

Kaila: Welcome to Valley 101, a podcast from The Arizona Republic and azcentral.com where we answer the questions you ask about metro Phoenix. I'm your host, Kaila White.

Kaila: Today, we've got a Valley 101 first. Most of our questions are objective. There's a factual answer, perhaps tied to a specific historical event or something scientific. But we're tackling something subjective today.

Kaila: Tackling this question is podcast editor Katie O'Connell. Katie, take it away.

Katie: What buildings would you say are the most iconic in the Phoenix skyline? To answer this question, we have to break it down, part by part. First, what does it mean for a building to be iconic?

Alison: Are you talking about silhouette? Are you talking about history? Are you talking about aesthetics?

Katie: That's Alison King.

Alison: I'm the founder of Modern Phoenix and also assistant professor of design at Grand Canyon University.

Katie: Alison founded Modern Phoenix in 2003. It's a group that catalogs and studies examples of midcentury modern design in Phoenix. They're the hosts of Modern Phoenix, an annual 10-day celebration of architecture that happens every March. Alison said that if you approach this question of iconic buildings from an aesthetic standpoint, there's a clear frontrunner.

Alison: And for me, I think one of the most iconic aesthetic statements that we have here in Phoenix is the Phoenix Financial Center and the Rotundas that are at Central and Osborne.

Katie: Odds are you've seen these buildings if you've taken the light rail north of downtown. There's a tower ...

Alison: ... which started as a mid rise and then got a second edition several years later.

Katie: And it looks like a punch card. There are a ton of thin, vertical windows running up and down the sides of the beige building. The complex also includes two shorter rotundas.

Alison: The rotunda themselves, which are so beautifully positioned there at Central and Osborne with their swooping, concrete, inverted u shaped support structures there, and they're thin shell concrete roofs.

Katie: In terms of unique, midcentury design, Alison said

Alison: And so there's so much to look at in such density of good design that for me, that building tops them all.

Katie: Butttttt, there's just one problem with that answer.

Katie: The question asked for the most iconic buildings in the Phoenix *skyline*. While the tower portion of that complex *could* qualify, the rotundas aren't tall enough to be part of the skyline. So, scratch that answer. (scratching noise) We're going back to the drawing board.

Katie: Let's try answering this question about iconic buildings in our skyline from a different perspective.

Alison: Well, for some people, it boils down to the silhouette.

Alison: You know that I'm a graphic designer. We design icons and iconic in a kind of a textbook definition means a simplified, recognizable version, for example, the Eiffel Tower is iconic. OK. Or the Empire State Building or other great buildings in America.

Katie: There's just one hitch.

Alison: So if you're looking for an iconic silhouette in Phoenix, you might be hard pressed to find one because there aren't many that really stand out for this kind of graphic silhouette.

Katie: In fact, that was an answer I got from an Arizona State University professor when I asked for an interview. To read from her email directly ... "Honestly, if we are talking about the reality of 'the Phoenix Skyline', I would have to say none. Most, if not all, of the buildings that we see when driving to phoenix on the skyline are buildings that are not significant for the history and project of architecture."

Katie: Ouch. (pause) Kind of heard crickets when I read that one. (cricket noises) But that opinion wasn't shared by everyone.

Alison: But time and time again, when you ask people about iconic silhouettes, they often bring up the westward ho downtown.

Katie: Located on the northwest corner of Central Avenue and Fillmore Street, the Hotel Westward Ho is a 16-story reinforced concrete building, finished with stucco. The interior was decorated with Spanish Colonial Revival details, drawing on influences from Mexico and Italy.

Michelle: And it's it's really it's steps back, you know, as it goes up higher. And it has a lot of interesting design to it, especially at the main entrances to the hotel. It certainly draws your attention. It's unique, I think, to the buildings that you see downtown.

Michelle: My name is Michelle Dodds. I'm the historic preservation officer for the city of Phoenix.

Katie: Michelle said that the Hotel Westward Ho has stood out ever since it was constructed. The hotel opened on December 15, 1928, and its design was applauded from the beginning.

Katie: One thousand people reportedly attended its opening. A headline in The Arizona Republican rang out, "Society Glitters At Westward Ho Opening." "In the history of brilliant social events in Phoenix, the opening yesterday evening of the Westward Ho magnificent new hostelry recently completed on Central Avenue and Fillmore will be entered as a glamorously splendid chapter Typical, even to the last minute detail, of modern sophistication and culture, the Westward Ho reflects the romance of the old west and its magnificence and beauty ..."

Michelle: This one, you know, when it was originally built, you know, it was kind of in the business district just a little bit outside downtown. And so I think it probably stood out a little more, just (the) other taller buildings that were more concentrated downtown.

Katie: In fact, it was so tall at the time it was built, it held a record.

Michelle: When it was built, it was the tallest building in Phoenix and it was I think it was the second tallest west of the Mississippi.

Katie: It was indeed. The Arizona State Historic Property Inventory confirms that. Plus, it was ahead of the curve at the time. The building was cooled by air refrigeration, a precursor to air conditioning, rather than the more common evaporative cooling systems.

Katie: The Hotel Valley Ho would change over time. It went through expansions in 1945 and 1948. And in 1949, a 240-foot tower and 40-foot antenna were added to the top of the building so that KPHO -- Phoenix's first TV station -- could begin broadcasting. That project cost \$25,000. Michelle said that the tower ...

Michelle: ... kind of set it apart forever.

Katie: The broadcast antenna was relocated to South Mountain in 1960. But the tower remained on top of the hotel.

Michelle: And you know, I'm sure some people think, oh why don't you remove the tower, you know why. But it's really part of its history.

Katie: About that history ... during its heyday, the Hotel Westward Ho hosted many notable people during its time. Gangsters like Al Capone and Bugsy Siegel were rumored to have stayed there. Many politicians have passed through its doors.

News report - It's kind of an iconic building in the Valley. You know, JFK actually stayed here, Ronald Reagan spoke here, so you've got a lot of rich history.

Katie: It's featured in the 1972 movie "Pocket Money" starring Paul Newman. And the parade scenes from the 1956 movie "Bus Stop" starring Marilyn Monroe were filmed in front of it. And most recently, it was featured in the 1998 Gus Van Zant remake of "Psycho"

Katie: The hotel closed in 1980. The building was converted into subsidized housing for the elderly and people who have limited mobility. Because of that, it's not open to the public. But you can pass by it and admire the architecture any time you're downtown.

Katie: Of course there are other answers for the most iconic building in Phoenix's skyline.

Michelle: Well, I can't but help think of Valley Center, which today is the Chase Tower that you see there at Central and Monroe that I think that remains the tallest building in the city.

Katie: But the thing about the Westward Ho is that it combines everything Alison mentioned at the top of the episode. It's got history, a standout aesthetic and a silhouette that's at least somewhat recognizable.

Kaila: So, that's your vote for the most iconic building in Phoenix's skyline too?

Katie: Iconic building? Yes. But I have to be honest, when I think of Phoenix's skyline, I don't think of buildings. I thought of our mountains, Camelback Mountain specifically. I talked to Alison about that. She said my theory that the mountains are actually the most iconic part of our skyline has been circulated throughout the architecture community for years.

Alison: They are the way by which we navigate our environment and Camelback Mountains, an excellent example of a natural landmark, which I don't think should really be upstaged by any other architecture around it, near it or even downtown. It doesn't really matter.

Kaila: I also would think Camelback Mountain, in part because it takes my breath away everytime I see it. But if I'm really thinking about what's iconic to me, like what do I see and I know that I'm home, it's the towers on South Mountain. It's probably because I grew up in Ahwatukee and that's how I knew on long drives or on flights that I was close to home, but still, I point them out and notice them all the time.

Kaila: Well Valley 101 listeners, we want to know what *you* think is the most iconic building in Phoenix's skyline. Share your pick with us on Twitter @Valley101pod. And send the prettiest photo you can!

Kaila: Thanks to Vicki Novak for submitting this question. And thanks to our listeners who have subscribed and rated our show. If you haven't had a chance to do that yet, please do. Leaving a simple comment or star rating can really help our show grow.

Kaila: That's all for this week. I'm Kaila White, signing off until next week.