



desertsun.com **STAY INFORMED:** BOOKMARK DESERTSUN.COM FOR E

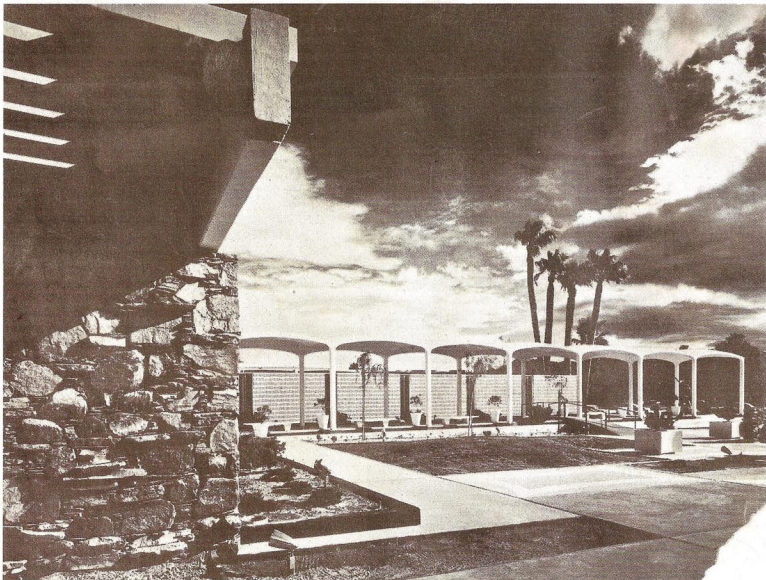
A GANNETT COMPANY

The Desert Sun

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 4, 2014

SERVING THE COACHELLA VALLEY SINCE 1927

SPA RESORT HOTEL REDEVELOPMENT



COURTESY PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The Palm Springs Spa Hotel, circa 1960s, with the concrete colonnade extending from left to right across the photo.

Desert icon taken down

Wrecking crew destroys concrete colonnade, shocking preservationists

By Skip Descant

The Desert Sun

To the dismay and outright outrage of the Palm Springs architecture and preservation communities, the demolition of the historic Spa Resort hotel in downtown Palm Springs started with the removal of one of the city's most notable examples of desert modern design — the concrete colonnade leading up to the hotel's entrance.

"They tore it down first, and not last," exclaimed an enraged Gary Johns, a preservationist, followed by some more colorful comments.

"It's very disheartening," remarked Gary Wexler, son of Donald Wexler, architect of the 229-room Spa Resort, built in the late 1950s and early '60s. "It's just shocking."

Officials with the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla



JAY CALDERON/THE DESERT SUN

Demolition of the spa and fitness center at the Spa Resort hotel begins Wednesday in downtown Palm Springs.

Indians, which owns the Spa Resort, gave every indication that the colonnade was an important part of the structure.

"That's the last thing that will be touched and/or examined. We'll be moving

from east to west, with regard to our evaluation," Tom Davis, chief planning and development officer for the tribe, told The Desert Sun in a July interview.

"I think it was one of my father's most recognizable

designs," Wexler said of the colonnade.

"This portion was the most iconic of the architectural elements of the complex, and we hoped that at the very least, that would have been preserved," said Erik Rosenow, president of the Palm Springs Preservation Foundation. "Evidently, that is not the case, and I have little confidence at this point that anything will be preserved."

On Wednesday morning, however, crews and heavy machinery were in place to raze the structure.

"We are in the planning stages of creating a vision for this key location in downtown Palm Springs," Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians Tribal Chairman Jeff L. Grubbe said, in a statement. "Our next steps include demolition of existing structures as well as tak-

Spa

Continued from A1

ing the necessary steps to protect and preserve the hot mineral spring.”

Tribe officials offered no further comments beyond what was stated in the Wednesday press release.

Demolition is expected to last several months.

The hotel was closed in early June. And because the demolition is taking place on tribal trust land, it is a tribal action, not a fed-

eral or state undertaking, and therefore it is not subject to the National Environmental Policy Act or the California Environmental Quality Act.

“We are working to make a positive, lasting difference in our community and having an aggressive recycling program during demolition sets the path for others to follow,” Grubbe said.

The Palm Springs Modern Committee and the Palm Springs Preservation Foundation were ardent advocates of preserving the hotel structure. They presented the tribe with a plan for

securing tax credits and other historic preservation incentives for the project.

And though Agua Caliente officials offered no promises, preservationists say they were assured that considerations would be made.

“Our communications with them said exactly that: that they would consider the things we were sending,” said Chris Menrad, a founding member of the Palm Springs Modern Committee, standing on the street corner outside the hotel as large machinery clawed away at the historic building.

“Tom Davis (chief planning and development officer for Agua Caliente) encouraged us,” remarked Nickie McLaughlin, executive director of the committee.

Some preservationists say the move on Wednesday — which came with limited advance notice — illustrates that the tribe never had an interest in preserving the iconic structure.

And though the tribe has always maintained plans to redevelop the site are not finalized: “They’re clear. They’re very clear on what they’re doing,” Menrad said.