



The Palm Springs City Council amended preservation laws to make demolishing structures built before 1969 more difficult. The Palm Springs Visitors Center, above, was saved from the wrecking ball by prior action by the city. OMAR ORNELAS/DESERT SUN

SAVING THE CITY'S ICONIC LOOK

Palm Springs increases its efforts to protect its architectural gems

By Xochitl Peña | The Desert Sun

PALM SPRINGS — With its eye-catching A-frame steel roof that juts dramatically into the sky, the city's Visitor's Center was almost demolished.

The Palm Springs Art Museum Architecture and Design Center, Edwards Harris Pavilion, designed by E. Stewart Williams, was going to be remodeled to become a restaurant with condos behind.

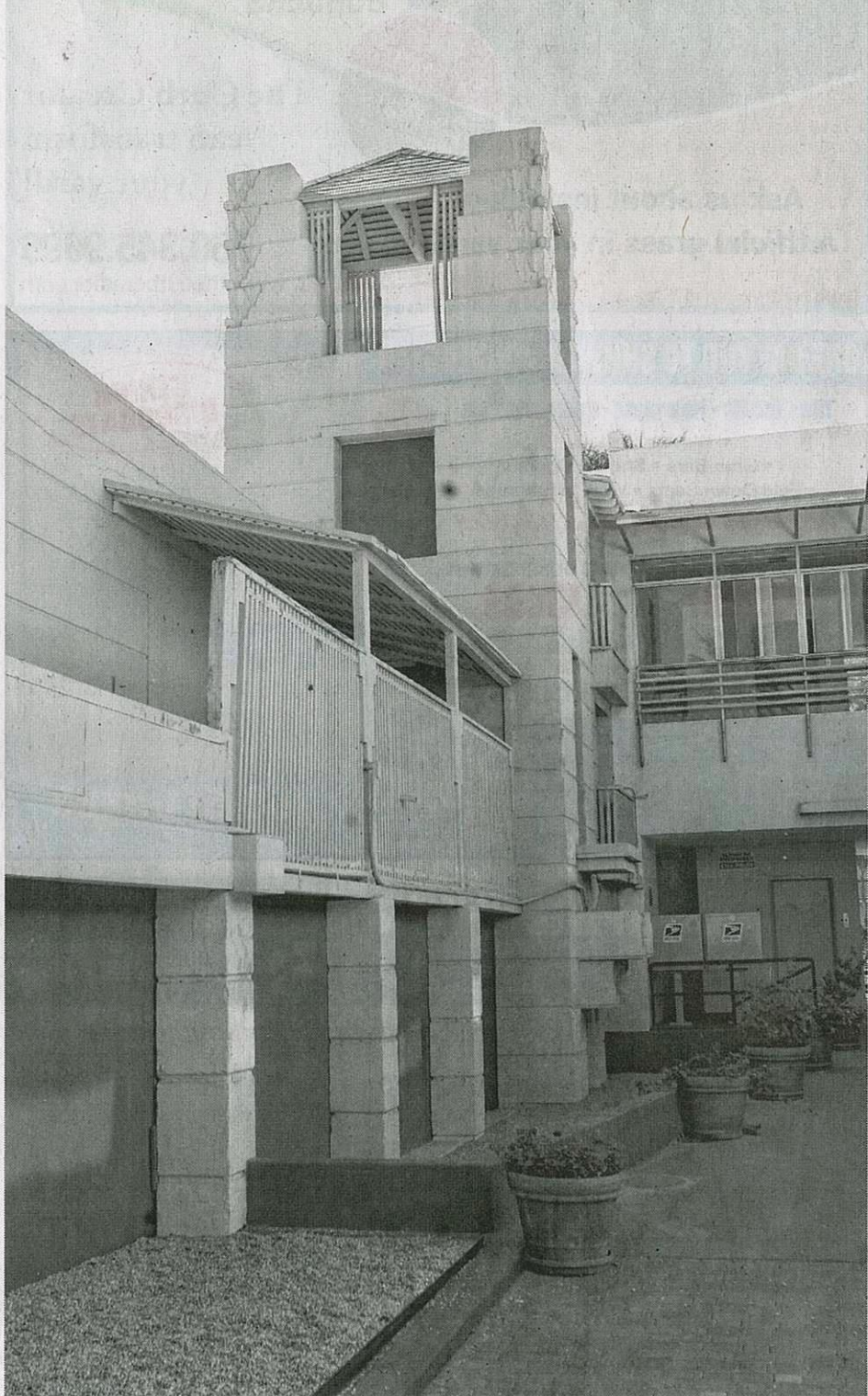
In each case, preservationists stepped in and saved them. "Preservation is important. We've seen enough good examples of what and how preservation has benefited the city. Chief among them, saving the Tramway gas station has provided the city with a striking world-recognized visitors center," said Gary Johns, a vice president of the Palm Springs Preservation

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The Town and Country Center at 174 N. Palm Canyon Drive is another complex in Palm Springs that could see greater protection under the amended city code.

OMAR ORNELAS/THE DESERT SUN



The Oasis Hotel Tower at 121 S. Palm Canyon Drive was designed by Lloyd Wright, son of Frank Lloyd Wright. OMAR ORNELAS/THE DESERT SUN

Modernism

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Foundation and member of the Modernism Week Board of directors.

With Modernism Week kicking off Thursday, the celebration of all things midcentury serves as a reminder of how important it is to protect midcentury buildings.

And to that end, the city has stepped up efforts in recent months.

The city has hired a security company to monitor the city's most vulnerable and historic buildings. Last week, the Palm Springs City Council adopted changes to its historic laws that makes it harder to demolish any building built before 1969.

"We are now as a City Council accepting the value of buildings that were built in a period of time that ... is now making our city absolutely famous," said Councilwoman Ginny Foat.

Palm Springs has become a design mecca, attracting people from all over the world who want to learn more about the architecture, or just appreciate its beauty.

Not only do these buildings provide a unique aesthetic to the city's landscape, but during Modernism Week, they help attract more than 40,000 people who leave a \$12 million economic impact on the area.

In its ninth year, it has grown to feature more than 100 events over the 11-day festival, including tours, lectures, exhibitions and parties.

"It's our midcentury building stock that is the city's tourism money-maker," said Ron Marshall, a board member and past president of the Palm Springs Preservation Foundation, which hosts a series of events during the festival.

The foundation has members from as far as Switzerland, England and Australia who joined while in town visiting.

Ten percent of the Modernism Week attendees are international, with another 40 percent coming from outside the state.

"We spawned some of the best architecture. That's why people come from all around the world," said Foat. "Why would we ever think of tearing down a house that someone from Yugoslavia and Turkey came to see."

Many of the featured buildings are designed by such notable architects as Albert Frey, Donald Wexler, Richard Neutra, E. Stewart Williams and William F. Cody.

They incorporate such details as clerestory windows, folded plate roofs, patterned concrete tiles and glass walls.

"We're looking at buildings differently. We're looking at heritage of buildings differently. They don't have to be someplace that Frank Sinatra slept. It's more design-oriented than celebrity-oriented ... and so it's really an interesting phenomenon," Foat said.

Demolition delays

The Palm Springs City Council last week approved changes to the city's historic building ordinance that designates pre-1969 buildings as Class 3 Historic.

The new classification means that if a demolition is proposed, the city can delay that process for as long as six months to allow for a more formal review by city staff and the Historic Site Preservation Board.

The board requested the changes be-

cause the ordinance had not been updated in a long time, and many of the city's signature midcentury homes were built between 1945 and 1968.

Before the change, only buildings built before 1945 were automatically classified as Class 3 historic sites.

"There is a higher level of review. It's designed to make sure we don't make a mistake. It's the ability to pause and then own whatever decision we make, whether it's to demolish or preserve," said Councilman Paul Lewin.

The changes do not prevent a pre-1969 building from being demolished, and if there is a review, Margo Wheeler, director of planning services, said that doesn't mean it will take a full six months.

Steve Rose, a preservation proponent and fan of Modernism Week, refers to the city's stock of midcentury modern homes as an "inheritance" that needs to be protected.

"We have become a destination for the ever-growing and lucrative modernism tourist," he said at a recent City Council meeting in support of the changes.

Beth Edwards Harris, who restored and used to live in the Richard Neutra-designed Kaufmann House, stressed the importance of preserving specifically public and commercial buildings, because they provide the most access to the public every day, not only during Modernism Week.

"There's many, many important commercial buildings that we can't get back. We have to really be careful and thoughtful because these resources are irreplaceable," she said at the recent City Council meeting also in support of the changes.

Safe from destruction

When the Carnell building or Palm Springs Community Church fires are brought up, many people shake their heads and lament their losses.

The second story of the Carnell building caught fire in July 2012, and a significant portion of the Community Church was destroyed during a Sept. 18 blaze.

The official cause of both fires have yet to be determined, fire officials say. But a popular theory among city leaders is they were caused by homeless people who broke in and set up camp.

To avoid this in the future, the city hired private security to drive by and walk around some of the city's most vulnerable and historical buildings until a more stringent vacant building ordinance is adopted.

City officials met Thursday to discuss changes to that ordinance, which could go before the City Council for discussion in early March, said City Manager David Ready.

Potential changes would include beefed-up requirements for owners of vacant buildings who need to board them up.

"So it truly is secure, so someone can't just take the boards off," said Ready.

Also, they could be asked to choose from installing a burglary alarm system or hiring private security to ensure the building is safe.

Any changes that help preserve the city's history and architecture is much appreciated, said Johns.

"Here in Palm Springs, we are in a renaissance. We are growing by leaps and bounds ... We have to remember our past, respect the past, because ... if we eliminate the past, then the way forward is lost," he said.