

# **249 Peruvian Avenue**



## **DESIGNATION REPORT**

**April 19, 2023**

**Landmark Preservation Commission**

**Palm Beach, Florida**

# **DESIGNATION REPORT**

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Report produced by Murphy Stillings, LLC

## **I. General Information**

Location: 249 Peruvian Avenue  
Palm Beach, Florida

Date of Construction: Rear Structure – 1924/1958  
Front Structure - 1961

First Owner: Clara Autenrieth

Architect: Rear Structure – unknown/John Stetson  
Front Structure – John Stetson

Builder: Rear Structure – W. E. Moorehead Co. Inc.  
Front Structure – L. E. Hammond

Present Owners: S & S Peruvian LLC – Unit F-1  
249 Peruvian LLC – Unit F-2  
249 Peruvian LLC – Unit F-3  
C &G Enterprises LLC – Unit F-4  
Palm Beach MD LLC – Unit R-1-1  
Marvin J. Babyatsky Revokable Trust & Marvin J.  
Babyatsky, Trustee – Unit R-1-2  
Min Y Jo LLC – Unit R-2-1  
Charles C. Modesitt Trust & Thelma A. Modesitt,  
Trustee – Unit R-2-2

Present Zoning: CTS

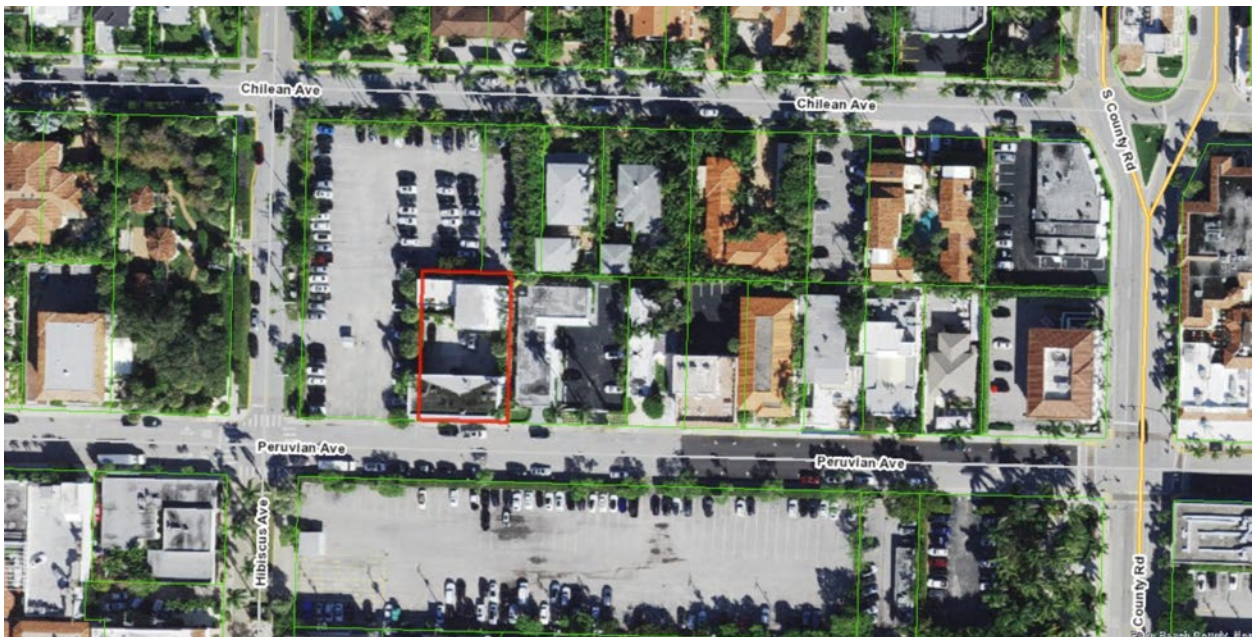
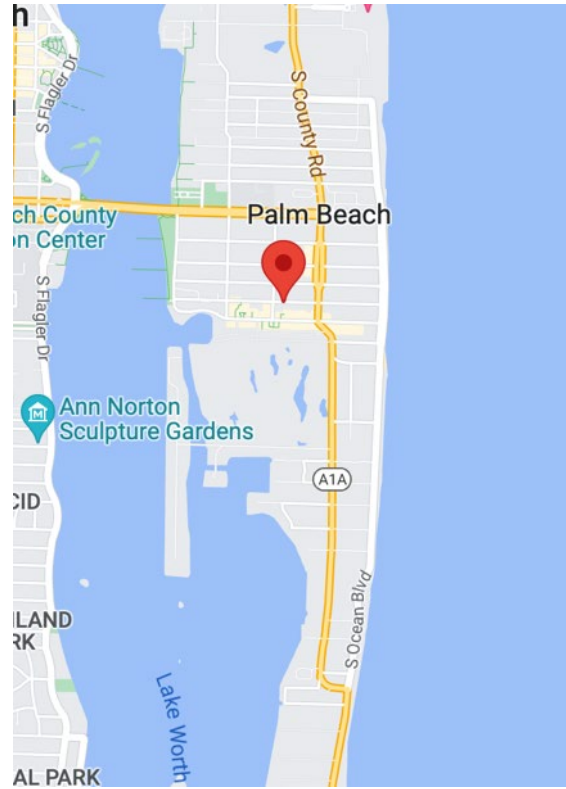
Palm Beach County PCN: 50-43-43-27-56-000-0061 – Unit F-1  
50-43-43-27-56-000-0062 – Unit F-2  
50-43-43-27-56-000-0063 – Unit F-3  
50-43-43-27-56-000-0064 – Unit F-4  
50-43-43-27-56-000-1811 – Unit R-1-1  
50-43-43-27-56-000-1812 – Unit R-1-2  
50-43-43-27-56-000-1821 – Unit R-2-1  
50-43-43-27-56-000-1822 – Unit R-2-2

Current Legal Description: Lots 48, 49 and 50, Block 10, Royal Park Addition to the Town of Palm Beach, according to the Plat thereof as recorded in Plat Book 4, Page 1 of the Public Records of Palm Beach County, Florida.

249 Building, a Condominium, according to the Declaration of Condominium recorded in Official Record Book 3968, Page 497, and all exhibits and amendments thereof, Public Records of Palm Beach County, Florida.

## II. Location Map

### 249 Peruvian Avenue





### III. Architectural Information

249 Peruvian Avenue is a Mid-Century Modern style condominium property in mid-town Palm Beach containing eight units. In 1958, well-known Palm Beach architect John Stetson purchased the property and designed renovations and additions to a multi-family structure that was built in the early 1920s at the rear of the property and added to over the years. Stetson's design for the rear structure was in the Mid-Century Modern style and in 1961 he designed the Mid-Century Modern style building that fronts Peruvian Avenue.



249 Peruvian Avenue is a notable example of the Mid-Century Modern style of architecture in Palm Beach. Mid-century Modern architecture designed during the Post-World War II Era was a by-product of post-war optimism and the nation's dedication to building a new future. With the desire to forget the pains of the Great Depression and World War II, architects and designers moved away from the period styles popular before the war and were adapting various modernist movements to create new designs. This new architecture often used modern materials and building techniques and was defined by clean lines, simple shapes, and refined simplicity. It was a further development of Frank Lloyd Wright's principles of organic architecture combined with many elements reflected in the International and Bauhaus movements. Mid-Century Modern architecture

generally features geometric forms, flat or low-pitched roofs, facades surfaced with smooth stucco, large amounts of glass, concrete eyebrows or cantilevers running the length of the building, decorative grilles or ornamental masonry elements commonly referred to as a concrete screen or breeze block, angular details, and minimal ornamentation.

249 Peruvian Avenue features a two-story structure on the southern portion of the property, fronting onto Peruvian Avenue, and a two and three-story building on the northern portion of the property. A parking area is located between the two structures and under a portion of the front building. Both structures have a rectangular form, are surfaced with smooth stucco, and feature flat roofs.



The southern building, which is located along Peruvian Avenue, was designed by John Stetson in 1961.<sup>1</sup> The west side of the building is open on the first floor and provides a driveway and parking under the structure's second floor. The entrance to the building is centrally located and leads to an internal exterior staircase which features precast terrazzo and provides access to the second floor. The building features many character defining features of the Mid-Century Modern style. In addition to the smooth stucco exterior and flat roof, the geometric forms, large amount of glass with its many single-light windows, and prominent cantilevered covered concrete balcony that runs the full length of the building are distinctive elements of the Mid-Century Modern style.

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<sup>1</sup> Building Permit #39261, July 3, 1961, on file with Town of Palm Beach building permit records.



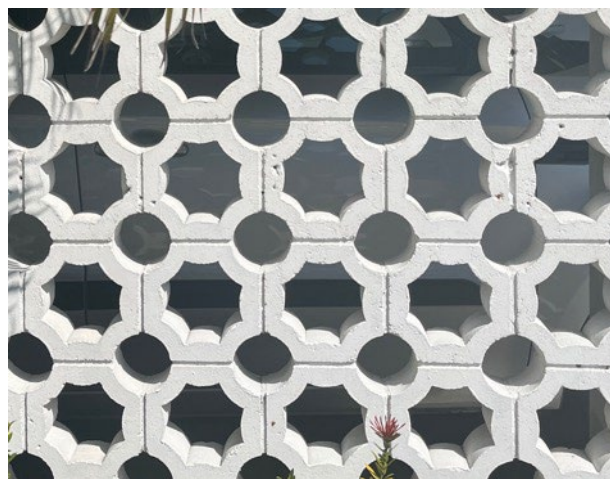
The focal point of the building and most it's most prominent character defining feature of the Mid-Century Modern style is the screen blocks used for the cantilevered covered balcony's railing and the walls that define the building's entrance. Screen block, also referred to as breeze block, is a cast concrete block with a geometric or organic pattern that creates an architectural decorative screen wall. While screen blocks date back to the 1930's, it was during the Mid-Century Modern era of the 1950's and 1960's that they became fashionable. Screen blocks were used in both commercial and residential architecture and were especially popular in warm climates as the blocks provided shade and allowed breezes to flow through while providing privacy.



Screen Block Balcony Railing



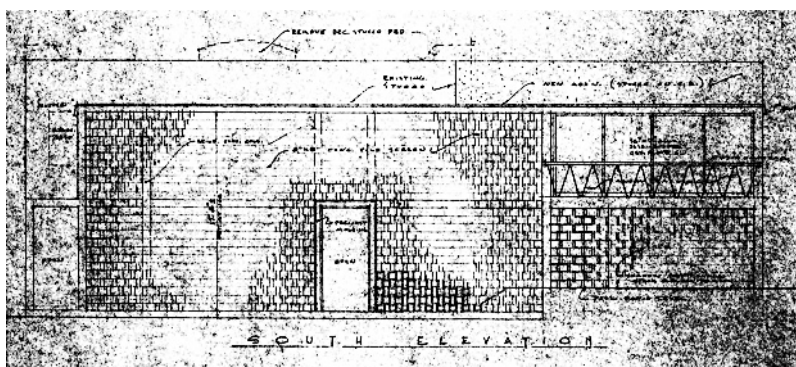
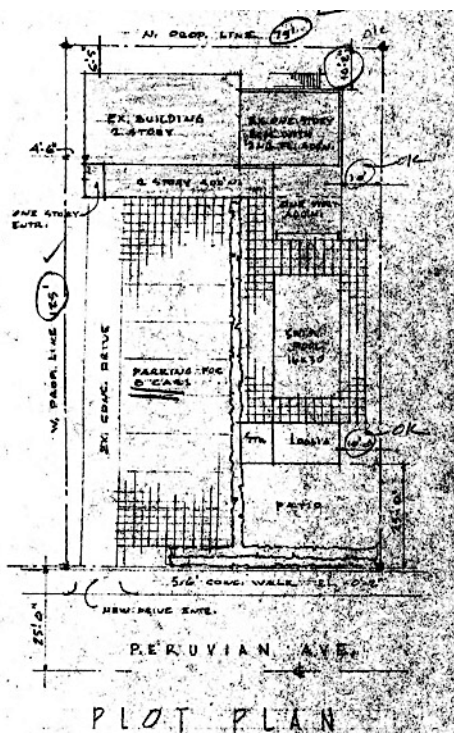
Entrance to Front Building



Screen Block Detail



The rear of the property is occupied by a two and three-story structure that was originally constructed in 1924 as a two-story garage and living quarters.<sup>2</sup> The building was enlarged and renovated between 1924 and 1955 to house four residential units.<sup>3</sup> In 1958, John Stetson purchased the property and designed alterations and additions to the one and two-story, multi-unit, residential building to create an office for his architectural firm on the first floor and a residence for he and his wife, Josephine DeFina, on the second floor.<sup>4</sup> Stetson's design for the renovation was in the Mid-Century Modern style. The renovations included constructing a two-story screen block wall to the south of the two-story portion of the building creating a courtyard with an entrance and staircase and additions to the first and second floors of the eastern end of the building. A swimming pool and patio were also constructed to the south of the building.



Drawings of Rear Building Renovations  
John Stetson, 1958

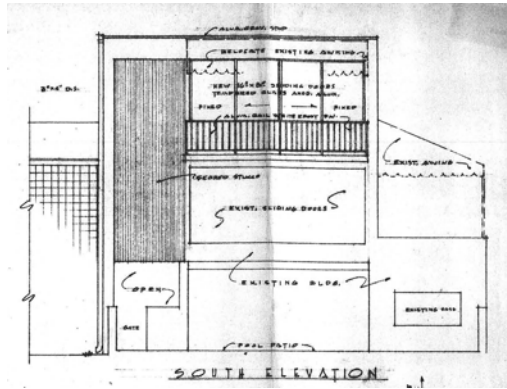
John Stetson designed later additions to the rear building including a second-floor addition on the east end of the building in 1961 for a Florida room, a one-story

<sup>2</sup> Building Permit #35724, November 19, 1924, on file with Town of Palm Beach building permit records.

<sup>3</sup> Building Permits #11928, August 6, 1928; #35653, dated October 8, 1953; #37455, dated September 1, 1955. All on file with Town of Palm Beach building permit records.

<sup>4</sup> Building Permit #40658, August 8, 1958, on file with Town of Palm Beach building permit records.

addition to the east façade of the building in 1966 for additional drafting space, and the construction of a third-floor addition at the eastern end of the building in 1973 for a master bedroom.<sup>5</sup> These additions and renovations were designed to be in keeping with the Mid-Century Modern style of the buildings.



Third Floor Addition on Rear Building  
Stetson, 1973



South Façade of Rear Building

In 1982 the swimming pool was removed and in 1983 the property was renovated and converted into an office condominium with eight units, four in each building. Additional exterior alterations over the years include window and door changes to both buildings, the addition of balcony railings on the roof of the two-story portion of the rear building, changes to the railings on the three-story portion of the rear building, and the installation of awnings.

#### IV. Historical Information

249 Peruvian Avenue is located in the commercial and governmental center of Town, in Captain E.N. Dimick and Harvey Geer's early Palm Beach subdivision, Royal Park. The Royal Park subdivision was originally 160 acres of land that contained jungle, sand and muck. The area included land north of Royal Palm Way to south of Worth Avenue, from the Atlantic Ocean to Lake Worth and was developed to include both residential and commercial uses.

Following World War II, Florida had explosive economic and demographic growth as America began to recover and reconvert to a peacetime economy. Thousands of people came to Florida during the War and decided to live and visit afterwards.

<sup>5</sup> Building Permits #58461, October 2, 1961; #12666, March 23, 1966; #42073, May 10, 1973. All on file with Town of Palm Beach building permit records.

While the nation's overall population grew 15% after the war, Florida's population rose an astonishing 46%.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, the lifting of wartime restrictions and an increasing supply of materials accelerated Florida's Post-War economy with new construction.<sup>7</sup> Despite high costs of building supplies, Palm Beach building permits in 1946 outrivaled those of 1925, previously the town's greatest construction period.<sup>8</sup> It was the start of the second big building boom in Palm Beach.

The first permit on file for the property at 249 Peruvian Avenue was issued in 1924 to W.E. Moorehead Co. Inc. for the property owner Clara Autenrieth for the construction of a two-story garage and living quarters.<sup>9</sup> In 1928, a one-story kitchen and porch addition was constructed on the east side of the building. After WWII, during a period of significant growth in town and a growing demand for residential units, the building was renovated to accommodate additional residences with the garage being converted to an apartment in 1953 and the upstairs unit being converted to two units in 1955.

As development in Palm Beach increased during the post-World War II period, the architectural styles of structures were also changing, with a shift away from the period styles of the 1920s and 1930s to new modern styles. During the post-WWII period, modern architectural styles were popular throughout the United States, and Palm Beach was no exception.

In 1958, prominent Palm Beach architect John Stetson, known for his Modern architectural designs, purchased the property and renovated it to house his architectural office on the first floor and a residence for he and his wife, Josephine DeFina, on the second floor. In 1961, he designed a two-story structure at the front of the property for additional offices. Stetson's designs for both the renovated building and the new building at the front of the property were in the Mid-Century Modern architectural style. The structures at 249 Peruvian Avenue are significant as a very good example of the modern architectural movement during the post-World War II era in Palm Beach and as a notable work of architect John Stetson.

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<sup>6</sup> The 1940 pre-war population of Palm Beach County, nearly 80,000, would grow to almost 115,000 by 1950 and escalate quickly from there.

<sup>7</sup> Augustus Mayhew. Palm Beach: A Greater Grandeur.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. From 1945 to 1955, the annual totals for building permits increased from \$1 million to \$6 million.

<sup>9</sup> The structure was constructed at the rear of the property. No information was found showing any other structures on the property at the time of the construction of this structure.

John Stetson's architectural firm, with his individualist approach and desire to mentor young architects, became a source of much of Palm Beach's modern architecture. In 1963, John Stetson was awarded the highest architectural award when he was named a Fellow of the American Institute of Architects. This was only the second fellowship granted to a Palm Beach architect with the first being awarded to Marion Sims Wyeth in 1954.<sup>10</sup>

In a March 6, 2011, article by Augustus Mayhew in the *Palm Beach Daily News* titled "Unforgettable Palm Beach: Modernist buildings among town's most endangered cultural resources" he speaks of the modern movement during the post-World War II period and the loss of many of these structures since the 1980s.

*"In Palm Beach, being modern is a thing of the past. However as much of Palm Beach's architectural tradition remains best known for its Spanish adaptations, Italian variations and Caribbean inspirations, progressive designers, as notable and diverse as Edward Durell Stone, Howard Chilton, John Volk, Eugene Lawrence and John Stetson, among them, once crafted sleek Modernist buildings throughout Palm Beach...For more than three decades, Modernism prevailed as Palm Beach's post-World War II paradigm of style...Considering the town's more welcome appreciation for contextual new construction and spec builder's passion for the curb appeal of colossal French-styled chateaus and high-volume Palladian-modeled villas, several hundred of the town's residential mid-century houses have been demolished, leaving its Modernist architectural tradition fragmented, and thus more predominantly evident among its commercial and condominium buildings... Palm Beach's Modernist buildings are among the town's most endangered and devalued cultural resources. They are a reminder of when Palm Beach was an international center for architecture, fashion and design with some of the nation's most refined elegant Modernist-designed houses and buildings."*

In 1983, Stetson converted the property's ownership to an eight-unit office condominium with four units in each building. He continued to have his office in the building until 1985 when, after 49 years in the architectural profession, Stetson retired and closed the office. The buildings are currently occupied by primarily medical offices and another architectural office, that of Patrick Segraves, SKA Architect+Planner.

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<sup>10</sup> "Architect Achieves Fellowship" *Palm Beach Post*, March 24, 1964.



## **V. Architects Biography**

### **John F. Stetson**

John F. Stetson, a Florida native, was one of Palm Beach's most prominent Modern architects. Born in St. Lucie County on June 26, 1915, he graduated from Ft. Pierce High School and the University of Florida School of Architecture and Allied Arts. Stetson came to Palm Beach in 1936 when he joined the architectural firm of Lester Geisler, who had been Addison Mizner's "right hand man". Following two years with Geisler, Stetson began working with another prominent Palm Beach architect Howard Major. At the start of the Second World War, John Stetson joined the U.S. Army Corp of Engineers and was responsible for converting many hotels and condominiums in Miami into barracks and facilities for soldiers. He was later assigned to Trinidad and South America for the last year and a half of the war.

Following the war, in July 1947, Stetson passed the Florida State Board of Architecture exam and opened an office in Palm Beach. John Stetson's architectural firm, with his individualist approach and desire to mentor young architects, became a source of much of Palm Beach's modern architecture. Licensed in New York, Pennsylvania, and Ohio in addition to Florida, Stetson was a member of the American Institute of Architects and in 1955 served as president of the Palm Beach chapter. In 1963, John Stetson was awarded the highest architectural award when he was named a Fellow of the American Institute of Architects. This was only the second fellowship granted to a Palm Beach architect with the first being awarded to Marion Sims Wyeth in 1954.<sup>11</sup>

John Stetson was very civically and socially active in Palm Beach and the State of Florida. He served under three governors as an official of the Governor's Hurricane Advisory Committee and as a panelist for the American Arbitration Committee. In Palm Beach, Stetson was a close follower of Town business and policies. He was active in social and civic organizations such as the Islanders Club, Fraternal Order of Police Association, Kiwanis Club of Palm Beach, Old Guard Society, the Sailfish Club, The Beach Club, Sons of the American Revolution, and the Royal Poinciana Chapel.

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<sup>11</sup> "Architect Achieves Fellowship" *Palm Beach Post*, March 24, 1964.

John Stetson retired after 49 years in the architectural profession and closed his office in 1985. He designed hundreds of private residences and commercial buildings in Palm Beach, as well as in the surrounding area, including the master plan for Old Port Cove in North Palm Beach, Temple Israel in West Palm Beach, the Federal Office Building in West Palm Beach, the Palm Beach Country Club, the Armour Building, the Dorset House, the original buildings of Florida Atlantic University, and Palm Beach Fairground buildings. He was also instrumental in the relocation of the Royal Poinciana Chapel to its current location. In addition to his commissions in Palm Beach County, Stetson also designed residences in Pennsylvania, Illinois, Montana, and Spain and was a patentee for plumbing connections for rotating buildings.

On November 22, 1986, John Stetson passed away. Following his death, architect Eugene Lawrence said “John was a strong individualist. Through the years, he made a strong contribution to his profession. He always was very involved and never minced words – he spoke his mind. John was one of the architects of an era in Palm Beach.”<sup>12</sup> The Palm Beach chapter of the American Institute of Architects created the John Stetson Award to recognize outstanding service to the chapter with the first award being presented in 1989.

## **VI. Statement of Significance**

249 Peruvian Avenue is significant as a very good example of the Mid-Century Modern style of architecture and reflects the Town’s history and architecture during the post-WWII Era. Designed and owned by prominent Modern architect John Stetson, the property was Stetson’s residence for many years and his architectural office for almost three decades.

## **VII. Criteria For Designation**

Section 54-161 of the Town of Palm Beach Landmarks Preservation Ordinance outlines the criteria for designation of a landmark or landmark site and suggests that at least one criterion must be met to justify the designation. Listed below are the criteria which relate to this property and justification for designation:

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<sup>12</sup> Romoser, Chris “Architect John Stetson Dies”. *Palm Beach Daily News*, November 24, 1986.

**(1) “Exemplifies or reflects the broad cultural, political, economic or social history of the nation, state, county or town.”**

The property at 249 Peruvian Avenue reflects the broad cultural, economic and social history of Palm Beach. Development in the Town increased significantly following the war and continued through the 1950's and 1960's. During this time, new construction was rampant and much of the architecture being constructed on the island was changing to modern architectural styles. 249 Peruvian Avenue, designed by John Stetson who was known for his modern architectural designs, is a very good example of the modern architectural trend that was popular during the post-World War II period in the town. The property at 249 Peruvian Avenue is also significant as Stetson's architectural office for twenty-seven years and residence.

**(3) “Embodies distinguishing characteristics of an architectural type or is a specimen inherently valuable for the study of a period, style, method of construction or use of indigenous materials or craftsmanship.”**

249 Peruvian Avenue is a notable example of Mid-Century Modern commercial architecture as designed by prominent Palm Beach architect John Stetson. The buildings embody distinguishing characteristics of the Mid-Century Modern style. Mid-century Modern architecture was a by-product of the post-World War II optimism and the nation's dedication to building a new future. Architects and designers were breaking away from the past and designing buildings defined by clean lines, simple shapes, and minimal ornamentation. Mid-Century Modern features of the buildings include their geometric forms, flat roofs, smooth stucco facades, large amounts of glazing, projecting concrete covered balcony, and the use of screen blocks as walls and for the balcony railing.

**(4) “Is representative of the notable work of a master builder, designer or architect whose individual ability has been recognized or has influenced his age.”**

249 Peruvian Avenue is a very good representation of the notable work of architect John Stetson. Stetson, who was a prominent Palm Beach architect and resident for 50 years, began his Palm Beach architectural career in 1936. Over the course of his career Stetson designed several hundred commercial and residential buildings most of which were in modern architectural styles.

## **VIII. Selected Bibliography**

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