

Press release

2017 AIA Gold Medal Awarded to Paul Revere Williams, FAIA

For immediate release:

Washington, D.C. – December 7, 2016 – The Board of Directors of the American Institute of Architects (AIA) voted today to posthumously award the 2017 AIA Gold Medal to Paul Revere Williams, FAIA, whose portfolio of nearly 3,000 buildings during his five-decade career was marked with a number of broken barriers. The Gold Medal honors an individual whose significant body of work has had a lasting influence on the theory and practice of architecture. Williams' legacy will be honored at the 2017 AIA National Convention in Orlando.

Williams, the first African-American architect to receive the AIA Gold Medal, was born in Los Angeles in 1894. He was orphaned by the age of four and was later raised by a foster mother who valued his education and encouraged his artistic development. Despite a high school teacher's attempts to dissuade him from pursuing architecture for fear that he wouldn't be able to pull clients from the predominantly white community while the black community would not sustain his practice, Williams persevered. Confident in his abilities, Williams garnered accolades in architectural competitions early in his career while developing tactics like rendering his drawings upside down so that his white clients could view his work from across the table rather than by sitting next to him. Williams was the first black architect to become a member of the AIA, and, later, the first black member to be inducted into the Institute's College of Fellows. Williams opened his practice in the early 1920s when Southern California's real estate market was booming. His early practice focused both on small, affordable houses for new homeowners and revival-style homes for his more affluent clients. As his reputation swelled, so, too, did his client list. Williams' practice expanded and among the 2,000 homes he designed included graceful private residences for legendary figures in business and entertainment such as Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz, Lon Chaney, Frank Sinatra, and Barron Hilton.

"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, Managing and Design Director at Perkins + Will, who presented to the AIA Board of Directors on behalf of Williams. "It's been many decades but Paul Williams is finally being recognized for the brilliant work he did over many years."

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While Williams was more than comfortable with the historical styles endemic to Southern California, his fluency in modernism is reflected in the work outside of his residential practice. Among his number of schools, public buildings, and churches are American architectural landmarks, including the Palm Springs Tennis Center (1946) designed with A. Quincy Jones, the space age LAX Theme Building (1961) designed with William Pereira, Charles Luckman, and Welton Becket, and his 1949 renovation of the iconic Beverly Hills Hotel. Eight of Williams' works have been named to the National Register of Historic Places.

"Our profession desperately needs more architects like Paul Williams," wrote William J. Bates, FAIA, in his support of William's nomination for the AIA Gold Medal. "His pioneering career has encouraged others to cross a chasm of historic biases. I can't think of another architect whose work embodies the spirit of the Gold Medal better. His recognition demonstrates a significant shift in the equity for the profession and the institute."

Williams, who passed away in 1980 is the 73rd AIA Gold Medalist. He joins the ranks of such visionaries as Frank Lloyd Wright (1949), Louis Sullivan (1944), Le Corbusier (1961), Louis I. Kahn (1971), I.M. Pei (1979), Thom Mayne (2013), Julia Morgan (2014), Moshe Safdie (2015) and Denise Scott Brown & Robert Venturi (2016). In recognition of his legacy to architecture, Williams' name will be chiseled into the granite Wall of Honor in the lobby of the AIA headquarters in Washington, D.C.

About The American Institute of Architects

Founded in 1857, the American Institute of Architects consistently works to create more valuable, healthy, secure, and sustainable buildings, neighborhoods, and communities. Through nearly 300 state and local chapters, the AIA advocates for public policies that promote economic vitality and public wellbeing. Members adhere to a code of ethics and conduct to ensure the highest professional standards. The AIA provides members with tools and resources to assist them in their careers and business as well as engaging civic and government leaders and the public to find solutions to pressing issues facing our communities, institutions, nation and world. Visit www.aia.org.

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