



September 3, 2026

Sent Via Email

Chair, Architectural Review Commission (ARC) (Attn: James Blakeley III)
City of Palm Desert
73510 Fred Waring Drive
Palm Desert, CA 92260

Subject: University Baptist Church (1966, Richard A. Harrison, AIA)

Dear Mr. Blakeley,

The recent ARC meeting of August 25, 2026, discussed proposed building changes intended to convert the subject church (located at 72700 Fred Waring Drive) into medical offices. Those proposed owner changes will dramatically compromise architect Richard Harrison's original design, denude it of many of its character-defining features, and destroy its historical integrity. We are happy that there was significant "push back" from some of the ARC members regarding these changes and that the item was ultimately "continued." The video minutes of the meeting reveal the applicant's genuine lack of understanding of the architecture. For example, the proposed changes do not see the recessed elements of the building as significant architectural elements, but rather as spaces to be "filled-in" for extra square footage.

Architect Richard Harrison is only recently being appreciated in his own right and not just as the less famous portion of "Wexler & Harrison" (an abbreviated biography is provided as Attachment 1). Harrison's work in Palm Desert includes the Shadow Mountain Fairway Cottages and the Marrakesh Country Club. In 2015, he received a star in front of the Palm Springs Art Museum Architecture and Design Center.

Most importantly, and as discussed during the ARC meeting, the University Baptist Church building is included in the Palm Desert historic resources survey and historic context statement.

We fully appreciate the need for buildings, even historic ones, to be repurposed. However, we would strongly suggest that the owner of the subject property consult a preservation architect and/or pursue a remodel of the building more sympathetic to the original architecture. This will not only make the owner's future clients happy, but will preserve an important piece of Palm Desert's architecture.

The point of contact for this matter is PSPF board member (and Palm Desert resident) Carl Dews at info@pspreservationfoundation.org.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Gary Johns". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Gary" and last name "Johns" clearly legible.

Gary Johns
President

Copy to:
Evan Trubee, Palm Desert City Mayor
Chris Escobedo, Palm Desert City Manager

Attachment (1): Biography of Richard A. Harrison, AIA

(Excerpted from the Class I Historic Resource nomination for the Dr. Harry and Betty Garber Residence (1970, Richard A. Harrison, AIA) written by architectural historian Steven Keylon)

Richard A. Harrison, AIA (1924-1995)

Richard A. Harrison, widely known as Rick Harrison, made significant strides in the field of architecture, notably in partnership with Donald Wexler during the 1950s. Together, they formed one of the most influential architectural firms in the desert, contributing to the development of what would later be recognized as the Palm Springs School of Architecture. However, Harrison's career is equally distinguished, marked by a series of noteworthy projects highlighting his unique artistic vision.

Born in San Pedro, California, Richard Arnett Harrison was raised in Los Angeles, where he attended University High School, graduating in 1942. He initially worked for Pacific Aviation and subsequently spent three years in the Navy as an instructor in aeronautical engineering. After World War II, Harrison enrolled at the University of Southern California (USC), earning a Bachelor of Architecture in 1952. During his time at USC, a hub for the post-and-beam architectural style and influenced by the Case Study House program from *Arts & Architecture* magazine, Harrison honed his expertise in this USC style, which he later brought to his partnership with Wexler, although he often did not receive due recognition for this contribution.

As articulated by Esther McCoy, the USC style is distinguished by its exposed wood post-and-beam structural system, which achieves aesthetic appeal through an asymmetrical yet balanced arrangement of modular, in-fill panels. This post-and-beam construction facilitated an open and flexible floor plan while fostering a strong connection to the outdoors. Patios adjacent to rooms, visible through expansive glazing, extended the living space and created transitional areas between the interior and exterior, embodying the style's emphasis on indoor-outdoor integration. In tribute to its Arts and Crafts origins, McCoy noted that a low-pitched gable with wide eaves and exposed rafter tails typically crowned the building. The commitment to site-specific design was equally important as any architectural feature, treating the existing topography as a partially completed canvas.

While still at USC in 1951, Harrison began working as a draftsman for the renowned desert architect William Cody. He contributed to significant projects, such as the working drawings for Cody's iconic L'Horizon Hotel. This experience was instrumental for Harrison, but it was his collaboration with fellow draftsman Donald Wexler that became a pivotal aspect of his career.

Harrison joined the American Institute of Architects (AIA) in 1957, with sponsorship from prominent local architects E. Stewart Williams and John Porter Clark. After amicably parting ways with Wexler in early 1962, Harrison embarked on a prolific and notable solo career. Although the split was reportedly due to differing professional interests—Wexler leaning toward commercial and civic projects, and Harrison favoring residential designs—Harrison's portfolio includes a surprising number of non-residential commissions.

Golf-related real estate developments were a significant aspect of Harrison's career. His designs for the Westward Ho Country Club (1962) in Indio, Canyon Country Club South clubhouse (1963), Palm Desert Country Club (1966, unbuilt), and Marrakesh Country Club (1971) established his reputation in the niche of golf clubhouse architecture in the Coachella Valley, mirroring the earlier success of William Cody. Additionally, he designed residential units for the pioneering golf developer Johnny Dawson's Seven Lakes Country Club in Palm Springs (1967-72).

Harrison's commercial architectural contributions include notable projects such as additions to the Sun Center, as well as the Patencio Building (1965), which, with its intriguing geometrical forms, is another standout project located on the bustling retail corridor of Tahquitz Canyon Way. Collaborations with architect Howard Lapham led to the creation of the Palm Springs National Bank (1964) on South Palm Canyon and the rustic modernity of the Smoke Tree Village shopping center (1964), designed to serve the growing South Palm Springs community.

Harrison also made significant contributions to religious architecture in the Coachella Valley. His design for the University Baptist Church in Palm Desert (1966) is particularly noteworthy, featuring bold geometric angles and a striking interplay of architectural solids and voids. Other religious projects include the Outdoor Chapel at Desert Memorial Park (1971), the Our Lady of Solitude Parish Center (1974), and the Palm Springs Church of Religious Science (1985).

In residential architecture, Harrison's work encompassed a variety of forms. Following his split with Wexler, he designed over 170 houses in south Palm Desert for developers Cliff Henderson and Adrian Schilck. His multi-unit projects include the three-story Canyon View Condominiums (1966) for developer Roy Fey and the luxurious condominiums at Seven Lakes Country Club (1967-72). Harrison's design for the Albert Marx Residence (1967) within the exclusive Tamarisk Country Club and the Garber Residence (1972) near the top of Southridge, among other prominent architectural works, demonstrates his versatility and enduring impact on the architectural landscape.