

Spa Hotel should be renovated, not simply destroyed

I was shocked last month to learn that the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians will tear down both the Spa Hotel and the Spa Bath House. The hotel, designed by architect William F. Cody, and bath house, designed by the firm of Wexler & Harrison, are much-loved buildings. Adding insult to the coming demolition, Tribal Chairman Jeff Grubbe claimed that the tribe “doesn’t have a plan in place yet” for the site.

I understand that the tribe has a right to do what it likes with its buildings and property. But what are the tribe’s responsibilities to the greater community? Surely tribal leaders have noticed that a wave of cultural tourism has helped buoy the local economy. We have visitors from around the world coming to see, enjoy and inhabit our midcentury-modern architecture. Is it wise for the tribe to be tearing down one of the best examples of that architecture?

And aside from the historical importance of the Spa Hotel complex to the citizens of Palm Springs and the Coachella Valley, where is the tribe’s sense of its own history? The tribal leaders of the midcentury era fervently hoped that the construction of the Spa Hotel complex (from 1959-1962) would blaze a path for the future of their people. By all accounts, it did.

At a June 19 joint session with the Palm Springs City Council, Grubbe implored the audience to visit the tribe’s new “Vision” website. He then confidently asserted that the “purpose behind the closing of the Spa Hotel complex” was a demonstration of the tribe’s vision to “protect, preserve, refresh and rejuvenate.”

Just moments later, on the heels of this inspirational vision, the tribal chairman further rationalized the demolition of the Spa Hotel complex because it’s a “very old building.” Pardon me, but isn’t this discredited 1980s-era thinking about development? In 2014, should we still be treating buildings like disposable commodities? In a praiseworthy instance of



Barbara Marshall

political doublespeak, the tribal chairman assured the audience that the tear down of the Spa Hotel complex would be “green” as much of the demolition waste would be recycled. Grubbe is asking us to thank him for hugging a tree after he has chopped it down. The Spa Hotel complex represents some of the most important and historic buildings the tribe owns and certainly seems worthy of investment. Just up the street Palm Springs’ Riviera Hotel has undergone an \$80 million investment. The owners of that hotel aggressively market the hotel’s midcentury pedigree. The tribal leaders need less “vision” and better eyesight.

While I applaud the tribe’s track record of community philanthropy, past generosity does not give them a pass to demolish a much-loved local landmark. I challenge the tribal council to embrace a community-oriented vision by preserving and investing in the rehabilitation of the Spa Hotel complex. Then words like “rejuvenate” and “preserve” will actually mean something. Until that happens, slogans and slick websites will remain poor substitutes for sensible leadership.

Barbara Marshall is a former resident of Palm Springs who now visits seasonally. During her seven years as a full-time resident she served as the vice chairwoman of the city’s Historic Site Preservation Board where she was instrumental in securing the city’s status as a White House “Preserve America” community. She continues to serve on the board of the Palm Springs Preservation Foundation. Email her at atomicbee57@yahoo.com