



# Farewell to a friend

## Many lament looming Spa Resort hotel loss

By Skip Descant

The Desert Sun

**PALM SPRINGS** — Mary Ann Palmer says the Spa Resort hotel played a part in saving her life.

About three years ago when Palmer, 73, moved to Palm Springs she was recovering from a heart attack and "couldn't walk up a short flight of stairs."

It was then she joined a daily water aerobics class at the Spa Resort. The hour-long class meets every morning in the hotel pool.

"I got into this class after I had a heart attack. And it was the kind of exercise that I like to do. And it saved my life," she recalled this week. "I mean, I really have to say that."

Palmer is like many members of the community lamenting the coming closure of the Spa Resort. For one, it means her class will need a new location after July 8, the final day of operations at the legendary hotel.

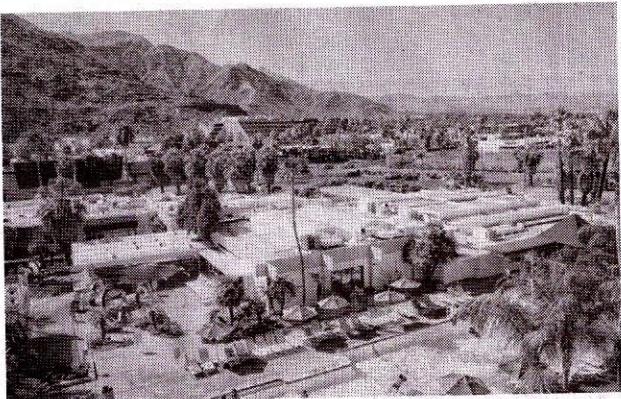
Several weeks ago the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians announced its plans to shutter the 229-room hotel and spa. In the next 18 months the tribe will carefully demolish the building, so as to not damage the natural springs that sited the hotel in downtown Palm Springs at the corner of Indian Canyon Drive and Tahquitz Canyon Way.

The closing and demolition reaches far beyond the loss of hotel rooms and economic impact related to the Spa Resort hotel, preservationists and others in the community say. The loss is also a cultural one.

"It is such a part of the community,"



The mineral pool at the Spa Resort hotel in Palm Springs. The hotel will close for good on July 8 and will be demolished over the next 18 months. RICHARD LUI/THE DESERT SUN



This view of the hotel pool, mountains and downtown Palm Springs is from a fifth floor room at the Spa Resort hotel in August 2011. CRYSTAL CHATHAM/THE DESERT SUN

## Spa

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said Gary Johns, a member of the Palm Springs Preservation Foundation and who also serves on the Palm Springs Historic Site Preservation Board. "This is a part of people's lives there for a long time.

"This is, I think, it's such a part of our history," he added.

The Agua Caliente opened the hotel in 1963. (The Palm Springs Spa opened in 1960.) Designed by William Cody, the hotel is regarded as a classic example of desert modern architecture. The design's most identifiable form is likely the entrance colonnade, noteworthy for its use of precast concrete forms. And the hotel itself was the first concrete and steel hotel building constructed in the Coachella Valley, according to Palm Springs Preservation Foundation documents.

PSPF plans to meet with tribe officials on July 8 — the final day of operations at the hotel — to discuss the hotel's future. The preservation foundation has long held the position that the building ought to be preserved and restored.

"Some portions of the Spa Hotel's architecture have become so iconic that restoration should be considered over renovation," the Palm Springs Preservation Foundation wrote in a 2008 letter to then Agua Caliente Chairman Richard M. Milanovich.

"The Palm Springs Preservation Foundation

will mount a campaign," said Johns of efforts underway to hopefully save all or even a portion of the hotel. "We're definitely going to do a public awareness, an outreach.

"We're not going to really do anything though until July 8th when we have our meeting with Tom Davis (chief planning and development officer for the tribe), so that we can talk with him, get feedback from him, and then we'll be better informed as to how to move our advocacy forward."

Tribal and hotel officials did not make themselves available for comment for this article.

The future for the site has been an item of open speculation. Agua Caliente officials have said no plan is in place.

However, about seven years ago the Agua Caliente unveiled plans for a new large, 10-story hotel complex. The recession hit soon after, and all indications were the plans were shelved.

"So back in '07 the tribe came out with the Spa Resort master plan project, which showed the demolition of the hotel and the spa and the colonnade, and all of that," recalls Johns. "So it's no big surprise. And so when the tribe consistently today says, 'we don't have a plan, we don't have a plan.' Um, yeah, you do."

At a recent meeting of the Greater Palm Springs Convention and Visitors Bureau, Palm Springs Mayor Steve Pougnet reflected that the tribe "always has options A, B and C ready. My belief is that they will move more to the



**The colonnade at the Spa Resort Hotel was designed in 1958 by Donald Wexler and Richard Harrison. FILE PHOTO**

north to better connect to the (Spa Resort) Casino.”

Whatever the outcome, Palmer’s aerobics class, which includes about 40 members, is coming to a close, and even if another location is found, the Spa Resort hotel experience was unique.

“It’s a major loss,” said John Macon, another member of the aerobics class, speaking this week from his part-time home in San Diego.

“It wasn’t just the wa-

ter aerobics itself, but the hot springs pools — there are several of those,” Macon added, recounting the Spa’s old-world features like mineral baths and soaking tubs.

“It was a beautiful way to spend a morning,” said Macon.

“Everybody’s been gracious. The staff is wonderful,” said Palmer. “It’s been a wonderful experience. So we’re losing something that’s more than an exercise class.”