

## VALLEY VOICE

# The Spa Hotel is worth preserving

I congratulate The Desert Sun newspaper on its coverage of the controversy surrounding the proposed demolition of the Spa Hotel. I think one of the most telling pieces of imagery in this discussion has been a reprint of a Desert Sun headline from Jan. 21, 1960, that reads "World's Most Beautiful Spa Opens Today." I hope this original splendor is only temporarily forgotten and that with some imagination and investment the Spa Hotel could be beautiful again.

I've observed that demolitions of this sort are rationalized in many ways. "The building is ugly," "the building is inefficient," "the building no longer serves its purpose," and so on. Curiously, the only reason offered so far for this demolition has reportedly been that the hotel "is a very old building." But some architectural experts tell me there is no reason that the Spa Hotel, fully renovated, can't stand for another 50 years — and another 50 years after that.

Architectural scholars say that "architecture is a visual art" and that "buildings speak for themselves." A scholar might look at a building like the Spa Hotel and say that it "speaks" of the glamour of living in Southern California, or "speaks" of the promise of modern architecture. Although I am not a scholar, the Spa Hotel does speak to me. When I



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see the building I can once again hear architect Bill Cody's booming voice and his infectious laugh.

My memories of my family, some still here, some gone, are tied up in buildings like the Spa Hotel. So when a special building like the Spa Hotel is proposed for demolition it strikes a very deep emotional chord with me. I know I am not alone in this feeling.

Those of us who were here dating back to the late 1940s can recall Palm Springs having only one paved road, Palm Canyon Drive. It was not the four-lane Highway 111 of today. The architecture in the valley then was rustic with a Spanish influence. The El Mirador, the original Plaza and many of the houses resembled small haciendas. As early as the mid-'40s, architects began to stretch the boundaries by merging the magical landscape of Palm Springs with the structures themselves.

My father hired one of those visionaries, E. Stewart Wil-



The Desert Sun reported the opening of the Palm Springs Spa Hotel on Jan. 21, 1960. COURTESY OF AGUA CALIENTE CULTURAL MUSEUM

liams, to design his first home in Palm Springs. We spent many wonderful times there with him. The house still stands today, registered as a Class 1 Historic Site and is a major draw for architecture and music buffs alike.

As time moved on toward the middle of the century, the desert came into its own as more people were drawn here for the lifestyle, the weather and by then the architecture. By the mid-'50s, my father had decided to move down valley to build his second home in Rancho Mirage. He hired none other than Bill Cody to design his home where he lived for the next 40-plus years. My children spent much of their

childhood in that home, as we spent every holiday season there with my dad. The Compound, as it was called, is also still there and is registered as an historic site with the city of Rancho Mirage.

Architects such as Cody, Williams, Frey, Wexler and many others put their indelible stamp on our neighborhoods. As our city grew, so did our reputation for beautiful mid-century iconic buildings and homes. The preservation and sometimes the rehabilitation of those buildings and neighborhoods have transformed Palm Springs into a global destination in recent years. This is a wonderful blessing for our city and for us. My

hope is that we can continue to enjoy and celebrate these places forever.

Some might dismiss my plea for the preservation of the Spa Hotel as nothing more than sentimental nostalgia. Say that I'm still afraid of losing an old friend. Or that I, and others, want to stand in the way of some inevitable march of progress. But I must confess it's difficult for me to see the progress. Is it progress to be left with a few postcards and photos of a once-beautiful building? Maybe the Spa Hotel deserves better from us.

The tribe's public relations people use words like "preserve," "rejuvenate" and "protect," but in the end the loudest word most of us hear is "demolition." I've witnessed the tribe be a good neighbor and a generous contributor to our community for decades. I ask that the tribal leaders re-evaluate this demolition plan and listen to the sincere and concerned voices that have been raised. I know that there are many ways that more revenue could be extracted from this valuable parcel of our downtown. But to many of us the land is already as valuable as it can be. The Spa Hotel is resting on it.

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