

Listen to the critics of City Hall redesign

Palm Springs council should reconsider plan that would block view of an architectural gem

As Palm Springs and throngs of visitors celebrate all things modern — that is, things that were modern in the 1950s and '60s — controversy continues to roil around the parking lot at City Hall.

Palm Springs City Hall is not just any city hall. It was designed by Albert Frey, Swiss-born apprentice of the legendary architect Le Corbusier.

In the early 1990s, the destruction of Frey's Alpha Beta shopping center — now a ubiquitous Ralphs on Sunrise Way — was the impetus for the formation of the Palm Springs Modern Committee, which hopes to host 20,000 visitors to its 10-day Modernism Week.

The demolition also inspired the adoption of the city's historic preservation ordinance.

According to a pamphlet produced in 2006 by the Palm Springs Preservation Foundation, City Hall was designed "cooperatively and



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Palm Springs City Hall, designed by architect Albert Frey in the 1950s, features the motto, "The people are the city."

serially" from 1952-57 by the firms Clark, Frey and Chambers and Williams, Williams and Williams.

"Inspired by a pivotal 1955 trip around the world in which his understanding of form and function was renewed, Frey returned to complete the final scheme for his most important design," the pamphlet says.

In other words, City Hall is a jewel and, if you mess with its setting, go cautiously.

For months, the city's Architectural Advisory Committee has debated a proposed redesign of the parking areas and landscaping that surround City Hall. The design is part of a renovation of Tahquitz Canyon

Way's medians, replacing turf with desert landscaping. The plan includes a demonstration garden on drought-tolerant planting.

The asphalt in front of City Hall is cracked and could become a liability. It needs to be replaced, one way or the other. Originally a vague item on the consent calendar — routine business a City Council often approves without debate — it has become a political bouncing ball.

Only in Palm Springs.

Three times, the committee sent the project back to the drawing board. Finally, Craig Ewing, the city's director of planning services, opted to approve the design anyway.

This is an odd case in that the City Council is the applicant and, of course, the council has the power to override any committee decision.

But local preservationists aren't going away quietly. With Modernism Week in full fury, members of the Preservation Foundation and the Modern Committee have distributed fliers opposing the design because it would have cars parked in front of City Hall. They have appealed Ewing's decision.

The Historic Site Preservation Board designated City Hall a Class One historic site in 1996. The board voted last week to investigate whether the entire City Hall site, not just the building, should fall under the historic designation — meaning the changes would need the board's blessing. One member of the advisory committee, architect Patrick McGrew, contends that it already does.

The preservation board also voted for a stay of demolition that could last six months.

The Planning Commission will hear the appeal of Ewing's decision in March, said City Manager David Ready. Its decision could be appealed to the City Council.

Laborious as it may be, the city must let all the voices be heard and consider the changes carefully.

City Hall is the first thing visitors see when they leave the Palm Springs International Airport. Maintaining the clear view of our architectural heritage is important. But get it done quickly, before somebody trips on that crusty asphalt.