

# Town & Country Center preservation approval never simple



Skip Descant, The Desert Sun

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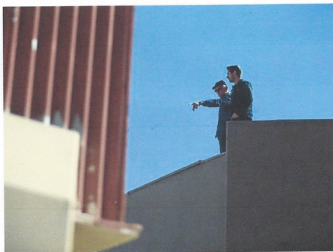
(Photo: Richard Lui/The Desert Sun)

The Town & Country Center may have moved one step closer to preservation Tuesday when the Palm Springs Historic Site preservation Board approved its nomination to historic site status, but that elevation may be muddled by new revelations about the shopping center's provenance.

The HSPB approved – with several conditions – the nomination of the late 1940s international style shopping center to Class I Historic Site status, the highest level of city protection a building or site can earn. The recommendation now goes to the City Council for a public hearing.

One of those conditions is to consider new information related to the origins of at least one of the buildings on the site that appears to have origins going back to the 1920s and '30s. The building that, in part, formerly housed a Bank of America branch, is an older building retrofitted by the designers of The Center – primarily A. Quincy Jones and Paul R. Williams – to tie into the mid-century international style design they envisioned for the whole development, historians say.

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Above: Developer John Weesman, left, stands on the roof of the Town & Country Center in downtown Palm Springs in January 2016. The mid-century shopping complex will be considered for Class I Historic Site status by the Palm Springs City Council. (Photo: Richard Lui/The Desert Sun)

The Center, which is the original name of the shopping complex, was constructed in multiple phases from 1946 to 1955 and designed by A. Quincy Jones, Paul R. Williams, Donald Wexler, Albert Frey and John Porter Clark. It was developed by The Palm Springs Corporation on land owned by Bank of America.

"We believe this resource is actually greater than you're giving it credit for," Leo Marmol, of the firm Marmol Radziner, one of the most pre-eminent historic architecture preservation firms in southern California, told the HSPB at its meeting Tuesday. "Underneath the modern facades that have been added to those buildings are actually historic, Spanish style buildings that were the original Bank of America structure."

Marmol has been hired by Weesman Development, the owner of The Center to research the history of the site and conduct a feasibility study to explore the rehabilitation of the complex "and evaluating those structures with a specific goal of developing an economically viable project," Marmol said.

The Center is part of the overall 20-acre downtown redevelopment site, largely occupied by the former Desert Fashion Plaza mall. Previous plans have called for the demolition of The Center shopping complex to make way for a new street. However, recent changes to the plan call for not just the preservation of The Center, but its adaptive reuse. Weesman Development has proposed placing a 135-room Marriott brand hotel within the site.

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Going back years, The Center has been a cause near and dear to the hearts of preservationists in Palm Springs. In 2009 the Historic Site Preservation Board nominated it to Class I Historic Site status, a move the City Council voted down. More recently, in 2015, the Town & Country Center was listed as "eligible" for listing on National Register of Historic Places.



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Members of the Palm Springs Preservation Foundation, which prepared the Class I Historic Site report for The Center, argued that city officials should move the nomination along for approval by the City Council and not get distracted by the shopping center's possible earlier origins.

"The period of significance for the Town & Country Center is 1949," stressed Ron Marshall, a board member with the Palm Springs Preservation Foundation. "That's what we're trying to protect here. We're not really trying to tell the archaeological history of this site.

"It's about the mid-century modern design. It's about the period of significance: 1949," he told the HSBP on Tuesday. "That's when this complex was important. It doesn't matter that there's Spanish revival underneath. The period of significance is 1949."

Marmol contends he's "not here to slow down the process or not support the process. In fact, just the opposite."

"We are actually right now just trying to figure out the sequence of events on the parcel, and what is currently in place now," he added.

It's not yet clear if John Wessman, with Wessman Development, will support the Class I Historic Site designation. In the past, he's been opposed to it.

"We have asked Mr. Wessman not to oppose the nomination," Marmol said. "We're being paid by Mr. Wessman to represent his interest. But we have also been very clear that we have a bias. We have a priority. And that is to protect the historic resources of this community. We have a long history of doing that," he added.



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Wessman offers to save, restore Town & Country Center

[\(http://www.desertsun.com/story/news/2016/01/29/town-country-center-restoration/79520220/\)](http://www.desertsun.com/story/news/2016/01/29/town-country-center-restoration/79520220/)

HSPB members appeared open to the idea of getting new information related to history of the The Center's evolution.

"We are possibly losing an opportunity to think outside the box a little bit here, and create an historic site that really does go with the archeology of Palm Springs," said Roxann Ploss, a member of the Historic Site Preservation Board, urging the research to move forward. "And to focus singularly on one year, I think, truly limits us.

"I really hope that we don't close ourselves into a single year, thinking that that is the history of Palm Springs," she added.

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