



May 8, 2014

Mr. Jeff L. Grubbe
Chairman, Tribal Council
Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians
5401 Dinah Shore Drive
Palm Springs, CA 92264

Dear Chairman Grubbe,

We were encouraged by an article in the May 6, 2014 issue of the *Desert Sun* newspaper about the Spa Hotel complex, wherein you were quoted that it was the tribe's intent to "preserve this key landmark."

Of course it is the foundation's view that the Spa Hotel *itself* is an integral part of that landmark--not to mention an important part of the history and legacy of the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians and the city of Palm Springs.

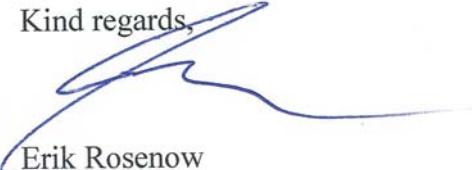
On May 30, 2008 the Palm Springs Preservation Foundation, the Palm Springs Modern Committee and the Palm Springs Historical Society, sent a joint letter to Tribal Chairman Richard Milanovich. The letter attached "a consolidated set of recommendations regarding the potential for the renovation and restoration" of the Spa Hotel. That seven-page attachment is again provided with this letter.

You will find that the information contained in the attachment is more relevant today than it was in 2008--in 2008 we could not have foreseen the astounding success of Palm Springs' Modernism Week and the marketing allure of "midcentury Palm Springs." Yearly, tens of thousands of cultural tourists visit from around the world looking to connect with the glamour and sophistication of midcentury Palm Springs. The designers of the Spa Bath House and Hotel, architects William F. Cody and the firm of Wexler & Harrison, are recognized architectural masters of that era.

In our previous interactions with the late Chairman Milanovich, and the tribe's staff, we were assured of transparency with matters regarding the Spa Hotel. We're confident that will be the case under your leadership.

We would be happy to meet with you to discuss this matter in more detail. Please contact us at (760) 837-7117.

Kind regards,



Erik Rosenow
President

Attachment: "Palm Springs Spa and Hotel" information sheet

Copy to: Palm Springs Modern Committee (Attn: Mr. Chris Menrad)
Desert Sun newspaper (Attn: Mr. Skip Descant)

PALM SPRINGS SPA AND HOTEL

PART I: SIGNIFICANCE

ARCHITECTURAL IMPORTANCE

When completed in 1960, the Palm Springs Spa was hailed in the press as “the most beautiful health Spa in the world,” having “added new glitter to the aura of Palm Springs, America’s foremost resort.” Later, the Spa Hotel was acclaimed as the “first concrete-and-steel modern hotel erected in the desert.” The Spa Hotel was also one of the first buildings in the desert to integrate world-class modernist art into its design.

The Architects: The Spa Hotel complex represents a masterwork of design by William Cody at the height of his professional creativity. Donald Wexler and Richard Harrison also played important contributing roles (especially for the Spa Bathhouse portion) in realizing Cody’s vision.

William F. Cody, FAIA, (1916-1978) was educated at the University of Southern California where he worked for architect Cliff May. His first Palm Springs project was the Del Marcos Hotel (1949). Cody designed the conversion of the Thunderbird Dude Ranch to the Thunderbird Country Club (1953), which led to his later designs of the Tamarisk (1953) and the Eldorado (1959) Country Clubs. Other notable building designs include the L’Horizon Hotel (1952) which was restored in 2005 as the Horizon Hotel, St. Theresa Catholic Church (1967), and the Palm Springs Library Center (1975). Cody designed a wide variety of commercial and residential projects in Palm Springs, Phoenix, San Diego, Palo Alto, and Havana. Cody received numerous national and local American Institute of Architects (AIA) awards throughout his career and was awarded a Fellowship for Design in the AIA in 1965. Described as an “astonishing talent,” Cody was the subject of a tribute journal published by the Palm Springs Preservation Foundation in 2004.

Donald A. Wexler, FAIA, (1926-) graduated from the University of Minnesota, moving to Los Angeles to work for Richard Neutra, and later to Palm Springs to work for William Cody. In 1952, he partnered with Richard Harrison, creating the firm of Wexler & Harrison. Wexler developed an expertise in prefabricated steel construction, bringing his ideas to fruition in the Alexander Steel Houses (1962). Other notable building designs include the Palm Springs International Airport (1965) and the Canyon Country Club (1963), as well as many commercial, institutional and public buildings. Wexler was the subject of a tribute journal published by the Palm Springs Preservation Foundation in 2010. Also assisting in the Spa Hotel project was architect Philip Koenig.

Architecture, Architectural Features and Art: The Spa Bathhouse (1959) was described as displaying the “elegant yet animated character of Cody’s architecture.” The hotel (added in 1962) was described as a “flat-roofed rectangular block...instantly recognizable as mainstream modern for 1962.” Describing the hotel itself, one commentator stated that “Cody’s rhythmic, syncopated arrangement of the room units’

repeated windows across the façade introduces a unique character to the design.” According to a concrete trade magazine of the era, the hotel also made notable use of “concrete T forms.”

Two features of the Spa complex, the **colonnade** and the **porte-cochere**, are especially noteworthy. The colonnade (also described as a “distinctive concrete-domed arcade”) was widely recognized as an example of the deft use of pre-cast concrete forms. The colonnade not only appeared repeatedly on the cover of local magazines like *Palm Springs Life* (November 1960, April 1963 and November 1966 issues) but also in national trade magazines like *Concrete* (December 1960 issue). The porte-cochere, or covered entryway, on North Calle Encilia, is today covered by an awning. As originally conceived the porte-cochere “tapers ever so slightly from bay to bay,” demonstrating how Cody could hone a specific architectural element “to bring out its structural nature and its graphic potential.” Both the porte-cochere and colonnade are such striking features that they continue to be featured in exhibitions to this day (including a recent Palm Springs Art Museum exhibition of architectural photographs entitled “Julius Shulman: Palm Springs”).

The Greek water nymph statue (since relocated) was designed by Los Angeles sculptor Bernard Zimmerman and appeared prominently in photographs and marketing brochures of the Spa Hotel. The work of John Mason and Dale Clark is found both inside and outside the Spa in “contemporary decorations, fountains and interior sculptures.” Artwork was a typical Cody detail used to “relieve the severity” of the architecture. The hotel’s turquoise and white signage used a very hip “informal modern” typography.

TRIBAL IMPORTANCE

The Spa Hotel building is especially important to the history of the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians. With the Spa Hotel as its impetus, tribal leaders, in concert with developers Samuel Banowit and William Leeb, sought from the U.S. government authority for extended leases on tribal land (ultimately requiring an act of Congress). This ushered in a new era of extended leases and made the Cahuilla Indians one of the wealthiest tribes in the nation. The Spa Hotel represents a tangible expression of how forward-thinking tribal leaders were in the early 1960s. It is appropriate that today’s tribal leadership pay homage to the tribal leaders of that era by showing similarly progressive vision.

CIVIC IMPORTANCE

Erected on the site of the natural hot mineral springs that gave the city its name, the Spa Hotel was the first concrete-and-steel modern hotel erected in the valley. As a city internationally recognized for its modern architecture, the Spa Hotel is a tangible resource attracting cultural and architectural tourism. The city’s “Modernism Week” is becoming more and more successful each year because of the influx of modern architecture and design aficionados. A significant influx of architectural tourists is starting to become an almost year-round phenomenon.

PART II: RENOVATION VS. DEMOLITION

CIVIC RESPONSIBILITY

Traditionally, the tribe has voluntarily adhered to the Palm Springs municipal code as part of the tribe's commitment to being a good neighbor and responsible member of the community. Due to the Spa Hotel's historic significance, it was identified in the City of Palm Springs 2004 Historic Resources Survey as appearing eligible for listing in the National Register and the California Register of Historic Places, and recommended for listing as a City of Palm Springs Class One Historic Site because of its local significance. The survey, which relied on Department of the Interior guidelines, made these findings despite the fact that the Spa hotel has not yet reached 50 years of age, meaning they found the hotel of "exceptional importance."

RESTORATION AND RENOVATION

Restoration (restoring portions of the hotel to original design clarity, for example the colonnade entryway) coupled with renovation (updating the tired plumbing, electrical and mechanical infrastructure of the physical building) would be a challenging, but very achievable goal. Fortunately, there are numerous architectural firms with substantial expertise in historic renovations and restorations of this sort. Some portions of the Spa Hotel's architecture have become so iconic that restoration should be considered over renovation. While such a task might normally be daunting, the ready availability of vintage photographs of the original hotel could greatly aid and inform an "authentic" restoration. Many of the photographs taken by renowned architectural photographer Julius Shulman would prove to be an invaluable aid (the Getty Research Institute's Special Collections Branch holds the Shulman photography archive). Further, in addition to the extensive archives of the tribe, one of the original architects involved in the Spa Hotel complex project, Donald Wexler, retains an impressive archive of relevant plans and photographs of the building. Additionally, the preservation organizations would be glad to provide any historical documentation in their possession or architectural expertise at their disposal. Finally, local collectors have salvaged important artifacts from the hotel over the years including the original blue Heath Company tiles that adorned the wall adjacent to the colonnade.

GREEN DEVELOPMENT

No matter how much green technology is employed in its design and construction, any new building represents a new impact on the environment. It is now generally held that **the greenest building is the building that has already been built.** In a speech concerning sustainability, Richard Moe, past President of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, said "it makes no sense for us to recycle newsprint, bottles and aluminum cans when we're throwing away entire buildings." To illustrate, by renovating, rather than demolishing, the midcentury Hotel Valley Ho in Scottsdale, **20,000 tons** of landfill debris was not sent to the local landfills.

Increasingly, the nonprofit U.S. Green Building Council (which administers the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design program) is shaping how new commercial buildings are constructed (many local and state governments have passed laws requiring that new public buildings be LEED certified). Until recently “the 'green design' movement,” said one expert, “has largely ignored the inherent ecological advantages of building reuse, including the primary one—embodied energy.”

The term “embodied energy” neatly encapsulates a persuasive rationale for sustaining old buildings rather than building from scratch. When some talk about energy use and buildings, they sometimes shortsightedly mean operating energy: how much energy a building—whether new or old—will use from today forward for heating, cooling, and illumination. Newer, more sophisticated, analyses takes into account the energy that's *already bound up* in preexisting buildings and the energy used to construct a new green building instead of reusing an old one. To quote one expert, “Old buildings are a fossil fuel repository, places where we've saved energy.” According to the same expert, if embodied energy is worked into the equation, even a new, energy-efficient office building doesn't actually start saving energy for about 40 years. And if it replaces an older building that was demolished and hauled away, the break-even period stretches to some 65 years, since demolition and disposal consume significant amounts of energy. Calculators are available to assess this embodied energy for different types of buildings (including hotels). Asbestos removal requirements do not affect the validity of such analyses. An embodied energy calculator can be found at “www.thegreenestbuilding.org.”

REDEVELOPMENT PRECEDENTS

Midcentury hotel renovations of the type proposed are becoming the norm rather than the exception. There are a number of remarkable similarities between the Spa Hotel with its “tired infrastructure” and the Hotel Valley Ho in Scottsdale which recently completed a major “rehabilitation.” Originally built in 1956, Hotel Valley Ho, like the Spa Hotel, had an inviting pool courtyard that became a hotspot for celebrities of the era. In June 2004, Westroc Hotels & Resorts embarked on an \$80-million rehabilitation and expansion of its 14-acre, 194-room urban resort. Reopened in December 20, 2005, press releases announced that the renovated hotel “blends the old with the new: classic mid-century modern architecture and modern conveniences.” Even closer to home, Palm Springs’ Riviera Resort and Spa (1959) recently underwent a \$70 million “facelift.”

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

As the geological fragility of the springs becomes better understood, it would appear that a “low-load” building complex, as presently exists, is more suitable to the corner of Tahquitz Canyon Way and Indian Canyon Drive. Renovation, as opposed to demolition, would minimize disturbance on the sensitive site.

PART III: ECONOMIC INCENTIVES

ECONOMICS OF RENOVATION

When compared to the timelines for demolition and reconstruction on the site, the timelines for renovation are potentially much shorter. This would allow a quicker return of the Spa Hotel back to a profitable and revenue-generating enterprise.

MARKETING POTENTIAL

In 2006, the National Trust for Historic Preservation placed Palm Springs on its esteemed list of cultural tourism destinations for architecture. Simultaneously, there appears to be yet another wave of re-discovery of the modern era by a new generation of cultural tourists (the city's Modernism Week saw a 35% increase in attendance in just the last year). The owner of Palm Springs Modern Tours (whose company "provides architectural tours to people from throughout the world who visit for the primary purpose of appreciating the extant mid-century modern built environment for which Palm Springs is internationally acclaimed") has opined that, "the original Palm Springs Spa Hotel, colonnade and Bath House are among the finest examples of innovation, siting and design of the era," but that, "sadly, that exceptional corner in its current configuration is essentially unnoticed by the growing demographic of visitor who would be eager to discover such a treasure." The tour owner has seen a dramatic increase in architectural tourism and international interest in Palm Springs' modernist architecture. The view of Palm Springs as a "living architectural museum" has gained such momentum that architectural visits by large groups are becoming a regular occurrence (these organizations include the Smithsonian Institution, Chicago Art Institute, Frank Lloyd Wright Building Conservancy, Denver Art Museum, and Boise Art Museum).

While many of the striking aspects of the Spa Hotel (especially the colonnade and portecochere) hide under a series of unfortunate modifications, the renovation and restoration of the original design has incredible marketing potential. A destination package that emphasizes green awareness (e.g., LEED certification), hip Hollywood poolside glamour and fresh infrastructure coupled with a return to the original signage all integrated with Julius Shulman's photography of the hotel during its heyday, makes for a compelling marketing plan. With such marketing, the hotel would attract visitors from around the world and help reinvigorate the city's downtown area.

In that regard we would also ask that tribal leaders consider joining the National Trust's Historical Hotels of America (HHA) program since the hotel is now eligible (being more than 50 years old). Over a dozen other historic California hotels have joined this program having found preservation in their economic interests.

CONCRETE

DECEMBER, 1960



High stacking increases storage at Blocklite . . . Reinforcing wire used for heating . . . NRMCA safety winners

The caption to the cover photograph of the December 1960 issue of CONCRETE magazine reads, *“The Palm Springs (Calif.) Spa made wide use of concrete: in the precast shell entrance arcade, the masonry wall shown at the right, in single T units used in the roof of the main building, and masonry again in the walls.”*

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