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Barrett Newkirk

Palm Springs modernism fans fear losing another Wexler

The potential destruction of a midcentury commercial building has lovers of the city's architecture style fearing they could lose another piece of Palm Springs' character.

The 1956 building by the firm Wexler and Harrison, located downtown on South Indian Canyon Drive, is an early example of the modernist style Donald Wexler would go on to create throughout the city and beyond.

"It's kind of an early indication of what he was going to do in his career," said Ron Marshall, a board member and former president of the Palm Springs Preservation Foundation.

"The fluidity of the concrete creates that deep eave. It's almost half of a cathedral without being overly dramatic about it."

But the future of the reinforced concrete building is now in question after the building's owners, a group of Native Americans, told the tenants to move out by May 31 or pay daily fines of \$1,000.

Moraino Patencio, one of the landowners, declined to discuss plans with The Desert Sun, saying last week he was not authorized to do so by other landowners.

But tenants have said the owners indicated they want to demolish the building and put a hotel on the site at the corner of Indian Canyon and Ramon Road.

Marshall said the building was pointed out as significant when Palm Springs conducted a citywide architectural survey in 2004. Since then, it's been mentioned in at least two publications surveying Wexler's work, which also includes the design of the Palm Springs International Airport.

"I'm not sure what they could put in its place that would be any better," Marshall said.

Sidney Williams, curator of architecture and design at the Palm Springs Art Museum, noted the building's important characteristics include the west-facing canopy and the use of river rocks on the north and south facades.

"This building could be adaptively reused, incorporated into a larger project and maintain these unique features," Williams said in an email to The Desert Sun.

The building houses at least six small businesses, including Gallery 446. The art gallery in March opened the show Mongolian Easter Bunny by Kenny Irwin Jr., with plans to have it run until at least January.

But the orders to move out have put the future of the installation into question. Irwin — well known for his Robolights holiday light show in the Movie Colony neighborhood — has told fans he can't afford to move the entire piece and will be leaving most of it for the building owners.

"I have less than \$500 today as a result of the investment in this project and, as a result of the sudden short-term forced evictions that occurred just twelve days after I installed it, this never had a chance to succeed," Irwin wrote in an email.

The tenants were not given eviction notices, but were informed last week that they had to be out by the end of May, the same date their short-term permits ends.

Tenants said they were optimistic that the landowners would allow them to stay in the building long-term, and they've seeking more time to relocate.

Patencio, speaking at a Palm Springs City Council meeting on Wednesday, said he lives in a Wexler-designed home in Rancho Mirage. He said his business tenants should have read and understood the term of the agreements they signed.

"As adults, we have responsibilities to either inform ourselves or proceed without that information," he said.

If the building is torn down soon, it will be at least the fourth Wexler structure in Palm Springs lost in less than three years, real estate agent and preservation advocate Gary Johns said.

The Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians in September tore down Wexler's arched entryway of its downtown Spa Hotel as the first step in the hotel's demolition. The sudden move caught many in the city by surprise and has upset local architecture lovers.

The Palm Springs High School administration building on East Ramon Road, built in 1957 by Wexler and Harrison, came down in 2012 to make way for a new building.

Palm Springs Unified School District also recently demolished the Wexler-designed field house on the north side of the Palm Springs High School football stadium.

A 2013 report on planned stadium improvements described the field house as out-of-date and inadequate for the high school's needs, noting the "simplicity and unrefined exterior" made it less significant than other Wexler buildings.

The trend upsets Johns, who said the downtown building's location places it directly along the route of the double-decker tour buses that roll around town during Modernism Week.

"We can't continue to lose this body of work," he said. "We made great strides in Palm Springs to develop a brand, and we're losing all of these pieces of the brand. The less brand we have, the less appeal we're going to have to architectural tourists."

Whether a building comes down because of neglect, fire or a desire for something newer and better, the loss is felt, said Chris Menrad, president of the Palm Springs Modern Committee.

"Every building is like a thread in a fabric. If you lose one and then another and another, the fabric gets worn and becomes useless," Menrad said.

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