



A dramatic view of the "desert modern" architecture of City Hall was like everything else in Palm Springs, unique and attractive.

# City Hall symbol of 'relentless progress'

**Iconic 'desert modern' structure has endured for more than 50 years**

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USA TODAY NETWORK

"The decision to construct a new city hall is another step forward in the relentless progress of Palm Springs" commented City Manager Russell Rink in 1952 in *The Desert Sun*. He continued that further important decisions would have to be made for "what you build today will be used for at least 50 years, and if well done, perhaps 100 years."

The first city hall was located in leased premises in the 300 block of Palm Canyon Drive. The seat of government was subsequently moved to converted army barracks in 1948. Relocated to an empty patch of desert west of the airport, the barracks were intended as a stopgap measure while plans were studied for a permanent location and buildings.

The idea of building a new city hall had been bandied about since the city's inception in 1938. Councilmen regularly expounded on the need for new quarters and the virtues of flexibility and planning for accommodating future enlargements. The local architectural firm of Clark & Frey was retained to study the prospect in 1946.

As discussion continued, an idea that instead building something new, the city should buy and repurpose an existing, half-finished building, (specifically the Sunset House, at Palm Canyon and Via Lola) gained some momentum.

The conundrum of where to locate a civic center that wouldn't be uprooted by expansion of the airport, federal government interference or mandate regarding Indian land was vigorous. Construction and maintenance costs were debated.

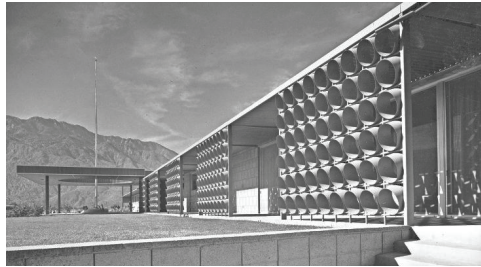
Some suggested the money for a new city hall would be better spent on a golf course to continue promoting tourism.

A committee was formed, advocating the purchase of the old El Mirador Hotel for conversion into a civic center, expansion of the hospital, museum, branch library, recreational center and city park. (This ambitious plan would not come to fruition.) The proposition was placed on the ballot and if the vote were close, the results would be delayed as 101 absentee ballots that had been issued and would have to be counted.

By September 1952, the council began seriously considering the creation of a new civic center. They promised no decision and no rash action without a thorough study. The population of Palm Springs had more than doubled in the decade between 1940 and 1950.

Building and business were booming. Many Villagers were staying put all summer rather than fleeing to cooler climes. A proper civic center seemed in keeping with the "relentless progress" of the town.

Further, a city hall was generally "looked upon as a monument which reflects and represents public spirit and



An iconic view of City Hall.



The Palm Springs City Hall.



**Groundbreaking for Palm Springs City Hall February 9, 1956 with Ruth Hardy and Earl Strobe.**  
PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY PHOTOS

pride in the affairs of the community, and investors are influenced by the condition of appearance of public buildings in making their decisions concerning the selection of individual communities for the investment of their capital."

A new city hall would keep the boom booming.  
"Like everything else in Palm Springs, the city hall should be exceedingly attractive and unique" the city manager reported. "What we know as "desert modern" would best serve this purpose. The lobby and council chamber should contain photo murals depicting

life in the desert. The lobby should contain space for shadow box exhibits to display items and activities of interest to the tourist."

By the end of 1952 the merits of two sites, north at Tamarisk Park and the existing barracks site, just west of the airport, were being discussed and fiercely debated.

Despite the commitment to exhaustive study, in January 1955, the council unexpectedly voted to build the new city hall at Tamarisk Park. Villagers were not pleased.

The Editorial Board of *The Desert*

*Sun* quickly weighed in with a front page editorial, noting intense community opposition and accusing the council of not a small amount of secrecy in considering the matter.

"The action last Tuesday came like a bolt out of the blue and was as unwelcome in many quarters as the chilly weather that followed. Most...don't like the idea of a civic center in a residential area."

The wisdom of spending the required \$300,000 for new construction was also questioned. There "was no reason for such haste. The city government is not without a roof over its head. Present quarters are inadequate, but no emergency exists..." But the principal criticism "which can justly be directed...at the council...is not having held a public hearing in the matter before arriving at their decision."

The Editorial Board concluded, "The City Council should rescind its action and give the subject more thought and study."

It became clear that the majority of the community was comfortable with the existing site, to the west of the airport, and was vehemently against any of the northerly possibilities. The dust-up resulted in other sites being considered as well.

The Planning Commission favored the current, airport site. Lienau Village, was owned by the city but thought to be "too long and narrow," across from a school, adjacent to a stable area and wouldn't have sufficient parking. Adjacent to DeMuth Park would entail the costly removal of boulders. Ramon and Sunrise had an owner unwilling to sell. The center of Section 14 would require negotiation with the Tribal Council. Numerous other sites were considered and duly rejected.

By July 1955, the city received the "green light on its plans to build a new city hall just north of the present buildings on McCallum Way when the Los Angeles office of the Civic Aeronautical Authority gave approval of the use of the land for the purpose..." This approval removed the major impediment and objection to the existing site.

A dusty bit of ground, next to some scrubby tamarisk trees was ceremoniously broken on February 9, 1956.

"The new civic center will be north of the present city hall building and will be built in two parts. One, a T-shaped building will house all the of the administrative offices. The other building will house the council chambers and possibly the Palm Springs judicial court rooms...A fund of \$300,000 has been earmarked for the structure. Parking place for 140 automobiles is provided in the plans."

The structure that resulted has indeed endured for more than 50 years.

The "desert modern" aesthetic it epitomizes is now iconic.  
Celebrated along with other buildings of the period during Modernism Week each year, tourists from all over the world descend on the desert to admire exceedingly unique and attractive architecture from the top of double-decker buses.