

Desert Sun | October 2, 2013

VALLEY VOICE

Don't let the old  
Town & Country  
be a victim of fire

The recent fire at the historic Community Church of Palm Springs has reignited discussion regarding the city's vacant building ordinance.

During the City Council meeting of Sept. 18, Mayor Steve Pougnet requested the city manager to review the ordinance. His comments were quickly echoed by council members Ginny Foat and Paul Lewin. Furthermore, the mayor called on the Preservation Foundation to draft a list of the five most endangered vacant historic buildings. The Palm Springs Preservation Foundation welcomes this chance to be included in the dialogue.

The Community Church is not alone in its destruction. We can point to the Clara Bee on Ramon Road as well as Albert Frey's Premier Apartments, both having succumbed to fires in recent years. Just last year, a fire broke out in the 1930s Carnell Building, destroying its second floor. Far too frequently, these fires were started by people illegally residing in these vacant buildings. This demolition by neglect must end.

While we welcome the chance to name our top five endangered buildings (and will do so), at the top of that list will stand the Town & Country Center. This significant midcentury complex designed by Los Angeles architects A. Quincy Jones and Paul R. Williams has been nominated as a Class One Historic Site. In 1959, an adjacent building by Palm Springs legendary architect Donald Wexler was added to the site. Unfortunately, the complex sits empty in central Palm Springs.

John Wessman, the building's owner, hopes to tear it down as part of the revitalization of downtown. Some in our community view the Town & Country Center as an eyesore and, unfortunately, its condition lends support to that view. But one need only to look at vintage photos of this vibrant, successful and architecturally rich complex to understand its potential if restored to that original beauty. And once such restoration takes place, its commercial viability would be ensured.

Take the Corridor Shops



## Erik Rosenow

on Palm Canyon Drive at the corner of Alejo Road. As recent as 2003, this was a vacant, boarded-up set of buildings. It took the vision of an investor, bringing in a coffee shop and a few boutiques to create the wildly popular venue for both locals and tourists that we have today. The Town & Country Center has even greater potential, given its location. Yet it faces the same "destruction by neglect" that so many buildings of historic value have suffered.

A. Quincy Jones, who designed the Annenberg Estate at Sunnylands, was featured at a recent exhibition at UCLA's Hammer Museum. The exhibit's catalog documents the Town & Country Center. The center sits in a prominent place in downtown Palm Spring, and is integral to the collection of architecture that has made Palm Springs so famous.

By adaptive reuse, it can be restored and made into something special. Instead, it sits vacant, awaiting a fate potentially similar to the Community Church. Similar great things have occurred in Old Town Orange and Pasadena, creating vibrant urban settings by repurposing existing buildings. This can and needs to occur in Palm Springs.

We at the Preservation Foundation encourage the city to review the ordinance and beef up its enforcement and are happy to be part of the dialogue. We also encourage working with the owners so these buildings do not remain vacant for long. I hope to one day soon dine at a new restaurant at the Town & Country Center. But I fear it will one day be an empty lot after yet another suspicious fire.

*Erik Rosenow is president of the Palm Springs Preservation Foundation. Email him at [erikrosenow@yahoo.com](mailto:erikrosenow@yahoo.com)*