

Spa hotel razing shocks many

Preservationists: Tribe shows dialogue on plan over

By Skip Descant

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The sudden tear-down of the historic Spa Resort hotel complex in Palm Springs on Wednesday took city leaders and preservationists off guard, effectively quashing hopes that their ongoing dialogue with the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians about the tribe's plans

for the historic structure would help save at least some of the building's distinctive architectural features.

The tribe several months ago announced plans to close the aging structure and replace it with a new development on the site. The tribe has yet to disclose its plans.

Tribal officials did say the demolition came after a careful review of the site

and structure, and numerous works of art, signs, graphics, mosaics, light fixtures, door handles, baskets and other pieces of memorabilia were removed and placed in storage for safe-keeping, Kate Anderson, director of public relations for the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians said in an email Thursday.

"During the entire assessment process, we spent a considerable amount of time listening and talking with commu-

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nity members and groups about the site," she said.

City and preservation leaders say they had conversations with tribal leaders to discuss options that ranged from complete renovation, a move proposed by the Palm Springs Modern Committee and other preservation groups, to at least a partial preservation of some of the hotel's key features like the poured-concrete arched colonnade leading up to the front door.

In a joint meeting of the Palm Springs City Council and the Agua Caliente tribal council several weeks ago, Paul Lewin, a Palm Springs City Councilman, asked Agua Caliente Chairman Jeff Grubbe to spare the colonnade, and said he left with reasonable assurances that this would happen.

"I do share your disappointment," Lewin told residents in the council chambers who showed up at Wednesday's meeting to express dismay at the tribe's actions. The disappointed residents said they feel that the fact that the colonnade itself was the first to go was a symbolic gesture meant to end the preservation discussion.

Tribal leaders say the removal of the Spa Resort hotel is central to the tribe creating its own "vision for this key location in downtown Palm Springs."

And ultimately, the tribe decided demolition was the most prudent path.

"The results of this exhaustive process led us in our current direction," Anderson said. "The responsibility of creating a vision requires making tough decisions."

Many in the preservation community believe that vision should have merged with their own vision of Palm Springs as a destination for admirers of midcentury architecture and design, an attitude the city has already embraced with events like the highly successful Modernism Week and the creation of the Palm Springs Art Museum Architecture and Design Center.

"Right now, midcentury modernism

is really at its apex, and it's huge, and for them to take this down, is just completely, it just boggles the mind," said Chris Menrad, a founding member of the Palm Springs Modern Committee, standing on the street corner outside the hotel on Wednesday as large machinery clawed at the historic building. "They're destroying culture, and this is part of their history as well as ours."

Tribal officials are careful to point out that the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians did not build the hotel and spa complex, completed in 1960, and designed by William Cody. Architects Donald Wexler, Richard Harrison and Phil Koenig played contributing roles. It was only later the tribe bought and operated the hotel.

"The project was a private development on a lease-agreement with the tribe," Anderson said.

Other Native Americans say the Agua Caliente have every right to develop the site according to their own cultural direction and vision.

"You can't get anything more historical and historical than the Agua Caliente people continuing to use this spot in a way they see fit to benefit future generations of tribal families," said Travis Armstrong, a member of the Leech Lake Reservation Band of Ojibwe in Minnesota and a writer on Native American Affairs, who lives in Palm Springs.

Those who were hoping for preservation of part of the structure also focused on cultural and historic loss.

"As they turned back on their word, Wednesday's demolition came as a shock, not just to the preservation community, but to Palm Springs as a whole," said Erik Rosenow, president of the Palm Springs Preservation Foundation. "A civic landmark has been destroyed."

The obvious chilliness between the preservation community and the tribe seems reminiscent of earlier times, said Armstrong.

"It's another chapter — being relived today — of non-Indians desiring to control what tribal members can do on the little bit of ancestral land they have left," Armstrong said.