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Sunnylands presidential summit spotlights estate's public mission



The coolly crisp Sunnylands visitors' center by architect Frederick Fisher embodies the highly public role the estate, once a vacation getaway for Walter and Leonore Annenberg, has embraced. (Mark Davidson / Annenberg Foundation Trust at Sunnylands)

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Even when it was just an architectural glimmer in the eye of Walter and Leonore Annenberg, the desert estate where President Barack Obama will greet Chinese President Xi Jinping on Friday was never in danger of being confused with a mere vacation house.

Designed by the prolific Los Angeles architect A. Quincy Jones and the decorator William Haines and finished in 1966, Sunnylands was inspired by Maya ruins even as it accommodated elements of Midcentury Modernism and the Annenbergs' own Asian antiquities and lacquered furniture.

On a choice site with views of the Chocolate Mountains, the house in Rancho Mirage has been a center for high-powered entertaining from its earliest days. Guests included Ronald Reagan and Richard Nixon — seven current or former presidents have visited Sunnylands in all — along with Queen Elizabeth, Bob Hope and Frank Sinatra.

The art collection, since shipped off to the Metropolitan Museum in New York and replaced by convincing replicas filling ornate frames, included first-rate pieces by Renoir, Cezanne, Van Gogh, Gauguin and Picasso.

And yet this weekend's summit, set to take place on a pair of punishingly hot days in which the temperature may top 110 degrees, will be a closely scrutinized test of a new vision for Sunnylands: As a kind of post-partisan center for both public and private diplomacy, able to put its reputation as a desert salon for GOP powerbrokers behind it.

And even as it adds to the annals of Sino-American diplomacy and a growing revival of interest in Jones and his architecture, the visit from the Chinese delegation will also shine a spotlight on a change at Sunnylands that is emblematic of broader shifts in Southern California culture.

For decades triumphs in art and architecture in Los Angeles were tucked away in the private realm to a degree unusual among major American cities, set behind thick hedges and iron gates. Now many of these residential landmarks, designed by architects including Richard Neutra and Julia Morgan, are embracing a newly public role.

The transformation is not always smooth or quick, but Sunnylands has handled it better than most.

In part that's because the original house, which holds nearly 30,000 square feet of interior space under a broad pyramid-shaped roof of pink cement tiles, was designed for entertaining on an exceedingly grand scale. (Walking across the giant living room feels like crossing a stage, and somehow the gargantuan size of the place allows it to absorb what is by domestic standards a singularly odd mixture of architectural and artistic styles and sensibilities.) And also because the Annenbergs, late in their lives, were keenly interested in mapping out the future role of the estate in public as well as diplomatic life.

In 2001 they established the Annenberg Foundation Trust at Sunnylands. After Walter Annenberg died in 2002 his widow, known as Lee, worked closely with the Los Angeles architect Frederick Fisher and a group of trustees, advisors and family members on the design of a new visitors' center, which opened last year. A crisp building of glass and white stucco looking out on a superbly designed garden by the Texas landscape architect James Burnett, it incorporates a couple of direct nods to the Jones design, including lava-rock walls and freestanding trellises.

Fisher was also enlisted, with the preservation firm Historic Resources Group, to oversee a restoration and seismic retrofit of the house, among other improvements.

In building the house, the Annenbergs wanted to bring a bit of their home state of Pennsylvania with them, not only in the décor but also what they'd see when they looked out the bedroom window.

The rolling and perfectly emerald lawns that surround the house on all sides, blending seamlessly with the nine-hole golf course, are slowly being replaced with plants that require less water.

Throughout the process of creating a new Sunnylands, Fisher and the other designers had to walk a fine line, bearing in mind the Trust's dual mission as a high-level center for political retreats like this weekend's and as a house museum open for public tours.

During Modernism Week every February, which fills the Coachella Valley with fans of midcentury design and architecture, Sunnylands can count on visitors likely to know more about Jones and Haines than the tour guides do.

At other times of the year the crowds may be more interested in seeing the pictures of the Annenbergs with the Reagans or the Clintons, or the wall lined with Christmas cards from Buckingham Palace, the products of a relationship begun when Walter Annenberg served as U.S. ambassador to England from 1969 to 1974.

And periodically the estate is given over to retreats or symposia on political and social issues. Last year Condoleezza Rice and Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa were among the guests discussing relations between the U.S. and Mexico.

But the news of this weekend's summit — by any measure a coup for Sunnylands — has brought a new level of attention to the house and to the Trust's plans for it going forward. Some analysts have glimpsed in the choice of location a desire by the White House to embrace Pacific Rim diplomacy — as opposed to a visit to Camp David — or signal at least a quiet respect for the presidencies of Reagan and Nixon at a time of deep division between the parties.

There is also speculation that President Obama, dogged by controversies over the IRS and surveillance that threaten to drag on for much of the summer, will be happy to get out of Washington for a weekend.

Close observers of the Obamas have discovered a few links connecting Sunnylands with the current administration — most obviously that the interiors of the new visitors' center were designed by Michael Smith, the Obamas' decorator.

In terms of the role Sunnylands plays in Southern California, or in connection to the architecture of the region, there is also plenty of rich material to mine as the estate moves into the media spotlight this weekend.

As part of the Getty's expansive summer series "Pacific Time Presents: Modern Architecture in Los Angeles," the Hammer Museum is presenting the first comprehensive retrospective of Jones' career. The show casts Jones as a prolific and collaborative designer who deserves far wider recognition.

A final irony of this larger story about Jones' shifting reputation and the Annenberg family's role as patrons of architecture is unfolding at USC, where Jones was dean of the architecture school in the 1970s, and where Geoffrey Cowan, president of the Sunnylands Trust, served as dean of the Annenberg School of Communication from 1996 to 2007.

It was Jones who designed the university's original Annenberg School, which opened in 1976 and is featured prominently in both the Hammer exhibition and in the Getty architecture show "Overdrive."

When the Annenberg School occupies a \$50-million new home that is now under construction, its connection to Jones, and to the idea of forward-looking architecture, will fade.

Wallis Annenberg Hall, by the firm Harley Ellis Devereaux, will be wrapped in red brick and covered in Collegiate Gothic touches that are deeply nostalgic or carefully respectful of the architectural context at USC, depending on your point of view.

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