

Condos marked Palm Springs expansion in the early 1960s

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Courtesy Palm Springs Historical Society

After World War II, Palm Springs boomed. By 1959, the permanent population of the city was 60 percent greater than in 1950. The federal government encouraged cities to build multi-family dwellings in areas with existing public services. The city of Palm Springs needed to expand so critical decisions had to be made. Two important things happened that dictated Sandcliff's evolution.

The 1959 Palm Springs General Plan identified South Palm Springs as ripe for re-zoning. The plan proposed the building of medium density garden apartments, citing the spectacular views and desirable location of this part of town and ease of access to the rest of the city and the burgeoning airport. The plan also focused on the need for dwellings that accommodated an older population without children and seasonal residents. In addition, The General Plan proposed a neighborhood shopping center, as long as there was population growth in the vicinity to support it (this resulted in Smoke Tree Village that opened in 1965).

Second, in 1961 Congress authorized the Federal Housing Administration to insure mortgages in "parcels of air space" in the form of multiple housing units. The condominium was born. The National Housing Act, which recognized this new form of home ownership, was adopted in each state over the next eight years.

In November 1959, developers were in negotiations to buy the land for Sandcliff, adjacent to Smoke Tree Ranch on Barona Road. The city approved a zoning change: from "G-R Guest Ranch" to "R-2" (Limited Multiple Family), and the Berkeley Square Company had plans drawn up by designer Sherwin Barton for a 40-apartment community with expansive community areas. In March 1960, three homes were available and open for viewing. They advertised: "Own your own apartment homes without the cares, repairs and maintenance problems" and offered "gracious living in an atmosphere of true elegance." And then: Nothing happened. The developers went through more planning iterations, but no further construction. They waited.



Courtesy Palm Springs Historical Society

In 1960, 'co-op apartments' were the only option for multi-unit developments. A Palm Springs Life article in December 1960 stated, "In less than six months, six cooperative apartment projects have been launched in Palm Springs alone, while another half dozen have sprung into being in the unincorporated territory around the city. At least that many more are in the planning stage." The article continued, "The trend toward co-ops, which appear to be the biggest thing to sweep the desert since cactus, has occasioned the City Council to bring forth special legislation governing their construction."

Co-op homeowners didn't own the land; instead they owned shares in the corporation that owned the property so were dependent on the financial wellbeing of the corporation and other residents.

In the south end of town, Royal Hawaiian Estates and Park Imperial South were underway or completed by 1960. Developers got to build multiple units on smaller areas of land and residents enjoyed the 'carefree living' touted by every advertisement. The boom was adding hundreds of new apartments to the city while the construction of single-family homes almost ground to a halt. Hotels grumbled about the low-priced apartments and the city threatened to add a big license fee to construction permits. The City of Palm Springs dug in its heels, trying to discourage runaway development by setting maximum lease periods of 55 years on co-ops.



The Desert Sun file photo

Utah approved legal 'condominiums' in 1960 and an act was put before Congress to make the condominium a legal entity nationwide. After it passed in 1961, Sandcliff's developers had another long wait. The state of California didn't adopt the law until 1964. "Condominiums" gave homeowners the right to own the fee title, i.e. they owned the ground space underlying the apartment, while a management company was established to collect fees and oversee community maintenance. The biggest advantage for developers and prospective buyers was that the FHA would now guarantee a mortgage on a condominium.

Development at Sandcliff was underway by this time: The remaining 37 units were built in 1963 and 1964, along with the two large pools, spas, and the dramatic semi-circular loggias that still exist today. In February 1964, The Desert Sun announced the "Condominium Plan Offered at Sandcliff Garden Apartments," and described the advantage of this type of ownership, "With separate ownership of the apartment home and the land upon which it stands, tax assessments are on an individual basis, a plan which is becoming increasingly popular with desert dwellers ... The owner of an apartment is not responsible for anyone else's mortgage payments or taxes."

In November 1964 The Desert Sun heralded the new condominium lifestyle with a Sandcliff story headed: "Own-Your-Own Apartment Idea Now Nationwide."

"Own-your-own apartment homes have introduced a new way of life to families all over the nation. Palm Springs is no exception; it offers many additional advantages by providing more

leisure time and as a second home for vacations or full-season residence ... One of the newest in Palm Springs is Sandcliff.”

“Each Sandcliff living unit provides maximum privacy for its owner. To obtain this privacy, the developers designed each unit with a private garden entry, well-screened from the recreational area. Each dwelling also has a large private patio, as well as smaller private gardens. In many cases, a Sandcliff apartment has a total patio area exceeding its floor space.”

Sandcliff apartment entryways were shielded from sun and snoops with the extensive use of decorative screen block that are a hallmark of the community. Inside, homes featured every modern convenience from built-in food mixers to intercoms and pre-wired stereo. “Care and dedication to luxury” was reflected in the marble and antiqued mirrored walls around sunken Roman tubs.

Original owners at Sandcliff included enterprising businessmen. Notable among them was Joseph Cossman, the creator of the Ant Farm and the licensee of the Spud Gun, both of which made his fortune. He sold two million Spud Guns in six months.

Earlier this year, Sandcliff Garden Apartments received ‘Historic District’ status from the City of Palm Springs Historic Site Preservation Board. It was a resounding recognition for Sandcliff’s existing homeowners who are dedicated to preserving the original features of the community, from their own apartments to the spectacular pool loggias with their original tiled bar areas and built-in barbecues.

The Palm Springs Preservation Foundation, (www.pspreservationfoundation.org) which researched and wrote the community’s historic nomination, describes Sandcliff as “one of the finest and most intact examples of a mid-century ‘lifestyle’ condominium complex in Palm Springs.” The foundation also sponsored the new ‘Sandcliff’ signage that replicates the original 1960 logo. In addition, Sandcliff is now featured in the newly updated book “The Architecture of Desert Leisure” by Erik Rosenow for the preservation foundation, which focuses on several of the multi-family residential communities that were built in Palm Springs during the 1960s.

In the late 1960s, the community became known as "Garden Villas" when the same group that developed and owned "Villa Roma" and "Villa Riviera" took over sales and marketing for Sandcliff. As part of its historic preservation initiative, the HOA decided to revert to the original name.

One home – complete with original kitchen and bathroom – will be open at Sandcliff during the “Pads, Pools, and Patios” event for Modernism Week Preview on October 22. Tickets are on sale now. Proceeds go to ONE-PS, <http://www.modernismweek.com/organized-by/one-ps/>.

Melissa Riche is a writer, architecture enthusiast and preservationist. She is the guest writer for the Palm Springs Historical Society and has written historic nominations for the Palm Springs Preservation Foundation and articles for Atomic Ranch magazine, The Desert Sun and the Greater Palm Springs Convention & Visitors Bureau. She is currently working on a book about the mid-century modern architecture of Rancho Mirage, entitled, Mid Century Mirage.'