

Spa Hotel

# Swellegance

The original Spa Hotel buildings in downtown Palm Springs are fine examples of an architectural style that is now sometimes referred to as "Palm Springs Modern."

The story of their development starts when President Eisenhower, following a visit to Palm Springs in February 1954 that illuminated the plight of the Agua Caliente, signed the Equalization Bill finalizing land allotments. (He made many return visits to Palm Springs and eventually retired to El Dorado Country Club in 1961.)

Congress then passed the General Leasing Act of 1955, allowing for long-term leases. The all-female Agua Caliente Tribal Council, comprised of Vyola Ortner, Gloria Gillette, Eileen Miguel, Dora Prieto and LaVerne Saubel, boldly proceeded to lease the 8-acre site of the ancient mineral springs at the corner of Indian and Tahquitz-McCallum Way.

In 1957, Sam Banowit convinced the council that he could build a bathhouse that would be profitable for the tribe. The spa and hotel that followed were the first commercial developments resulting from the changed rules regarding land leases, and the deal was the first transaction of its kind in the United States. The tribe was to receive all the income from the hot springs, which would boast a world-class modern facility.



Striking contrasts of stacked stone, concrete block and cast concrete under a spectacular desert sky.

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President Eisenhower (second from right) visited Palm Springs in February 1954 to see Smoke Tree Ranch and his friends Paul Hoffman, the president of Studebaker, and Paul Helms of Helms Bakery (pictured with Ben Hogan, starting at left).

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The first thin-arch, post-tension concrete colonnade to be built in California, designed by Wexler & Harrison.

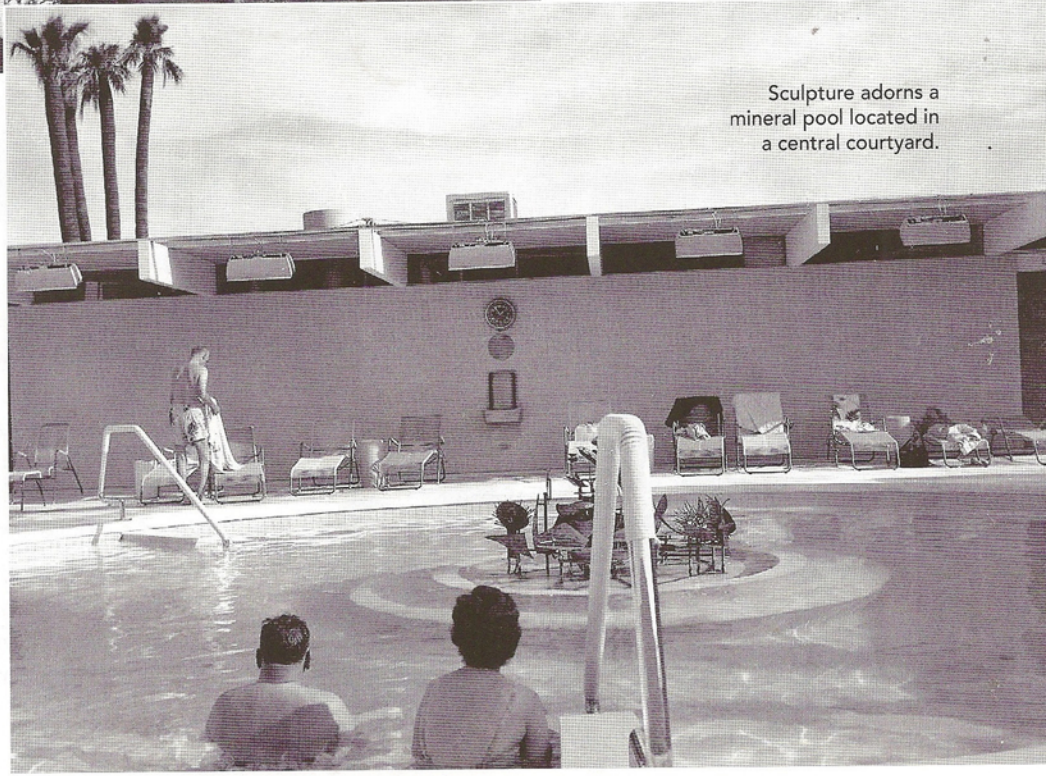


Banowit originally anticipated investing \$200,000, but the cost of the final project—a 30,000-square-foot spa on the ancient mineral springs with an adjacent three-story 131-room hotel—was some \$1.8 million. Later, two more stories would be added to the hotel.

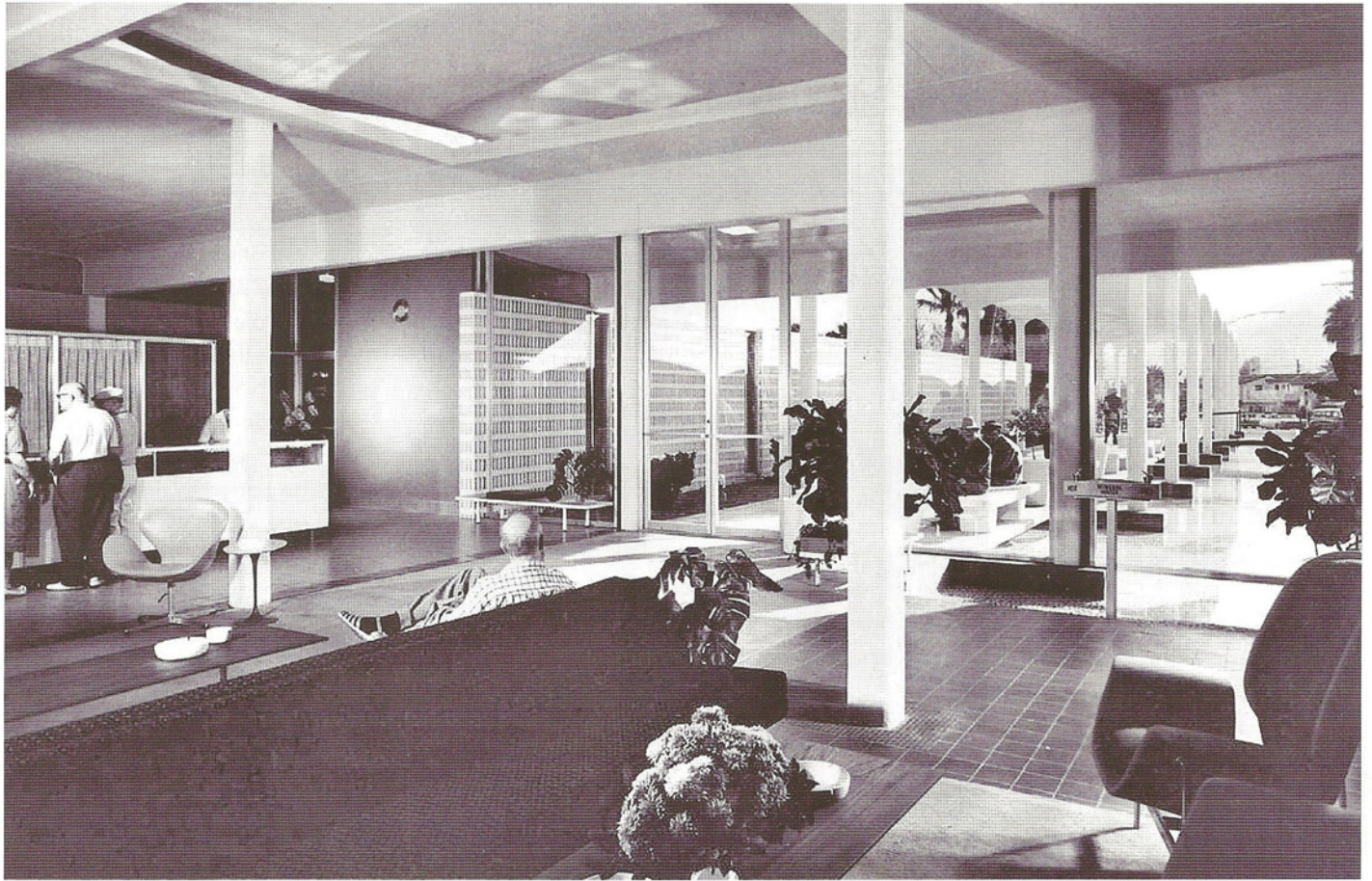
The buildings were extremely brave for the time. Instead of the Spanish Mediterranean style predominant in town and fervently advocated by then Mayor Frank Bogert, the cutting-edge modernist idiom of local architects was selected. The firms of Wexler & Harrison, William Cody, Parker-Zehnder & Associates and Philip Koenig were all commissioned to design the ambitious project.



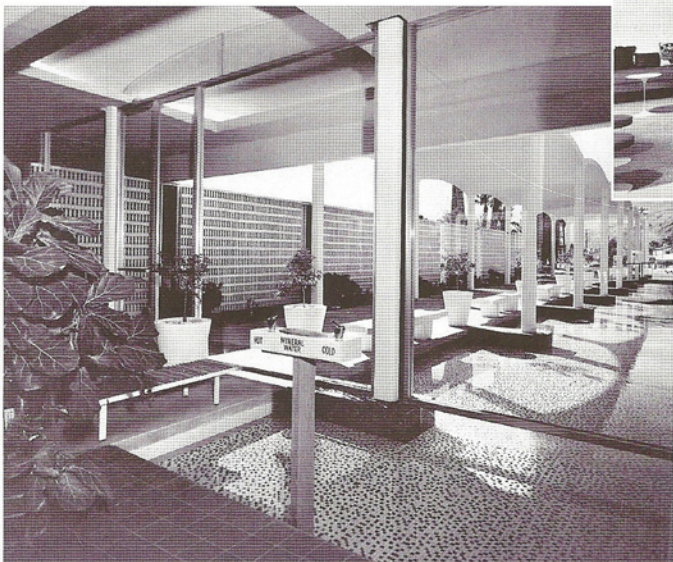
The newly completed spa building (above) shows off a swanky sign and "Dancing Water Nymphs" sculpture, 1960.



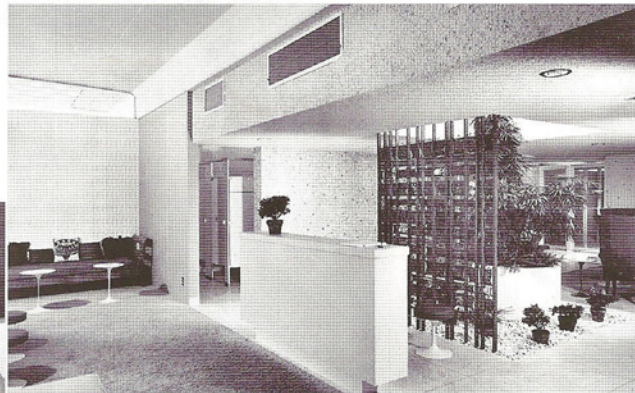
Sculpture adorns a mineral pool located in a central courtyard.



The spa interior features modern furnishings, looking out the entrance to the reflecting pool.



A water fountain boasts hot and cold mineral water.



The spa's elegant interior waiting room.

The jazzy, sophisticated aesthetic that resulted imbued the space with a modern and sexy feel. Its clean lines and open vistas attracted everyone from Hollywood stars to locals who indulged in the healing mineral springs.

Alterations and additions made to the buildings over the years since have covered up their sublime midcentury heritage. Beneath remains an incomparable work of modern architecture that has immense allure half a century later.

—TRACY CONRAD