



June 7, 2009

Town & Country Center: eyesore, gem or both?

*Stefanie Frith
The Desert Sun*

Hidden behind the boarded-up windows, peeling paint and discarded soda cans is a testament to innovative, shopping-center design by nationally recognized architects, a local preservationist and architect argued this week.

The Town & Country Center in downtown Palm Springs "really is worth another look," said Patrick McGrew.

Tell that to downtown merchants who work in and around the Town & Country Center, where businesses including Zeldaz, The Well in the Desert, Grill-A-Burger and Del Sol are located, and you get another response.

"It's an eyesore," John Kouri, owner of Cash Financial at 170 E. Andreas Road, said as he looked out across the parking lot at the ailing two-story center. "It's a junky-looking building."

Preservation vs. progress?

On Tuesday, the Palm Springs Historic Site Preservation Board will review a recommendation from Director of Planning Services Craig Ewing to declare the structure a historic site because of its significant location, design, setting, materials and aesthetics.

If that happens and the City Council approves it, plans to renovate the Desert Fashion Plaza across the street could crumble.

Mall owner Wessman Development Co. says the center needs to be torn down to create a street heading into the mall. A historic designation would prevent the center from being demolished, and a mall renovation won't be successful, Senior Vice President Michael Braun said.

"We will try and make a viable project there," Braun said.

But most likely, he said his firm will simply try and lease up the mall's Palm Canyon Drive frontage rather than give it the \$50 million facelift and new promenade that has been discussed.

That \$50 million plan has been preliminarily submitted to the city. The City Council would like to create a plan for hotels and housing on the 13-acre site but has agreed that Wessman Development can use the renovation as a first phase.

Stuart Peterson, who owns Stuart's Jewelry at 182 N. Palm Canyon Drive next to the Town & Country Center, said the center is "disgusting," especially from the Indian Canyon Drive side.

But he said nothing should happen until Wessman does something with the mall first.

"Let's see him actually do something," Peterson said.

Jeanne Martin, who owns Del Sol in the center, said there are already enough "gorgeous preserved buildings" and the Town & Country Center "isn't a very pretty building."

"If (Wessman) wants to (tear it down), the benefits outdo the nonbenefits," Martin said. "The (mall) will be a draw."

It's the Town & Country Center that has the potential to be a draw, though, McGrew said. Its center courtyard was once a gem, with an incredible free-standing staircase leading up to the once-posh Town & Country Restaurant, now Zeldaz, he said.

"It's (Wessman's) turn to say, 'OK' instead of saying 'We can't.' He can say 'Let's see what we can (do),' " McGrew said.

Former Palm Springs Planning Director Marvin Roos, however, said the Town & Country Center has always been a dysfunctional plan that does not cater to passersby.

He wrote to Ewing that the buildings have been altered to the point that their design is far removed from what the architects originally envisioned.

In addition, 17 former Palm Springs Chamber of Commerce presidents signed a petition requesting the City Council not designate the Town & Country Center as historic or take any other action that would prevent it from being demolished and becoming a new street connecting to a renovated Desert Fashion Plaza.

Save it or raze it

The Town & Country Center was built in 1948 and 1955, with major exterior remodels in 1949, 1952 and 1979.

The former upscale Town & Country Restaurant courtyard and second-floor balcony, now Zeldaz, were enclosed in the 1980s.

The center was designed by A. Quincy Jones and Paul R. Williams, nationally recognized architects who collaborated on the Palm Springs Tennis Club restaurant in 1946.

Williams designed elegant mansions for the rich and famous, including Frank Sinatra.

However, an independent historical report for the city by CRM TECH determined the Town & Country Center does not constitute "a particularly important example of their sizable body of works by either ... it does not appear to represent a particularly important milestone in the development of its architectural style."

A report from the Palm Springs Preservation Foundation's submittal for Class One Historic Site status by McGrew, however, said the Town & Country Center "does appear to represent a particularly important milestone in the development of Jones' architectural style."

The fact that the two architects were doing "fancy houses" prior to the design of the commercial Town & Country Center is, in itself, significant, McGrew said.

"It's a gorgeous little design," he said.

The center was once home to The Desert Sun, Bank of America and Patterson Drug Store.

Today, the collection of three buildings is home to Zeldaz, Grill-A-Burger and retailers including Del Sol.

According to the city staff report, the property would need to be brought into compliance for today's standards, including disability access, asbestos removal and abatement of lead-based paint.

Braun said it would cost \$5million to \$10 million to refurbish the property. John Wessman bought the property for about \$3 million.

McGrew thinks it could be brought back for a couple hundred thousand dollars, however.

Kouri with Cash Financial said he is frustrated with the city's process for historic designation.

"I am against groups telling private property owners what they should do with their property," Kouri said. "If they designate it, it will be worthless."

Stefanie Frith covers Palm Springs for The Desert Sun. She can be reached at (760) 778-4757 or stefanie.frith@thedesertsun.com.

Additional Facts

If you go

The Palm Springs Historic Site Preservation Board will discuss the Town & Country Center at 8:15 a.m. Tuesday at City Hall, 3200 E. Tahquitz Canyon Way, Palm Springs.