

ARTS + CULTURE MODERNISM

Inside Susan Secoy Jensen's Renovation of a Midcentury Church for Dezart Playhouse

The long-running theater company Dezart Performs moves into its new permanent home — a midcentury church reimagined by architect Susan Secoy Jensen.

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Architect Susan Secoy Jensen has been recognized for her work in preservation architecture, including winning an award from PS ModCom at the 2024 Architectural Preservation Awards.

PHOTO BY JESS STEPHENS

This month, history and modernity converge in Palm Springs as the First Church of Christ, Scientist, designed by architects Albert Frey and Robson Chambers, reopens as the **Dezart Playhouse**. The metamorphosis from sacred space to cultural hub has captured the imagination of the theater and architecture communities, which will see the first of two renovation phases unveiled Nov. 13–15, when the company opens with *West*

Side Story in Concert and a pre-show gala reception. (The church and the Tony Award-winning musical both debuted in 1957.)

“It’s going to be kind of weird the first season,” says [Susan Secoy Jensen](#), the architect leading the restoration, suggesting the theater’s most dramatic changes will come in Phase 2, beginning next spring. “I hope visitors [know] that the best is yet to come.”

Dezart Performs, an Equity theater company founded in 2009, staged its productions at the Palm Springs Woman’s Club for 14 years before it purchased the church as its permanent home in December 2024. For the restoration, Jensen is collaborating with landscape architect JC Miller and TheatreDNA, a firm specializing in the conversion of small theatrical spaces. Phase 1 focused on readying the theater for performances. It included the construction of a new thrust stage, soundproofing, and technical installations such as a lighting grid to accommodate the company’s range of productions.

Phase 2 will focus on the playhouse’s functionality and aesthetics. The pews will give way to 131 theater seats, increasing capacity and improving sightlines. A full-service bar will extend onto the front patio, encouraging an indoor-outdoor flow. Outside, drought-tolerant native plants will join the church’s original olive trees.

Once transformed, says Dezart co-founder Michael Shaw, “The theater should act as a social hub for diverse populations to connect through performances.”

Secoy Jensen spoke with *Palm Springs Life* during Phase 1 of the renovation.



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What makes Albert Frey's architecture special?

Frey assembled a new type of architecture based on Bauhaus, Le Corbusier, and the International Style, embracing the sun, the pure air, and the simple forms of the California desert. He used steel, glass, aluminum, concrete masonry units, and the desert landscape to create his own aesthetic. There are a lot of classic Frey details and features in the church. Robson Chambers was also a key part of the team.

What surprised you about the structure?

The building is timeless, and the layout lends itself beautifully to this adaptive reuse. The small meeting rooms will become the dressing rooms. The Sunday school room will become the rehearsal space. These spaces just fit like a glove.

What's your vision for the restoration and transformation?

This is and always has been a gathering space for the community, and repurposing the structure is the most sustainable approach.

The patio outside the lobby will be the primary gathering space. It's a seamless design with glass with aluminum frames that responds to the original design and rhythm.

It's been advantageous to have the original drawings by Clark, Frey, and Chambers. We're trying to maintain the same color and material palette, including polished concrete floors with refurbished redwood divider strips, throughout interior and exterior spaces. We'll pour new terrazzo that matches the original, which we'll demolish to expand the men's and women's restrooms to comply with the Americans With Disabilities Act and building codes.

You discovered Arthur Elrod furnishings in the church. Did he decorate the interior?

The theory is that Arthur Elrod's partner, Hal Broderick, was a member of the First Church of Christ, Scientist, and introduced Elrod to the practice. Both became first readers of the church — elected by other members to lead the congregation. We have documentation of Elrod's involvement around 1956. From what we can tell, Arthur Elrod Associates provided interior design services to the church. A handful of elements he created, designed, or selected have survived. The most notable are the beautiful and distinctive Kurt Versen Saturn light fixtures that still illuminate the Sunday school space.

When were the Southwestern design elements introduced?

The late 1980s saw a nationwide proliferation of design motifs and color palettes characteristic of the American Southwest. In 1989 and '90, the church underwent a Southwestern makeover during which nearly all evidence of Arthur Elrod Associates' influence was replaced. With this makeover, the original 250 theater seats in the chapel were replaced by the pews.

What does TheatreDNA bring to the transformation?

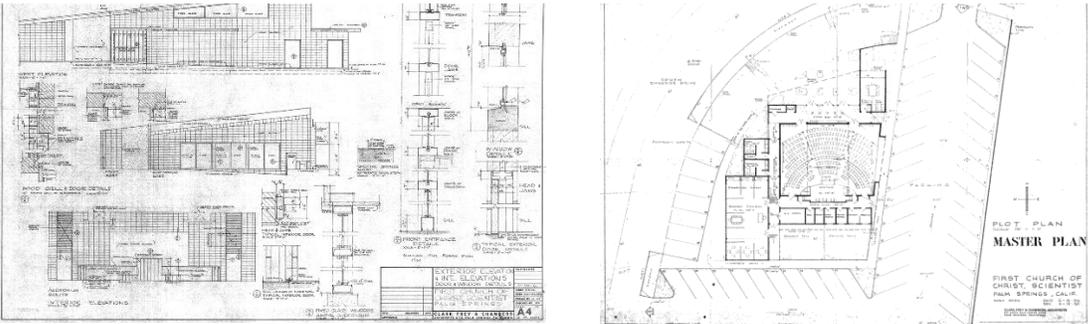
These guys bring a specialized expertise to create a functional and technologically sound theater. I defer to their expertise on the technical aspects of the space and the design — how it feels, how it functions for the performance.

What role does landscape architecture play in the design?

Albert Frey’s building design aesthetic often carried into the landscape. We are fortunate to have strong reference material: historic photos, some by Julius Shulman, and original drawings. Many of the original landscape features are still present, including both hardscape and the specimen olive trees. Our goal is to remain true to that original design intent so that the new work looks natural to the site.

How do you feel about having to wait until spring to begin Phase 2 of this transformation?

To be brutally honest, I was initially disappointed with the news about the need to have a temporary environment for the 2025–2026 season. I hope that visitors will have an awareness that the best is yet to come.



Original architectural renderings for the First Church of Christ, Scientist from Clark Frey & Chambers.

COURTESY DEZART PLAYHOUSE



Rendering of the updated entrance for DeZart Playhouse.

COURTESY DEZART PLAYHOUSE