

VALLEY VOICE

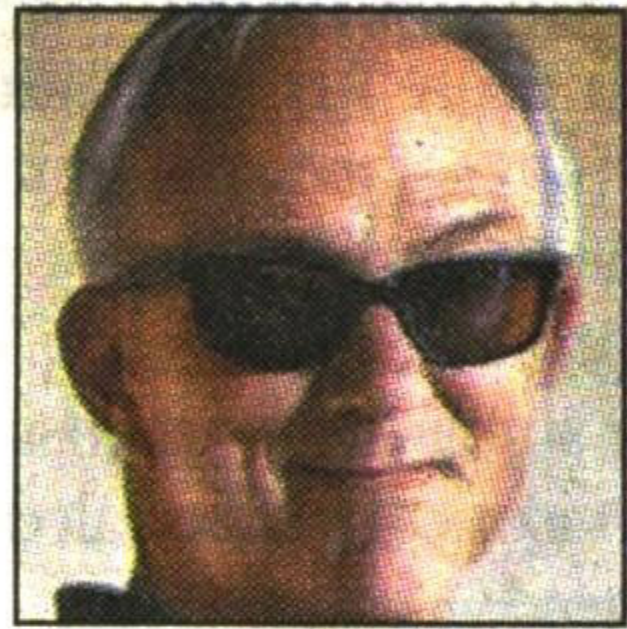
The 'de-malling' of Desert Fashion Plaza would be a good thing

A recent land-use trend is "de-malling," which transforms aging shopping malls by integrating them into urban neighborhoods rather than continuing to be walled off from surrounding development as they are now. More than 14 U.S. shopping malls are in the process of this transformation.

The proposed Palm Springs Downtown Revitalization Plan is essentially a de-malling project, and now that the distraction of the Town & Country Center development is off the table (at least for the time being) there is an opportunity to examine the rest of the project and, surprisingly, there is much to like about this proposal.

By re-establishing a street grid, the site plan goes a long way toward addressing the land-use mistakes of the past, which involved the demolition of the historic Desert Inn that altered forever the downtown's village-like character. Streets were closed to assemble the super block that contained the Desert Inn Fashion Plaza shopping mall. Adding insult to injury, the village's two main north-south streets (Palm Canyon and Indian Canyon) were converted into a one-way couple that today feel more like a freeway than small-town shopping streets. Possibly the coup de grâce was the introduction of pay-parking, a mistake that the new mid-valley town did not embrace. It's not surprising that shoppers deserted the town in droves.

Today, the new plan is a multimillion-dollar overhaul that involves the demolition of most of the original mall to be replaced by a new grid of open-air streets with blocks of smaller shops and larger anchor buildings, and structures that will provide free parking. These changes recall Palm Springs' original village atmosphere. This plan embraces the idea of a downtown that is both a shopping experience and a community center with outdoor public spaces for dining and socializing, supported by diagonal parking in front of the various stores and shops. If the restoration of the



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two-way street system becomes part of the project, along with the promised free parking, when combined with the retention of the surviving historic resources, a vibrant new downtown seems within reach.

Given the importance of our local architectural heritage as a focus of cultural tourism, imagine if the buildings of the "new downtown" were individually designed by important architects, both local and national in reputation. The resulting collection of important new buildings, focused upon the restoration of the Town & Country Center, will assure Palm Springs' cultural-tourism reputation for decades to come.

Think of Columbus, Ind., with its vibrant collection of world-class architecture as a role model. Add maybe a Modernism Week Festival Hall that could be not only the headquarters for Modernism Week, but could also function as a venue for lectures, exhibitions and other local and tourist-related activities, and finally there would be reasons to go downtown again. There's even a "green" angle: Malls have to be heated, air-conditioned, cleaned and maintained, adding costs that must be passed on to the tenants.

These same costs for an open-air town center are often considerably cheaper and consume fewer resources. It's hard not to hope that maybe this project really is the light at the end of what has been a very long tunnel.

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