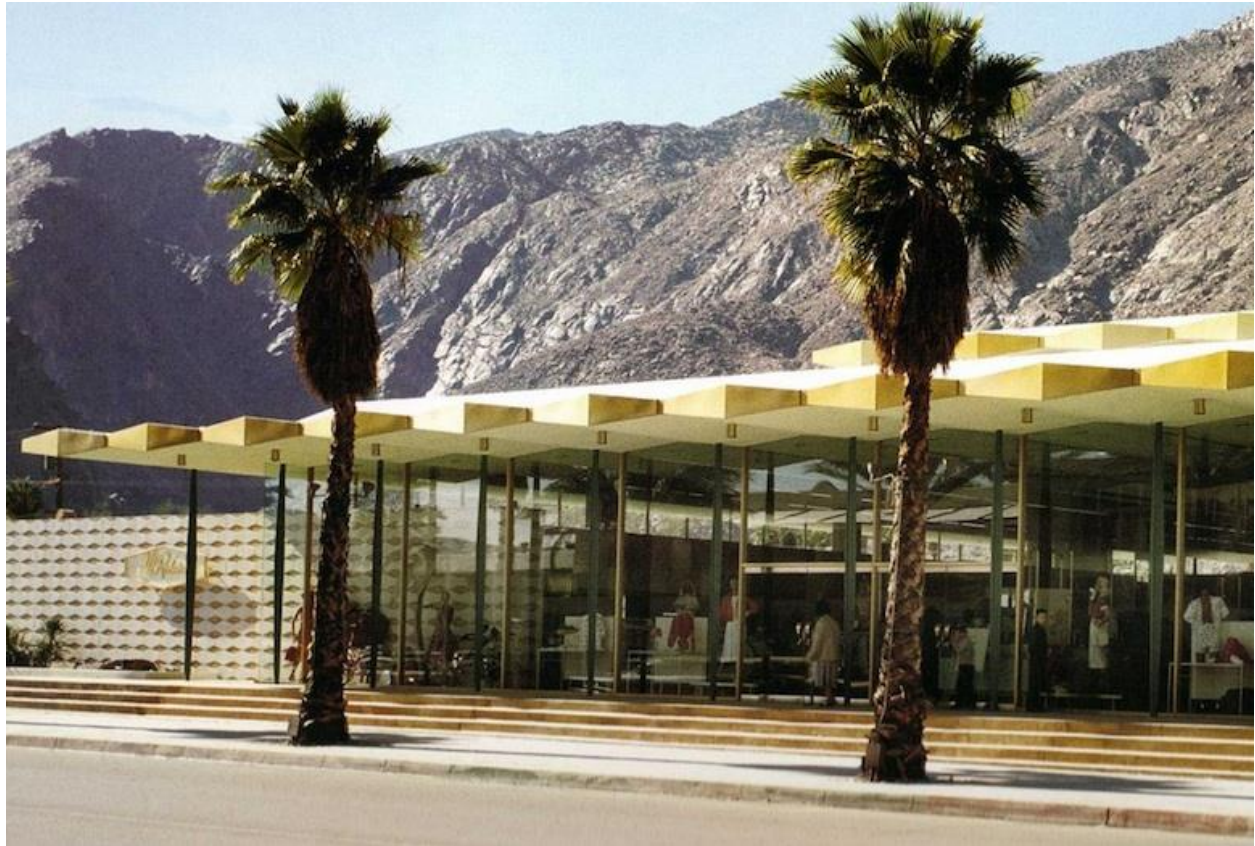


Palm Springs Life

Historic Designation Preserves, Promotes Palm Springs Architecture

City's process allows public to celebrate architecturally significant buildings

LYDIA KREMER / JULY 5, 2015 / MODERNISM / LEAVE A COMMENT



The former J.W. Robinsons building, currently occupied by The Alley, is an example of a Class 1 historic designation.
Photo courtesy of Gary Johns

Palm Springs' attractions go well beyond your typical park or ride.

One of the city's most defining characteristics is its architecture, and many of the structures have been repurposed for locals and visitors to still enjoy. Thanks to the Palm Springs Historic Site Preservation Board (HSPB), there are approximately 100 designated historic sites broken down into three levels – Class 1, Class 2, and Class 3.

Of the 100 or so designated sites, there are about 39 single family residential properties and the rest are commercial, institutional, governmental, or other non-residential sites with Class 1 or Class 2 distinction. Buildings that were built prior to 1969 are automatically Class 3.

“Historic preservation is important to Palm Springs” says Ken Lyon, associate planner for Palm Springs’ Department of Planning Services. “As a city whose primary industry is tourism, 'cultural tourism' (historical, architectural, arts, etc.) offers our visitors a 'richness of experience' and contributes to the attractiveness of Palm Springs as a popular international tourism destination.”



The Tramway Gas Station is now the Palm Springs Visitors Center.
Photo courtesy of Palm Springs Life Archives/Palm Springs Historical Society

Due to the HSPB and other local preservation organizations, Palm Springs has retained much of its important Spanish Colonial Revival and Midcentury Modern architecture. Two high profile examples of architectural preservation through Class 1 historic designation are the Tramway Gas Station and the Santa Fe Federal Savings and Loan.

In 1999, the Albert Frey-Robson Chambers designed Tramway Gas Station with its magnificent soaring roofline was nearly demolished. It galvanized a huge groundswell in the community to preserve this striking structure and resulted in the formation of the Palm Springs Modern Committee (PS ModCom). The Tramway Gas Station, built in 1965, is now among the City's most prized midcentury modern buildings and serves as the Palm Springs Visitors Center, providing a dramatic gateway to the city.

The Palm Springs Art Museum's dazzling Architecture & Design Center was formerly the 1961 Santa Fe Federal building designed by E. Stewart Williams. The defunct bank building was purchased by the museum in 2011 following its Class 1 historic designation, protecting the building from proposed development plans.



The Santa Fe Savings and Loan is now the Palm Springs Art Museum's Architecture & Design Center. Photo courtesy of Robert Imber

Photo

Both buildings came under the scrutiny of the HSPB, which was established in 1981 when the City Council adopted the Historic Preservation Ordinance to manage the review and granting of historic status. Gary Johns, chair of the HSPB and also a member of the nonprofit Palm Springs Preservation Foundation for eight years, says the research for historic nominations is exhaustive.

"PSPF's board of directors is a lean group of seven passionate volunteers who have gone to great lengths to identify and write historic nominations," explains Johns who also presents a very successful annual lecture titled Palm Springs Lost, Saved, and Endangered.

"The nominations for historic designation require hours of research, title searches, exhaustive research at the library, the Historical Society, and even the City's Building Permits records – all done by volunteers whose hard work and dedication greatly benefits the community," Johns adds.

The historic designation process endows a building with protections and incentives they would not otherwise have.

"Class 1 is the highest, most prestigious historic designation available in Palm Springs," says Lyons. "Class 1 designation makes the property eligible for the application of a Mills Act Historic Property Preservation Agreement between the City and the property owner for potential property tax reduction." Besides a historic designation by the City of Palm Springs, a property may be also be eligible for national and state historic designations which have their own potential tax benefits.



The Hideaway, formerly the Town and Desert Apartments.
Photo courtesy of Palm Springs Life archives

Two recent Class 1 buildings are the Town and Desert Apartments (currently named The Hideaway) and the J.W. Robinsons Bldg. (currently occupied by The Alley). “Both terrific buildings; I like Herbert Burns’ work (Town & Desert, Orbit In, etc.),” says Lyon. “JW Robinson is a beautiful building done by a master architectural firm, (Charles) Luckman & (William) Pereira. It has so many wonderful little details, such as the 'finned' steel columns, the extremely slender profile of those columns, the use of patterned concrete block, and the richly detailed 'folded' fascia.”

Christy Eugenis, part-time Palm Springs resident and owner of The Hideaway and former owner of The Orbit In, fully embraced the Class 1 historic designation.

“It was a wonderful experience working with the pros of the Palm Springs Preservation Foundation, who did extensive research to find out more about Herbert W. Burns and the history of the Town & Desert,” Eugenis recalls. “Our Class One historic designation gives me a sense of hope that other people will learn more about and appreciate Burn's contributions to the Historic Tennis Club District, and that the Hideaway is much less likely to be abandoned or replaced in these times of ravenous real estate development.”

Lydia Kremer has worked in the architecture and design communities of Palm Springs for more than 10 years. As a publicist, she promoted Palm Springs Modernism Week for seven years since its inception, she served on the Architectural Design Council board for five years, and was a board trustee for the California Preservation Foundation for five years.