

'Save the Wave' effort under way to preserve unique Palm Desert house with roller-coaster roof

Sherry Barkas, *The Desert Sun* Published 12:23 p.m. PT June 8, 2017 | Updated 3:24 p.m. PT June 8, 2017



The city is considering preserving a historic wave house in Palm Desert. (Photo: Jay Calderon/The Desert Sun)

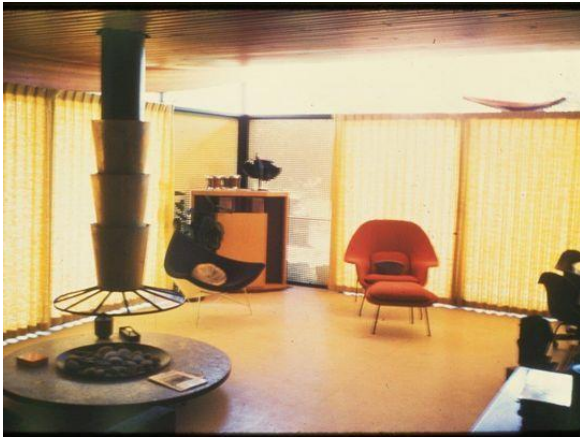
An effort is under way in Palm Desert to “Save the Wave,” a mid-century modern house with a unique roof that was built in the 1950s by well-known architect Walter S. White. The Palm Desert Historical Society is raising money to get the Miles Bates House, with its wave roof, designated as a national landmark. “It was designed to curve with the mountains behind it,” said Merilee Colton, secretary for the Historical Society of Palm Desert’s board of directors.

Designation as a historic landmark would save the house from demolition by whomever purchases the property, but the registration application process can cost up to about \$9,000 – money Colton says is needed by July 1. The historic designation “is not a fail-safe, but it’s the best tool that we have” to preserve the house, Colton said, recently standing outside the home – now in disrepair – built for artist Miles C. Bates in 1954-55. White, known as a groundbreaking architect who created roofs that “can cause people to stop, stare and smile,” designed at least 48 homes in Palm Desert.



Miles Bates House, Palm Desert 1955. (Photo: Historical Society of Palm Desert/Special to the Desert Sun)

The historical society isn't alone in its desire to save the house, which currently belongs to the city. It was purchased by the Redevelopment Agency in 2007 for future expansion of nearby Joslyn senior center and to provide more affordable housing for seniors, city spokesman David Hermann said. The state dismantled the redevelopment agencies in 2011 and, in meeting dissolution mandates set by the state, the city’s successor agency must sell the property.



This vintage photo shows how the living room in the Miles Bates house in Palm Desert originally looked. The photo is from the Walter S. White papers, Architecture and Design Collection, at the Art, Design & Architecture Museum at UC Santa Barbara. (Photo: Courtesy of Art, Design & Architecture Museum at UC Santa Barbara)

White patented the roof, which he created using wooden dowels with bi-concave intermediate elements. More than 60 years later, except for a couple of small areas of dry rot, the roof is in good shape and savable. During the city's first 10 years – Palm Desert incorporated in 1973 – White was the designer for new houses and private homes, according to Volker Welter, a professor of art history and architecture at the University of California, Santa Barbara, wrote in a February 2016 letter to then-Mayor Bob Spiegel urging the city to not let the Miles C. Bates house be demolished. "Within the history of Palm Desert the Bates house is, to the best of my knowledge, a rare if not a sole survivor that recalls that the architectural origins of Palm Desert were wider and more diverse than the wonderful custom-designed homes of the Shadow Mountain (Golf) Club area," Welter wrote.

But long before it was purchased by the city, the 800-square-foot, one-bedroom, one-bath house at 73697 Santa Rosa Way, underwent some renovations that obstruct the view of the roof from the street, so many don't realize they are passing by a desert jewel.



This vintage photo shows how the kitchen in the Miles Bates house in Palm Desert originally looked. The metal cabinets have since been replaced with wooden cabinets. The photo is from the Walter S. White papers, Architecture and Design Collection, at the Art, Design & Architecture Museum at UC Santa Barbara. (Photo: Courtesy of Art, Design & Architecture Museum at UC Santa Barbara)

Additions, all done in stucco rather than keeping with the original brick design, included two more bedrooms, a bathroom, dining room and extension of a kitchen wall. There was a pool in the back yard that has since been filled in and a single-story structure with three apartment units was built. There is no record of when the additions were done, leading officials to believe it all happened before the city was incorporated. Vintage photos show a freestanding fireplace where a ceiling fan now hangs. Floor-to-ceiling sliding glass windows – now boarded up – allowed for natural lighting throughout much of the house. The original flooring has either been replaced with tile or covered over with now-stained and worn beige carpet. "The utilities are all underground," Public Works Director Mark Greenwood said, as he led city staff and four council members on a tour through the home Wednesday morning. There is no insulation in the roof, making the home difficult to live in during the hot summer months. "This must have been a winter home," he said.

Realizing the architectural history of the home, the city is weighing options for preservation, including a possible incentive program to help with restoration costs.



The Miles Bates house in Palm Desert is a mid-century modern home with a unique wave-shaped roof. (Photo: Jay Calderon/The Desert Sun)

The hope is someone with a desire to restore it to its original design will buy the home, which was recently appraised at \$320,000 to \$340,000 if it receives historic designation, City Manager Lauri Aylaian said. The appraisal does not include restoration, which would be expensive though officials did not have an estimate of how costly Wednesday morning. The land is zoned for single and multi-family dwellings and surrounded by apartment complexes. Without being designated a historic landmark, the future owner could demolish the house and clear the land for a new apartment complex, Aylaian said. "I think we're all interested in preserving and saving it," Aylaian said, but the city doesn't have the funds.



This vintage photo shows west side of the roof and patio area of the Miles Bates house in Palm Desert. The sliding glass doors opened into the kitchen area. The photo is from the Walter S. White papers, Architecture and Design Collection, at the Art, Design & Architecture Museum at UC Santa Barbara. (Photo: Courtesy of Art, Design & Architecture Museum at UC Santa Barbara)

"We would love to tie this in with Modernism Week," Aylaian said. Modernism Week is a celebration of all things mid-century modern with home tours and other events that bring awareness and honors the architecture that has put the valley on the map. It would be an ideal time to try and sell the house to someone with a passion for mid-century modern architecture, Aylaian said. While Mayor Pro Tem Sabby Jonathan supports preservation of the house, he also said it would take money the city doesn't currently have. "It is definitely unique and has an artistic element," he said. "We're not giving up. Just trying to get creative and find solutions" the city can afford, he said.

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'SAVE THE WAVE' The Historical Society of Palm Desert is raising \$9,000 to apply for historic designation of the Miles Bates house on Santa Rosa Way through the National Register of Historic Places. For more information, call the museum at (760) 346-6588 or send donations to the Historical Society of Palm Desert, PO Box 77, Palm Desert 92261