

Politics, architecture meet in Palm Springs

Skip Descant

The Desert Sun

In many cities that space between politics and architecture is often a narrow one; but perhaps especially so in Palm Springs.

"Thank goodness for the recent election, where we elected a new mayor, two new council people who are very considerate of historic sites. And so the feeling of the (City) Council switched from tearing down historical sites to preserving them," reflected local modernist architect Hugh Kaptur during a Modernism Week lecture where Kaptur discussed some of his projects with local preservationist Gary Johns.

Their talk Monday, in front of a packed crowd in the lecture space at Modernism Week's Community and Meeting Place, reminisced about Kaptur's career that has spanned some 60 years in Palm Springs. And though Kaptur has worked for clients with names as bold-faced as William Holden or Steve McQueen, in the last year Kaptur's name surfaced hundreds of times on social media and news stories if only because of a small collection of mid-1970s office buildings he designed known as Tahquitz Plaza.

It was the classic story of a developer wanting to tear the buildings down for a new project, and a city's preservation community rallying its political muscle to fight the demolition.

"It was a contentious year. It went back and forth with daily headlines," recalled Johns, a local realtor and also a



LUCAS ESPOSITO/THE DESERT SUN

Tahquitz Plaza is a collection of four mid-1970s office buildings in Palm Springs designed by Hugh Kaptur.

member of the board of directors of the Palm Springs Preservation Foundation. "The developer strongly arguing for the demolition of the buildings. The preservation community strongly advocating for the preservation of the buildings." Nexus Development, the owner of Tahquitz Plaza, aimed to develop the site and a neighboring property into a 91-unit mixed-use development it was calling Aberdeen.

"I certainly didn't want to see it torn down," Kaptur said of Tahquitz Plaza. "If it was for a project that would have conformed to the zoning, that would have been one thing. But the project that was being proposed didn't comply with the zoning ordinance, the height limits, the density. It didn't comply with anything."

The plan never received approval by the city's Planning Commission, in part because the design held too many flaws, commissioners

said at the time.

The issue was further complicated when it became known that then-Mayor Steve Pougnet had a business relationship with local developer Richard Meany, who has been affiliated with Nexus.

In early December, just minutes after taking their oaths of office, the city's new mayor and two new council members joined a unanimous vote to declare Tahquitz Plaza, a Class I Historic Site, the highest preservation designation offered by Palm Springs. The move was also embraced by Nexus, which has pledged a restoration project for the buildings. Kaptur will serve as a consultant for the restoration project.

"So hopefully in the not too distant future we will see a restoration of Tahquitz Plaza," said Johns, who added, the win for the preservation community, "speaks to the importance of elections."