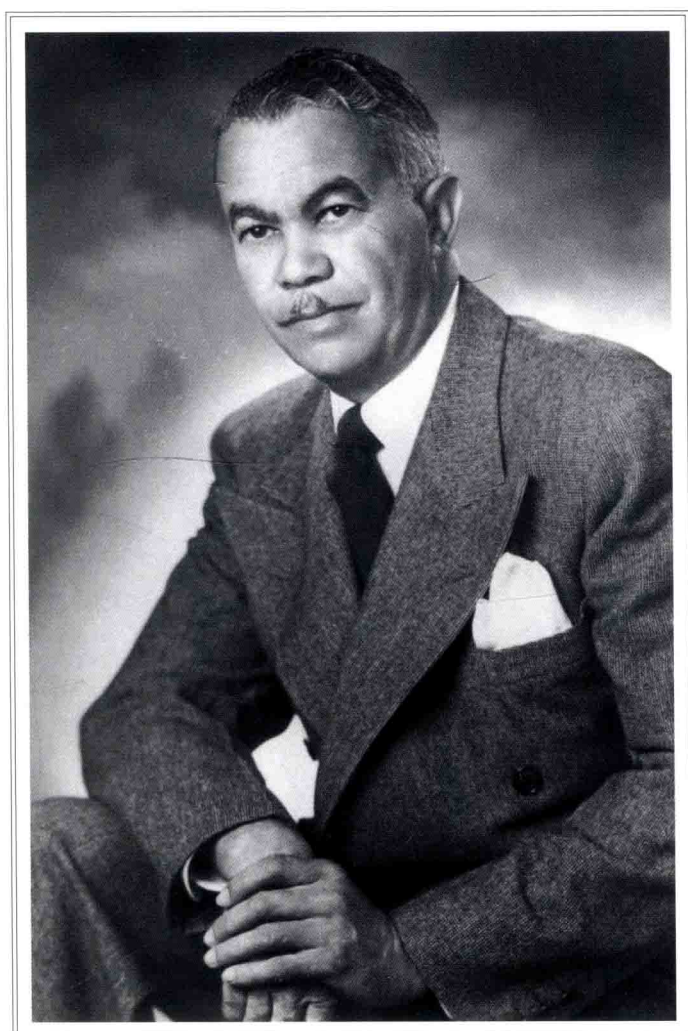
He knew that “if you know where you came from, it's easier to get where you're going.” And he faced his racial challenges, never forgetting where he came from.

I'd be willing to bet that in his heart he believed just as I do that you must have humility with your creativity and grace with your success.

A trailblazer, classic, amazing, brilliant . . . a giant. Like Duke Ellington and Charlie Parker, you could see his style a mile away. He took time for others, he had the grace—he was *something else*!

QUINCY JONES JR.





Paul R. Williams