Will Paice, Co-Producer of film-documentary ‘Visual Acoustics: The Modernism of Julius Shulman’ visits Palm Springs, where celebrated photographer Shulman created some of his most iconic images, and takes us on a tour of one of the Modernist Greats.
The steep San Jacinto Mountains to the west of Palm Springs protect the city from coastal fog, rain and smog, creating a sanctuary in the middle of the desert. The seemingly unlimited land, a good supply of spring water from an underground aquifer, mineral hot springs and clean, dry air has attracted settlers since the late 19th century. But it was film executives, looking for locations outside Los Angeles, who first brought Palm Springs and the Coachella Valley to the attention of Hollywood's glitterati. The area quickly became a popular escape: accessible from Los Angeles and styled as a Californian Shangri-La, the wealthy and famous transformed it into their own desert playground. Tennis clubs, spas, cocktail lounges and resort hotels were built to accommodate their tastes for luxury entertainment and the town flourished during winter months.

Hollywood stars like Frank Sinatra, Cary Grant and Kirk Douglas purchased hideaway homes in Palm Springs, and they were followed by businessmen looking for a winter escape harsh East Coast winters. So it was a rich market for well-travelled architects looking for undeveloped spaces in which to experiment with the International Style architecture's great experiments. Rudolph Schindler and Richard Neutra had built a couple of Modernist houses since World War II, but by the 1940s everyone wanted modern. And by the 1960s very few houses in Palm Springs were built in the traditional Spanish vernacular style.

Established architects with practices in Los Angeles were brought in to design second homes for their wealthy clients, but the first modern architects actually to live in Palm Springs were Swiss-born Albert Frey (a disciple of Corbusier), who moved from New York in 1934, and John Porter Clark, who he partnered to move from New York in 1934, and who developed the modernist architecture of Palm Springs by his visit to the onset of night.

The Kaufmann Desert House
In the shadow of the sandy-gold mountains, the slopes of Palm Springs’ Little Tuscany are strewn with huge boulders. Smoothed by the weather and softened by sagebrush and yucca succulents, the brutal desert landscape provides an unlikely context for one of architecture’s great experiments.

But this is where Richard Neutra built a winter house for the Pittsburgh department store owner, Edgar J. Kaufmann, arguably one of the most important examples of International Style architecture in the United States.

The Kaufmann Desert House, completed in 1946, glitters like ice in the desert landscape. Its flat roof is edged with silver, glinting in the unyielding sun and hovering over transparent walls of glass. It is a sculptural object whose geometric forms contrast dramatically with the desert around it, and yet it reaches out to the landscape, drawing it into its cool interior.

Kaufmann was no stranger to International Style modernism. He had commissioned Frank Lloyd Wright to build Fallingwater in south-western Pennsylvania, named by The American Institute of Architects as “the best all-time work of American architecture”. For his desert commission, however, Kaufmann used architect Richard Neutra, perhaps inspired by his visit to the Kaufmann Desert House. Neutra had designed for the St. Louis socialite, Grace Lewis Miller in 1937.

The film-documentary ‘Visual Acoustics: The Modernism of Julius Shulman’ is due for UK release in 2014 – for more information, go to juliusshulmanfilm.com.