

Handled with care: Bank of America building restoration showcases commitment to preservation

During a re-opening celebration Friday, company leaders and local preservationists touted the cooperation that resulted in a uniquely Palm Springs project.

By Kendall Balchan | Palm Springs Post | June 14, 2024



Locals line up Friday morning to take a look inside the newly-renovated bank of America historic building in Downtown Palm Springs.

Palm Springs bills itself as a city "like no place else." On days like Friday – when more than 100 locals showed up for the reopening of the Bank of America building on South Palm Canyon Drive – that phrase proves to be more than just a slogan.

A simple bank reopening and ribbon-cutting would prove barely newsworthy in most places. But if Friday's event here was just a simple ribbon-cutting, it wouldn't have attracted members of the Palm Springs City Council, City Manager Scott Stiles, a representative from state Rep. Greg Wallis's office, the bank president for Bank of America's Inland Empire branch, Bansree Parikh, and a whole retinue of commissioners

and committee members belonging to architecture and preservation groups throughout the city.

Residents started arriving well before the event started, some taking the chance to peer inside the windows of the building like kids in front of a toy store window, hoping to catch their first glimpse of the completely redesigned interior.

Some were just glad their local branch was finally reopening. But most were there for the spectacle of the unveiling of the restored building.

The [modern masterpiece](#) was designed by Rudi Baumfeld in 1959. It's more sculpture than building, instantly recognizable thanks to its shimmering blue mosaic tiles and its frothy, curvilinear roof inspired by Le Corbusier's [Ronchamp Chapel](#) in France.

Baumfeld was working for Gruen Associates when he designed the Bank of America Building. Victor Gruen founded the architecture firm, and is considered the [Father of Shopping Malls](#) after designing the world's first enclosed regional shopping center.

The building originally housed City National Bank and was one of four notable midcentury modern banks all within walking distance of each other that made up The Financial District of Palm Springs in the 1950s and 1960s.



Inside the lobby of the Bank of America building it's anything but cookie-cutter bank design.

Attracting visitors worldwide, fans of the building at home and abroad were worried when the Bank of America sign first came down at the beginning of the project.

"We have a community that is pretty linked in on social media, and they were just freaking out that someone was destroying things," said Courtney Newman, president of

the Palm Springs Modern Committee (PS ModCom). He remembers fielding urgent phone calls and emails from concerned residents.

But to Bank of America's credit, Newman said, he had the confidence to tell every caller that the building was in good hands and that it was being thoughtfully restored by experts.

The building is a Class 1 Historic Site, so major changes had to go through the city-appointed Historic Site Preservation Board and there are strict rules that dictate acceptable and unacceptable changes.

Parikh said B of A officials weren't content with doing the bare minimum, and chose to go above and beyond the requirements when rehabbing the building.

Michael McAllister, an associate with Gensler architects, said what he thought was just going to be a three-month project, eventually morphed into a three-year complete restoration.

"We thought we were just going to put some paint on it, put in a new microwave and call it a day," he said. But while surveying the top of the building, the project team noticed water was pooling on the roof.



The interior of the Bank of America building was completely demolished during the building's restoration. (Photo courtesy Gary Johns)

After taking a closer look at the roof, they also realized the ceiling needed fixing along with new structural components to support the curtain wall system.

The building also had to be brought up to current energy efficiency standards by completely replacing the single-paned glass and adding insulation in the roof.

"Literally roof to slab it is all brand new," said McAllister.

Once the team realized the extent of the work, they came back and informed Bank of America.

"It's an uphill battle to get owners, particularly of commercial structures, to understand the value of taking care of these old buildings," said PS ModCom's Newman. "The value both financially and for the community."

But, Newman said, the bank committed to the restoration efforts right away, "without any arm-twisting or cajoling or arguing back and forth with us."

McAllister agreed, "They put their money where their mouth is."

The restoration was so thorough, PS ModCom announced it was awarding the Bank of America with the Commercial Restoration Award, to be handed out at their annual Preservation Awards in October.

Nearly the entire building was gutted and restored, with some of the biggest changes being the change in paint color on the exterior from white to a tan color to better match the original color.

The interior was transformed from its previous state. Walking inside the building before, you could be in any bank in any city in the country. The room was without character, with bland, featureless details and flooring.



The re-opening of Bank of America wouldn't have been complete Friday with a traditional Palm Springs Chamber of Commerce ribbon cutting.

Now, customers are greeted with a high ceiling, big windows with sweeping views, and custom furniture. The dark wood laminate flooring was replaced with poured Terrazzo.

Before, the iconic blue mosaic was almost hidden at the back of the building, dimly lit. It's now the centerpiece of the building and the first thing you see when you walk in.

The building is important not just because it's a neighborhood bank, or its association with a well-known architect. It's important because it serves as a neat bookend to the city, explained Gary Johns, board president of the Palm Springs Preservation Foundation.

With the Albert Frey-designed gas station turned visitor's center to the north, and the Bank of America building to the south, no matter how visitors enter the city, they're greeted with a midcentury modern masterpiece.

Knowing that the building was essentially gutted, it's no wonder locals were concerned about the outcome.

"People in Palm Springs, they're more than just citizens," Johns said. "They're activists, preservationists, artists. They care about our city and the look of our city."

Perhaps that's why so many attended the reopening, acting almost as watchdogs to ensure the local treasure had been handled with care.