

**MICHAEL SNYDER** THE DESERT SUN

The courtyard of the Town & Country Center, former home of Zeldaz nightclub in downtown Palm Springs, is shown in this May 2009 photograph.

Las Vegas can give Palm Springs a lesson in historic preservation

As most know, the controversial issue of preserving our historic resources vs. development has been swirling about our city for many years. At the heart of much of this controversy has been the fate of the Town & Country Center (1948) designed by architects Paul R. Williams and A. Quincy Jones. Williams is historically important as the American Institute of Architects' (AIA) first African-American architect (1923) and first African-American AIA Fellow (1957).

Last month, Palm Springs proudly announced that our bureau of tourism won several advertising awards, including a special award for its "Like No Place Else" campaign. I have seen these ads in various magazines and was impressed with the cleverness of comparing Palm Springs with Las Vegas. If you missed the ads, the headline was, "We don't blow up our 50-year-old architecture." The ad goes on to say "there are places that blow up the old just to replace it with something new. That's not the way we do things here" ... and goes on to "highlight our mid-century architectural treasure troves."

I believe this is a brilliant advertising campaign as it plays into that national perception of Palm Springs. On a personal level, I moved to Palm Springs several years ago believing that this vision truly existed and that all was well with regards to our architectural treasures. Unfortunately, I have discovered that the vision is far from reality.

While the surrogates of the owner of the Town & Country Center take great glee in denigrating the building's architectural merit, the Town & Country has been evaluated by numerous qualified professionals, all of whom assert that it is eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places. Despite this solid architectural provenance, this owner



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has once again proposed the demolition of this building to construct what preservationists argue would be the "road to nowhere" in his plans for the nearby Desert Fashion Plaza.

Palm Springs does not destroy buildings? The facts reveal this award-winning advertising campaign is not merely ironic, but a bit hypocritical. While the city and developer are conspiring to demolish the Paul R. Williams-designed building, historic preservation in Las Vegas has taken an interesting twist. Just a few years ago Las Vegas supported a preservation campaign to save an important part of the La Concha Motel, designed by, none other than Paul R. Williams! Successful preservation efforts in Las Vegas allowed this building to be repurposed as the city's new neon museum. This seems to me as visionary for a city known for "blowing up" buildings left and right.

I recognize that our leaders need to make tough decisions and complicated calculations and must frequently compromise when dealing with large-scale development. I also expect our city's leadership to do their best to try and live up to the high national expectations that our recent award-winning tourist campaign so ably and cleverly tapped into.

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