



Town & Country

RESTAURANT



TWO SIDES OF THE CENTER

Development and preservation
drive opposing forces at downtown
Palm Springs' Town & Country.

Words by **Janice Kleinschmidt**

The Center is an example of the international style of architecture. Opposite: KDES radio station, 1963.

Past courtyard flowerbeds showcasing a kaleidoscope of red, pink, purple, yellow, and white blooms, “Villagers in a steady and graceful stream” mounted floating stairs for the season opening of Town & Country Restaurant on Oct. 27, 1949.

Precisely a year earlier, *The Desert Sun* heralded the Palm Springs venue’s debut: “Ultra modern in design, with a unique architectural and [pinkish tan/dark teal] color motif which gives it a sharp individuality, the Town & Country was created to provide a smart, new, intimate rendezvous for Villagers.”

In the days when the city carried the quaint “Village” moniker, the newspaper regularly reported sightings of prominent locals and visitors to the restaurant. It was an easy task given the publication’s office in the same complex of buildings officially named The Center but soon dubbed Town & Country Center.

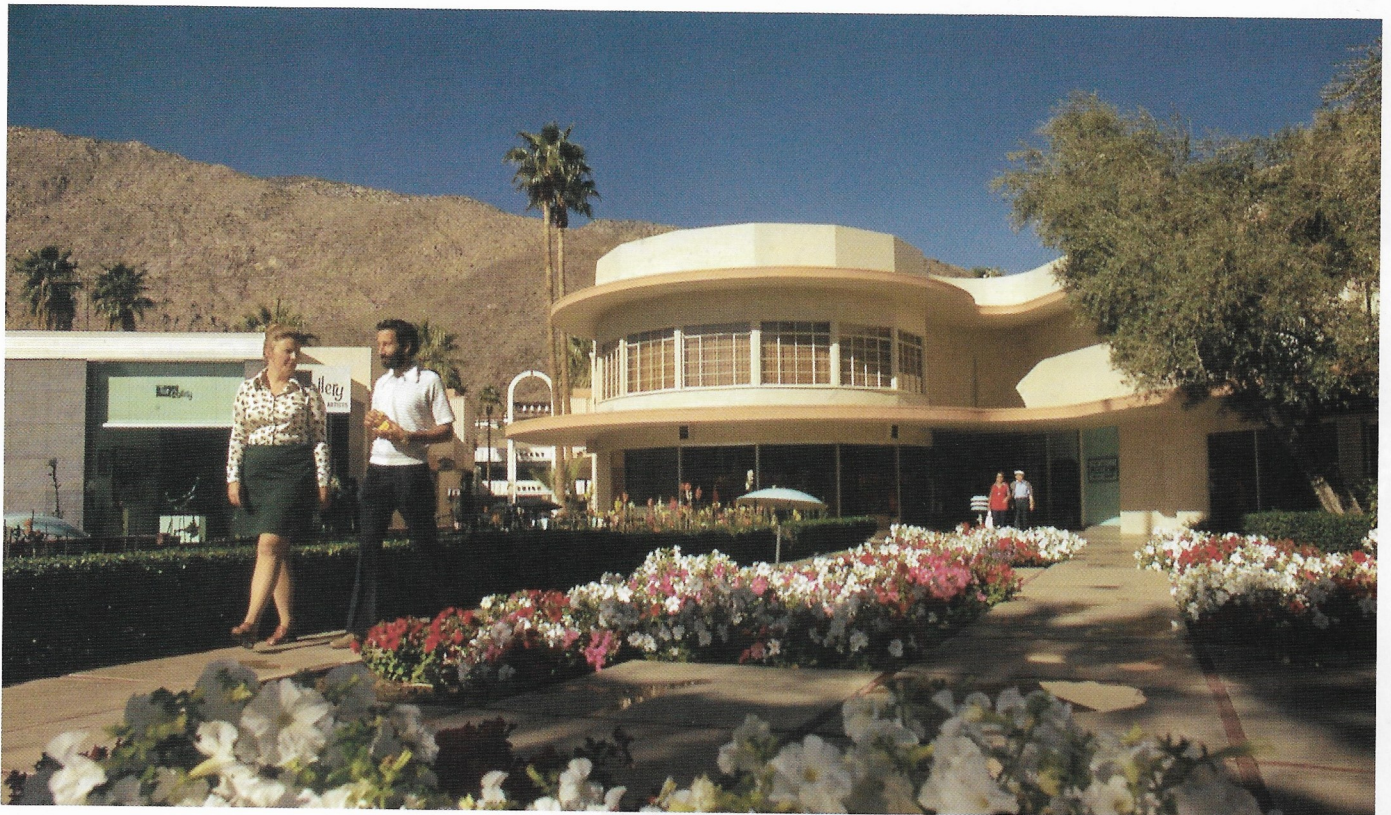
Within three months of its premiere, the restaurant began evening valet service, and “Roma’s smart woman’s shop,” according to *The Desert Sun* on Jan. 25, 1949, presented the site’s first fashion show. By March, owner Palm Springs Corporation advertised The Center as “the most photographed — talked about spot in Palm Springs,” with tenants including a gift shop, home furnishings, candy and children’s clothing stores, KDES radio station, a Christian Science reading room, and professional services (accounting, dental, floral, legal, photographic, salon, and travel).

In a fairy tale, The Center would be celebrating its 72nd anniversary this year as a social hot spot. But happily-ever-afters often come only after a wicked turn of events.

TUG OF WAR

To think that Palm Springs’ midcentury modernism immediately sprang from previous grounding in mission and Spanish colonial revival architecture ignores a critical point in the city’s history: when visionary entrepreneurs strove to lure a voguish clientele to their businesses.

In the late ’40s, internationally recognized architects Archibald Quincy Jones and Paul Revere Williams of Los Angeles introduced modernist architecture at The Center. Sandwiched between the thoroughfares of Palm Canyon and Indian Canyon drives, the project demanded an inner sanctum for people to gather and cross paths. It is here where they puzzled out the use of space in unexpected fashion (see “Presage to Prestige,” page 63).



Palm Springs Historical Society







Town & Country Restaurant.
Opposite: Tee Jay's
Rickshaw restaurant, 1966.

Just as the property has two street facades and a middle, it also has the dueling sides of its owner and the Palm Springs Preservation Foundation, with the city trapped between them.

One can trace years of dissension through the foundation's website. The saga became even messier in 2017 when John Wessman, owner of The Center (and other downtown real estate through his company, Wessman Development), and former Mayor Steve Pougnet were indicted on bribery, perjury, and conflict-of-interest charges involving downtown development.

California Code Section 1090 prohibits public officials from entering into contracts in which they have a financial interest; §1092 provides that contracts made in violation of §1090 may be nullified. Last July, the city settled with Wessman Development's successor company, Grit Development, to resolve the issue clouding future development. Preservation-minded citizens urged the city to include The Center in property Grit would give the city in exchange for incentives provided by development contracts, but that didn't happen.

"[Wessman Development] purchased the property in 1997 for \$2.8 million, with the intent to reposition it," Grit president Michael Braun says. With his purchase five years later of Desert Fashion Plaza on the west side of Palm Canyon Drive, Wessman then envisioned a vehicular connection between downtown and the convention center to the east.

"The specific plan approved in September 2009 restricted any development for The Center until the western side of Palm Canyon Drive was redeveloped," Braun says. "After [that work] was well underway, political views changed."

In particular, he references the city council's 2016 approval of Class 1 historic designation for The Center. A previous council in 2009 voted 5-0 against such protective status. Ron Marshall, preservation foundation secretary, charges Palm Springs officials with falling victim to the Stockholm Syndrome, under which hostages start identifying with their captors.

"Wessman Development owned critical pieces of land downtown. After a while, the city believed its interests were in consonance with the developer's interests," he says. "I think the 1090 negotiations show there are still vestiges of the Stockholm Syndrome. For the first time, the city had serious leverage over the developer and failed to use it."

Then-Mayor Robert Moon rebuts the notion that putting The Center into the settlement was a "practical" concept. The city on its own is incapable of undertaking the restoration, so it would have to sell the property — a process that could take years, he says.

"Who do you think would have been the No. 1 bidder?" the former mayor posits, noting that the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians owns a resort and casino across the street along Indian Canyon Drive. If the tribe put the property into federal trust, "they wouldn't have to observe the historic designation. They could bulldoze the whole thing," Moon suggests.

He further thinks it unlikely another investor/developer would determine The Center could generate enough revenue to justify the purchase price of "10 to 12 million bucks" plus more than twice that in restoration costs.

In the 1950s, Town & Country became one of the most photographed locations in Palm Springs.

PRESAGE TO PRESTIGE

Like a harbinger of spring, development in the 100-north block between Palm Canyon and Indian Canyon drives ushered in Palm Springs' "high season" of midcentury modernism.

Working in tandem, architects A. Quincy Jones and Paul R. Williams bestowed upon The Center design elements indicative of streamline moderne (emphasizing sleekness), international style (emphasizing volume over mass), and late moderne (emphasizing surrealistic paradoxes).

Standing in the courtyard, Palm Springs Preservation Foundation vice president Steve Keylon points to the west side's semicircular structure with faceted plate glass and an overhang between the first and second floors as a combination of streamline moderne and rectilinear international style.

On the east side, a cantilevered redwood planter juts out from a corner of a building otherwise oriented squarely with the street. Similarly angled, a staircase of floating steps rises from an asymmetrical platform. Keylon explains that these dynamics, as well as vertical fins on the center's north building, fit the late moderne profile. He calls the pre-post-and-beam modernist style "an architecture of leisure."

"It was introduced as a way of bringing a social element of modernism that people could understand, versus the coldness of international or Bauhaus [design]," he says. "Late moderne has some of international style's bold geometrics, but mixes in the organic materials of Frank Lloyd Wright." Like his fellow preservationists, Keylon frets about losing manifest parts of the past. "These details matter," he says. "All these dramatic touches add up to the whole."



"However, Grit has another incentive, because it owns the property to the west, and those tenants are unhappy looking across the street and having the center in the condition it now sits," Moon says.

Braun confirms that Grit's tenants want to see a block-long renovation along Palm Canyon Drive — from Tahquitz Canyon Way to Andreas Road. He also says, "The Center is our main priority for the next three years."

"Michael Braun and John Wessman are night and day," Moon opines. "Michael Braun will work with you, and I think he is trustworthy."

BATTLE TO THE FINISH

"The best cities manage to find a healthy balance between preserving their history and planning for tomorrow while managing the present," Braun says. "We are working hard to find the right balance between tenant needs and preservationist demands to make The Center financially viable in its current configuration."

In 2019, Grit hired two retail-specialty brokers to focus on the tenant mix. Braun estimates total project costs at \$30 million, with tenants assuming some \$5 million for build-outs. The majority of Grit's restoration costs relate to mechanical, elec-



trical, plumbing, and roofing work. The balance of the budget comprises tenant allowances and expenses, such as building permits, broker fees, and legal fees for lease negotiations.

“We cannot and are not planning any changes to the exterior facades,” Braun promises, acknowledging the Class 1 historic designation. “We are returning key buildings to their original state. Colors will be the original colors.”

In late 2019, Grit had workers onsite, restoring courtyard-facing overhangs. But Braun declines to specify a completion date: “When doing a quality project, time is your friend,” he says. The most he’ll offer is that construction will take 20 to 24 months once he has signed leases and approved construction documents in hand and that tenant build-outs — some of which could occur simulta-

neously — will take eight to 12 months. Destination PSP has signed a long-term lease to remain in the storefront on the north side of the Palm Canyon Drive passageway.

“In a perfect world, I would like to see it be a viable complex, with all the architectural features intact and operating with [non-national chain] businesses — not just out of nostalgia, but because that’s what people want when they come to town: They want to see something authentic,” Marshall says. “Realistically speaking, I think there is a very good possibility that vision is going to be realized.

“There was a time when we were sure we were going to lose [The Center],” he continues. “The city council and developer were against us. There was no appreciation even in the community. They saw the developer as the cure-all — the key that was going to unlock downtown’s potential. The message from Grit has certainly changed to a more positive one. Now, it looks like the question is: Will we get a good center or a compromised one? After all this work, why would we want to compromise?”

Not in question is what Grit will call the *fait accompli*.

“The name will remain ‘The Center,’” Braun says. “It is the project’s history, and we want to use anything and everything to leverage the history of this gem.”