

# Historic Palm Springs school building should be restored — not demolished

Last week, one of the city's midcentury residential gems, Steel Development House No. 2, was placed on the prestigious National Register of Historic Places.

Designed by architects Don Wexler and Rick Harrison, the 1962 home has been beautifully restored and is lovingly cared for by its current owner. Placement on the national register is no small feat: applications are rigorously reviewed and preparing a credible nomination package can be time-consuming and expensive for the homeowner.



**James R. Harlan**

On the very day of that important recognition, I, along with fellow board members of the Palm Springs Preservation Foundation, met with the superintendent and senior staff of the Palm Springs Unified School District to discuss our objections to the scheduled demolition of the one-story modernist Palm Springs

High School Administration Building built in 1957.

The demolition is intended to make space for a new two-story "pseudo-Spanish" performing arts building. Ironically, the administration building slated to become victim to the wrecking ball was designed by none other than architects Don Wexler and Rick Harrison.

In the course of our discussions with the school district, it came to light that the rationale for constructing a new performing arts building was based on a 2008 analysis that showed that the campus' music building was too expensive to renovate. Amazingly, in the process of searching for an alternative solution, the conclusions of that specific analysis were applied to the nearby administration building to keep the ball rolling on the project.

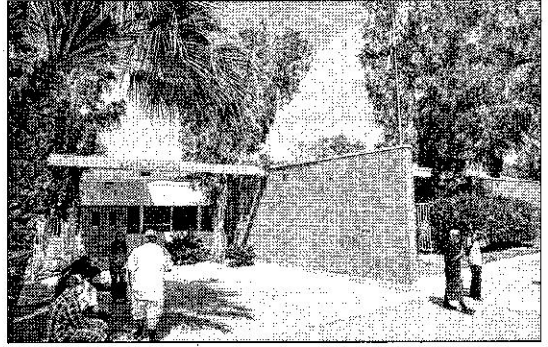
In fact, no analysis has been done of the efficacy of converting or sympathetically adding to the administration building to meet the needs of the performing arts programs.

The school district has yet to catalogue the wealth of historic resources on the high school campus. Such an inventory could serve as a development road map for this and future projects. Additionally, and specific to the impending demolition, the district has not conducted a sustainability or "green" analysis to determine:

- How much embodied energy is tied up in the 1957 building.
- The amount of energy required to demolish it.
- And the energy that will be spent to build a new building.

Today, using calculators available online, rough estimates of once-esoteric things like "embodied energy" and "demolition energy" can be made by anyone capable of balancing a checkbook.

In the school district's defense, for major projects it relies heavily on outside "professional" advice and in this case engaged a San Diego-based architectural firm. However, this does not relieve the district staff of taking notice of what is hap-



The Palm Springs High School Administration Building, designed by architects Don Wexler and Rick Harrison in 1957, is now used as the Ramon Alternative Center. JAY CALDERON/THE DESERT SUN

pening in the community. Surely the huge impact of Modernism Week on the local economy, the burgeoning year-round architectural tourism industry and the city's highly publicized sustainability initiative should have elicited some common-sense questions.

For example, this building sure resembles the sort of buildings — like City Hall and the Tramway gas station — that folks are making all the fuss about. Is ours also architecturally significant?

Or maybe, is it green and is it practical to demolish a perfectly serviceable and sturdy building?

The answers to those questions should have led the staff to then ask the obvious: How can we adapt the Palm Springs High School Administration Building to our programmatic needs?

A fraction of the money spent on the demolition and construction of a new — and far less remarkable — performing arts building could be used to properly rehabilitate and add to the modernist administration building. This may delay creation of additional performing arts spaces by as much as two years but may result in a solution that is accepted by all parties and that will last 100 years.

Fortunately, it is a golden opportunity for us to teach our kids and some adults some valuable lessons such as: "Recycling buildings saves money and is just as important as recycling paper and aluminum cans," or "Our history is important and once you destroy something it is gone forever," and perhaps even "Sometimes you have to wait a little longer and work a little harder to get things right."

There is a wonderful vintage photo of the members of the 1957 board of education standing in front of the Palm Springs High School Administration Building. They are beaming with pride because the architect-designed building they helped bring to life was modern, bright and clean — in short, everything that is good for kids. Making it bright and clean again would likewise be good for the kids.

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