

ALAN HESS
ARCHITECT
4991 CORKWOOD LANE
IRVINE, CA 92612
949 551 5343
alan@alanhess.net
www.alanhess.net

March 20, 2015

Carol Roland-Nawi
State Historic Preservation Officer
Office of Historic Preservation
1725 23rd Street, Suite 100
Sacramento, CA 95816

Re: Tahquitz Plaza by architect Hugh Kaptur, Tahquitz Canyon and Calle El Segundo

Dear Ms. Roland-Nawi:

I am writing at the request of the Palm Springs Preservation Foundation to ask you to consider writing a letter to the City of Palm Springs encouraging them to conduct an EIR for the Tahquitz Plaza office buildings (1971) by Kaptur & Lapham. The four buildings in this complex are excellent and well preserved examples of key aspects of architect Hugh Kaptur's work, and of Palm Springs Modernism.

The buildings are currently under threat of demolition for a proposed residential project. So far the city has not requested an EIR, but I believe the complex's significance and quality require it.

Kaptur is an important architect in Palm Springs Modernism. Rather than drawing on the rectilinear steel and glass geometries of, for example, Richard Neutra, Kaptur often draws on organic concepts from Frank Lloyd Wright and forms from the American Southwest. This is seen in Tahquitz Plaza's irregular roofline, the deep, sculpted frames around windows, the bermed walls, the eaves and sun shading features, and the integration of outdoor areas interspersed among the offices. The strong composition of these many elements shows Kaptur's skill and the high artistic value of his work.

In addition, Tahquitz Plaza's location on Tahquitz Canyon places it in the context of the city's Modern civic center. Tahquitz Canyon is the city's main civic thoroughfare, linking the airport to downtown; along this boulevard is an extraordinary collection of Modern buildings serving civic purposes, including city hall, police and county facilities, and the airport, complemented by commercial buildings of similar style and siting. Such a collection of Modern civic center buildings is rare in the state.

Palm Springs' midcentury Modern architecture is known for its use of Modern concepts in addressing the challenges of climate, functions, and new material technologies. These are not typified by a single aesthetic; it ranges from the lightweight, steel framed houses resting lightly on the earth seen in the work of Richard Neutra and Albert Frey, to the autochthonous monolithic concrete structures, literally buried in the earth, seen in John Lautner's work, with many more interpretations in between.

Within this wide range, Kaptur's work is singular. His training in design was closely associated with midcentury automotive design in Detroit, where he attended Lawrence Tech and worked for General Motors' consumer design division. Kaptur has worked in Palm Springs from 1956 to the present day. He worked for and with other noted local architects, including Donald Wexler, Richard Harrison, and William Cody. Like those architects, his work is distinctive and individual, and yet his design also reflects common themes that distinguish Palm Springs Modernism.

The Tahquitz Plaza offices are an excellent representation of his use of sculptural, expressionist forms influenced by Native American adobe structures, but modernized and abstracted aesthetically in the spirit of Modernism. The complex's thick stuccoed walls do not imitate those vernacular structures; the silhouette of the walls and the curving windows frames that grow directly from those walls are carefully abstracted into forms that represent a distinct, modernized aesthetic vocabulary. This approach is also seen in other Kaptur designs, including the William Holden house (1977), and the Casa Blanca motel (1979.)

In addition, the Tahquitz Plaza offices incorporate unpainted wood walls and wood trellises. These also update the wood ramadas and trellises of traditional Southwestern architecture. The siting of the office structures creates small courtyards between the buildings (another design aspect seen in historic Spanish architecture of the Southwest) allowing for shaded outdoor areas.

Likewise, the landscaping and siting of the Tahquitz Plaza buildings represent an updating of traditional concepts and a Modern response to the hot climate. Berms rise partway up the walls, providing thermal insulation and connecting the structure to the earth, similar to Lautner's desert designs.

The thick walls, hooded windows, and shaded courts all have historic precedents, but they are also practical, integral elements that help moderate the strong sunlight and heat of the local climate. The design of all these elements is artful and well composed.

The use of historic regional architecture by twentieth century architects is an important facet of Modern architecture in California and the West. It can be seen, for example, in the work of Irving Gill in the 1910s, the Ranch Houses of Cliff May in the 1950s and 1960s, and the civic buildings and residences of Bennie Gonzales in Arizona, where historic forms were blended with Modernism's abstraction. Hugh Kaptur is the primary interpreter of this approach in midcentury Palm Springs, and Tahquitz Plaza is a primary example in the city.

Kaptur's work has been rediscovered fairly recently. This is not surprising; our understanding of the significance of Palm Springs Modern architecture in general is also relatively recent. Only a dozen years ago, the work of now-recognized architects such as William Cody, Donald Wexler, Palmer & Krisel, and E. Stewart Williams was not generally well known outside Palm Springs, and its significance was not even widely recognized within Palm Springs.

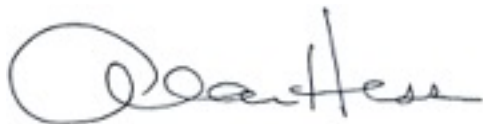
In the years before Palm Springs' heritage was fully understood, the city lost many significant structures. Unfortunately, this degradation has continued; the demolition of a major Kaptur design such as this would be a loss to history and the city's urban quality.

But as we continue researching this history, it is clear that the work of Hugh Kaptur makes a significant contribution to the unique character of Palm Springs architecture. This opinion is not mine alone; the newly published book *The Desert Modernists: The Architects Who Envisioned Midcentury Modern Palm Springs* (Desert Publications, 2015) and the documentary film *Quiet Elegance: The Architecture of Hugh M. Kaptur* (Bert Simonis, director, 2014) indicate the clear direction of opinion on Kaptur's importance.

I have written to the Palm Springs Planning Commission about my support, as a historian and architect, for the preservation of Tahquitz Plaza. I am also a consultant on architectural history for the Palm Springs architectural survey, currently underway. I have already unequivocally recommended Tahquitz Plaza as a significant building in that survey. I believe that a letter from your state office would encourage them to conduct an EIR that would document the significance of this complex.

Thank you for your consideration of this matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Robert H. H. H. H.", written in a cursive style.