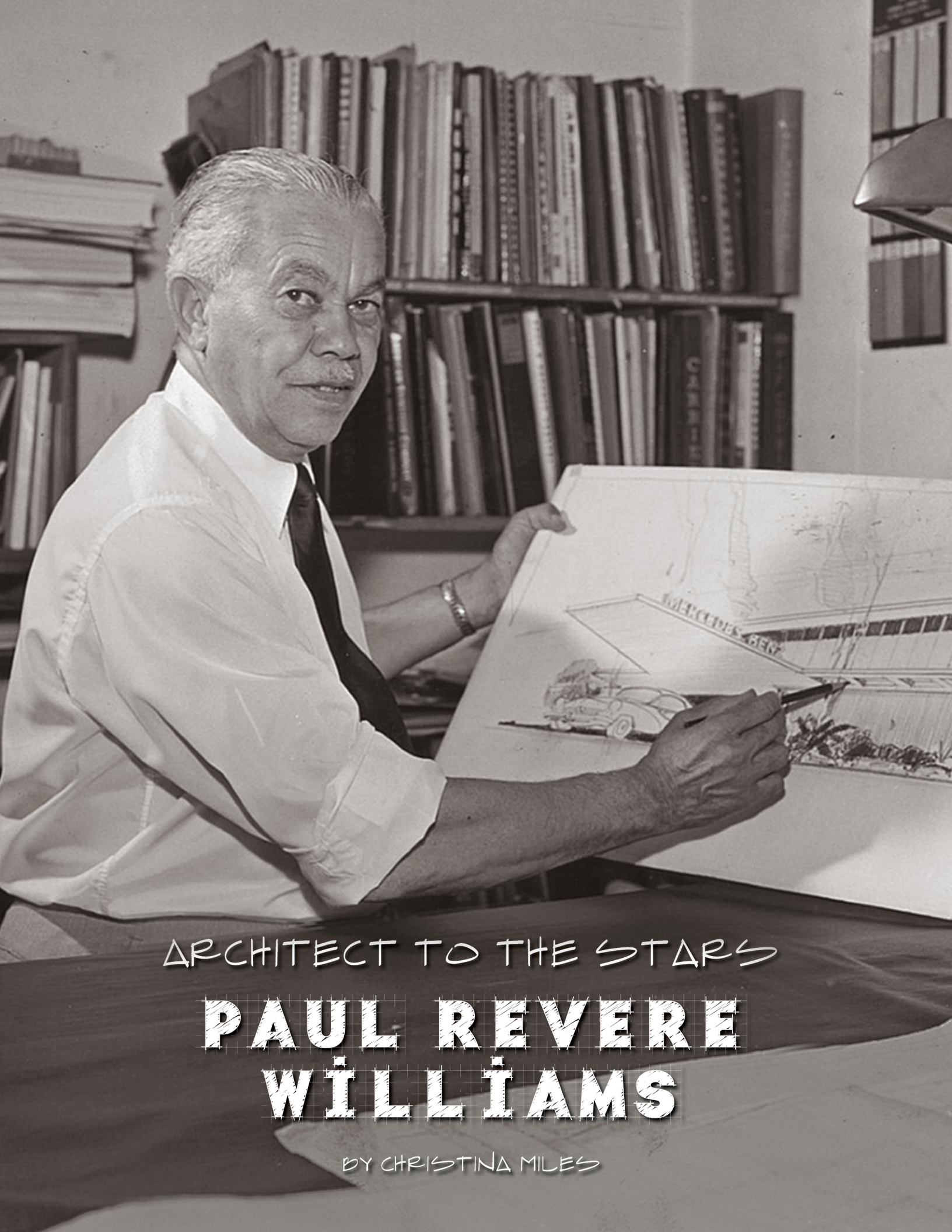
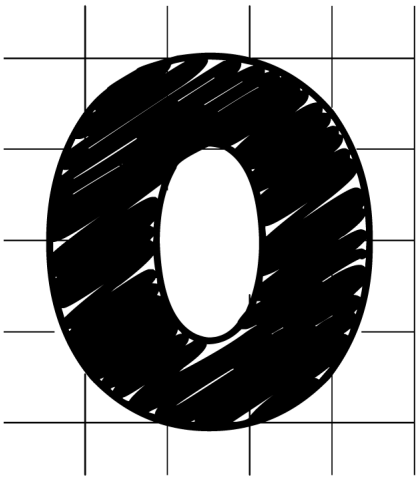


ARCHITECT TO THE STARS

PAUL REVERE WILLIAMS

BY CHRISTINA MILES



On the corner of Paloma and 28th Streets stands the historic YMCA building. At first, its facade blends into the warm tones of Los Angeles, a square building with paint well-loved by the sun's heat. However, upon closer inspection, passersby begin to notice the swirling details nested at the top of the building, and the wine-red arch that cradles the doorway of the men's entrance. Wedged between Downtown LA, Watts and South LA, the 28th Street YMCA acts as a crossroads, weaving together some of the threads of Los Angeles' most vibrant communities. While to the untrained eye it might be just another fixture of LA's historic architecture, the YMCA is a mark of the resilience of the local Black community, as well as a testament to the remarkable skill of architect Paul Revere Williams.

It's easiest to describe Williams as a trailblazer; looking upon some of the many structures he's conceived — whether it be the Frank Sinatra's dream home or the original sprawling design of LAX—it's hard to imagine this "Architect to the Stars" as anything other than the sharply dressed man pictured in old magazines and history books. Yet the man who would become the American Institute of Architects' first Black member and recipient of the Gold Medal had more than humble beginnings.

Born in 1894 against the backdrop of Jim Crow, William's parents Chester Stanley and Lila Wright Williams would travel to Los Angeles prior to his birth to flee the American South's harsh racial violence, as well as seek treatment for their tuberculosis. Unfortunately, they would succumb to this illness, orphaning four year-old Williams and his older brother. He was taken in by Charles and Emily Clarkson, who would support his passion for the art of construction. Williams, an orphaned Black man facing segregation's sharp teeth, quickly grew to realize the importance of community.

To best understand the sheer willpower it took to establish himself in a white-dominated field, we must understand the time in which Williams was living. It is easy to water down segregation and, by extension, Jim Crow as separate water-fountains and dining cars, however, in the tight-knit community of Downtown Los Angeles at the time, Black folks and their white counterparts existed in isolated spheres. As my Texas-born grandmother and former resident of Watts would say: to be Black in LA was to organize your work, social and religious life around your community. A Black man would be unable to find work in the pristine, picket-fenced world of Beverly Hills and Pasadena. However, Williams wasn't one to turn from a challenge. By age twenty-seven, he was a licensed architect and graduate of USC, opening his own firm only a year later in defiance of the white teachers who told him he'd never find employment.

Still, any employment was not easy. Just as he struggled to find respect from his white colleagues, his clients were often dismissive of his talents. Williams, aware that many of his clients were less than comfortable sitting next to a Black man, learned to draw upside down while sitting across from them in order to appease Hollywood's elite, a trait that would quickly become a trademark of his career. He was known for his finely pressed suits and impeccable style, as well as an amicable demeanor that made him palatable to his white clientele--by donning a facade just as grand as his buildings, he became a well-respected figure within architectural history.

What further set Williams apart from his contemporaries was his ability to listen to the client's unspoken desires. Within the design of the Sinatra home (which arguably put him in the national spotlight) he was able to manifest Sinatra's love for both Old Hollywood and the fabled "exotic" modernity of Japanese-style architecture. His trademark spiral staircases, high ceilings, and manipulation of natural light through round, scattered windows can be seen in some of his most famous work, such as the Beverly Hills Hotel.

> "*A house by* **Paul Williams** *is the finest* **trademark** *one can find in the field of* **architecture**."

One of the most subtle yet gorgeous embodiments of Williams's signature style can be seen in the design of the historic Fluor House in Floral Park, Santa Ana. Among the Spanish Colonial and English Tudor Revival homes is a Hollywood Regency style estate home attributed to Williams, its white facade glowing against the greenery of Santa Ana. The home was commissioned in the mid-1930s by John P. Scripps, founder of John P. Scripps Newspapers and grandson of publishing magnate E.W. Scripps. This hidden gem of Santa Ana perfectly harnesses William's strengths as an architect and includes many of his trademark design elements: broken pediments, oval windows, spiraling staircase and signature banisher

Photos clockwise: Drawing by Charles Henry Alston, Frank Sinatra reviews plans for his luxurious bachelor pad with Williams; Williams in front of his iconic Theme Building at LAX; the Beverly Hills Hotel tower featuring the hotel's name in William's signature handwriting.

design. It is important to note that Floral Park, like so many other neighborhoods in which he designed homes, was a restricted community in 1937 and for all of his hard work, Williams would be unable to move into the magnificent homes he designed, regardless of budget. Today, as Santa Ana bustles with more diversity than ever, the historic Fluor House on Heliotope Drive is a testament to his vision for a brighter future.

Yet his feet remained firmly planted within his community. Williams would go on to design hallmarks of Black excellence—historically Black colleges such as Howard University and Fisk, as well as the First African Methodist Episcopal Church in Los Angeles—and he was steadfast in his commitment to uplifting the Black communities across the nation.

One of his most impressive projects would be the first St. Jude's Children Hospital in Memphis, Tennessee; designed without charge for his closest friend and Hollywood star Danny Thomas (known for the Happy Hour Club and Danny Thomas Show.) The hospital would act as Williams' love letter to children of all races from the South, providing the care that his parents were lacking in Memphis. The Architect to the Stars was able to sew another brilliant light into our galaxy, housing the Star of Hope within the walls of a hospital standing in his parent's hometown.

As winter turns to spring and Black History Month rounds the corner, it is easy to forget about the foundations laid for us by those before who dared to challenge the status quo. Even more so, it is pertinent that we celebrate the works of figures like Paul Revere Williams, whose work faces erasure as companies seek to demolish his carefully constructed monuments to Black artistry. Just as many looked to him for guidance in the past, young Black entrepreneurs and architects stepping into a predominantly white field continue to champion Williams as a symbol of what could be. According to the National Council of Architectural Registration Boards, as of 2020, less than 1 in 5 new architects are people of color.

In an age of heightening racial tensions in which we are propelling towards progress, we cannot forget the importance of preserving the past. Paul R. Williams' work is so much more than a few houses. All I can think of while appreciating Williams' work is what it must have looked like to my grandmother, five years old in 1945 and fresh from rural Texas, gazing up at an old YMCA with chipped paint and a red doorway. It was perhaps the first building designed by a Black man with an architectural degree she would have ever seen, but it would for sure not be the last--that is the legacy of Paul Revere Williams.

*To learn more, watch the PBS documentary "*Hollywood's Architect: The Paul R. Williams Story,*" via a link at FloralPark.com.history.*

Christina Miles is a 17-year-old performance poet and storyteller based in Orange County, California. Her work has been featured in Rust + Moth Magazine, Cold Mountain Review *as well as the* Los Angeles Press, *and she has been nominated for Best New Poet and is a recipient of the Scholastic Gold Medal and Key awards for performance poetry. She reads for* Hominum Journal *and* ShePersists.net, *an online magazine dedicated to gender justice. She currently attends the Orange County School of the Arts where she studies creative writing, and will be attending Brown University in the fall.*