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## DESERT SHOWDOWN

Palm Springs revamp proposal puts historic Town and Country center at risk.

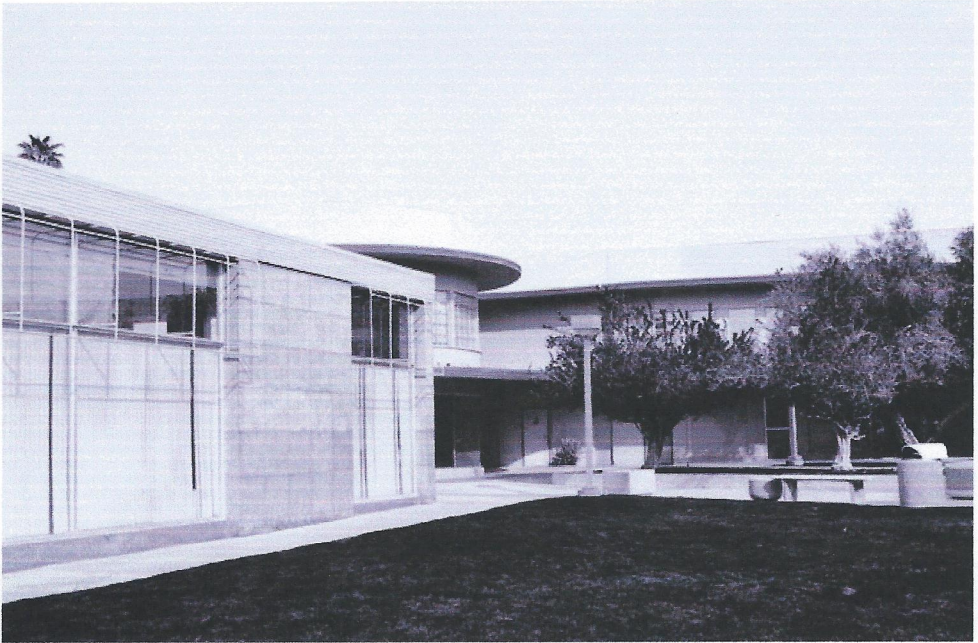


TOWN AND COUNTRY'S FACADE NEEDS TLC.  
DANIEL CHAVKIN

Everyone in Palm Springs agrees that the Desert Fashion Plaza, a mall in the heart of downtown, is a flop. It takes up 15 acres on the site of the former Desert Inn, one of four large hotels that drew Hollywood glitterati during the first half of the 20th century. By 1948 the area was a well-established resort town, and across the street, A. Quincy Jones and Paul R. Williams designed a late modern multi-use residential complex. At the time *Architectural Record* praised their Town and Country Center for its "flair and flavor." But by the mid 1960s the Desert Fashion Plaza replaced the Desert Inn, and morphed gradually into an ever larger mall that by the 1990s was largely unoccupied. Meanwhile, Town and Country's fortunes followed suit turning desolate and dilapidated.

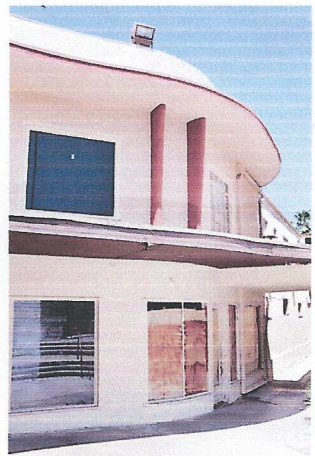
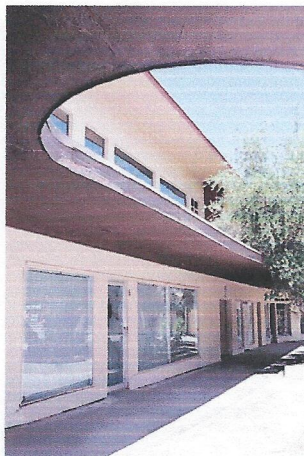
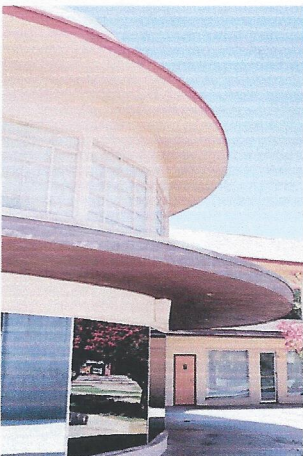
Besides being a commercial failure, the mall obscured the E. Stewart Williams-designed Palm Springs Art Museum, completed in 1976. Now Wessman Development, owner of both the mall and Town and Country, has put forth a plan that would break apart much of the mall, level the Town and Country Center, and create a new traffic corridor connecting the museum and a new shopping/entertainment center to the rest of the city. Making the art museum an anchor, planners are calling the area Museum Market Plaza.

Michael Braun, a senior vice president at Wessman, argues that without the east-west axis of the new corridor, the entire project would not be viable. Unfortunately for Town and Country, it sits in the middle of this axis. Braun said that car traffic patterns and parking dictate pedestrian traffic. "The distance from the parking spot to the first entrance, if its more than 15 feet, it won't be successful," he said. "The retailer is the one that decides whether they're going to rent. I need to provide what the retail wants."



The proposal puts the art museum in a tricky position. There is the opportunity to connect the museum to tourists and residents, expand within the new complex, and gain visibility—literally—from blocks away. On the other hand, they'll likely incur the wrath of Palm Spring's vigilant preservationist community. "We are very interested in working with the city and Wessman, but we are by no means endorsing the destruction of Town and Country," said museum spokesperson Bob Bogard. "The museum is very interested in an east-west corridor."

Since 2009, the city has held a series of meetings to discuss various redevelopment options for the area, including eminent domain, since the mall has been sitting empty for more than 15 years. But they also wielded a substantial carrot for Wessman in the form of tax brakes and subsidies. City Manager David Ready said that only the mall was targeted for eminent domain. But he also noted that Town and Country does not have the city's coveted class one historic designation.



With preservationists gearing up for a public hearing on June 15, a desert showdown looms. Any subsidies would increase city sales taxes, and that would require a referendum approval by voters in November. "Apparently the concern about the Desert Fashion Plaza is that it is a white elephant that trumps everything else," said Peter Moruzzi, president of Palm Springs Modern Committee, a local

preservation group. "I'm not convinced that the general public is willing to sacrifice the Town and Country Center to get this project done."

Moruzzi noted that a substantial east-west corridor could be freed up a mere half block north by reconfiguring East Andreas Road. But doing that would reduce the boulevard sight line to the museum by an entire city block. Ron Marshall, president of the Palm Springs Preservation Foundation finds the vista blocking argument lacking: "I came from Washington and I know something about grand boulevards. The fact is that the museum is intentionally built to blend in with the landscape, it's not the Washington Monument. The museum is an impressive architectural asset, but the Town and Country Center is also impressive. They should be bookends."

**Tom Stoelker**