

Palm Springs preservation board recommends historic designation for Temple Isaiah

The 70-year-old synagogue on Alejo Road was founded by concentration camp survivors; its layered architecture spans Modernist, Mid-Century, and Brutalist design phases.

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The interior and exterior of Temple Isaiah are seen in these images from a city staff report.

The Palm Springs Historic Site Preservation Board on Tuesday recommended Temple Isaiah for historic designation.

The synagogue and Jewish Community Center has sat at 332 West Alejo Rd., just north of the O'Donnell Golf Club, for over 70 years. The board recommended the temple for a Class 1 historic designation, noting that the property has maintained its historic significance even while undergoing various design iterations over the years.

“As a designated gathering space for the Jewish community in Palm Springs, it has been the social and cultural center for the community for the past 75 years,” a city staff member said Tuesday during the presentation. “The site captures the post-war period as a distinctive site

that has evolved through each significant design phase, starting its life as a modernist vision of a religious building, and the last design phase of the temple exemplifies late modern, brutalist features.”

Architect E. Stewart Williams designed the temple’s first facility — a Modernist building with C-shaped plan and exposed concrete blocks — between 1950 and 1952. By the early 1960s, the growing temple needed more space, and architects Wexler and Harrison added a six-classroom addition. In the 1980s, the temple needed a larger gathering space.

Architect David Christian encapsulated the original temple within a new stucco exterior and added a new auditorium, “making the complex more than three times its previous size” and transforming the building from “a Mid-Century Modern aesthetic to a Late Modern/Brutalist style,” according to the city staff report.

“I know there are so many wonderful layers of history, but what’s there now from the street is the David Christian design,” said Steve Keylon with the Palm Springs Preservation Foundation. “I think even if E. Stewart Williams and Wexler and Harrison had never happened, that design is still artistic and significant, and would classify this as the work of a master.”

The onus for designating the temple began around a decade ago, when the temple’s board tried to sell the property to a developer but the deal fell through, according to Robert Weinstein, president of Temple Isaiah. The temple was first founded in the late 1940s by a group of between 50 and 100 concentration camp survivors, whose stories are written in a booklet inside the temple, Weinstein said.

“Let’s preserve this for generations to come. Let’s not take any chances, you know 20, 30, 40 years from now, when future generations come, we want to make sure it’s still there,” said Weinstein.

The recommendation will next go before the city council for final approval.