

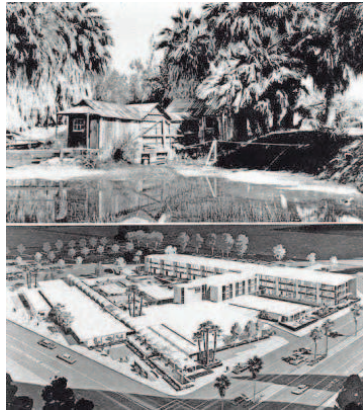
# How Section 14 became heart of bustling downtown

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The Desert Sun reported in November of 1962 the exciting prospect of a brand-name hotel coming to the desert with a headline that read, "On Section 14—Hilton May Come." The article mused, "Palm Springs may join other international tourist centers as the site of a Conrad Hilton hotel, Ray Simpson, legal counsel for the Agua Caliente Indian Tribe intimated. Simpson, speaking on problems of Section 14 development caused by current patch-work zoning on the strategic square-mile, reported here that new zoning and long-term leases 'could bring a Hilton Hotel to this resort sun mecca. Hilton was one of the leads contacted during our survey to determine what could be done or expected with Section 14 land. Hilton wrote us that he would be glad to have a hotel on Section 14, with a 99-year lease,' Simpson told city officials studying long term zoning for the Indian-owned land. Long-term leases were initiated with a special Congressional act, which permitted the Palm Springs Spa development at Indian Avenue and Tahquitz-McCallum Way."

Both the tribe and the city had struggled dating back to the 1930s to contend with the substandard conditions right in the middle of town created by decades of restrictive leasing terms imposed by the federal government. The development of this square mile at the very center of town was thought critical to the survival of Palm Springs as a resort. Many buildings were ramshackle and fire hazards. There were piles of trash and lack of sewer service. To protect the tourist trade, some sort of change was thought absolutely necessary. A 1961 report from the planning and police departments held there were some 2,000 persons among the approximately 173 families of two or more persons to be displaced by the move. And there



**Advertising contrasted the old bathhouse with the gleaming new facilities.** PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY/SPECIAL TO THE DESERT SUN

were 321 white families and 115 families of color residing in the section.

There was no reason to suppose there could be any sort of fancy development on Section 14. One of the only businesses in the area was a coin laundromat. There had been horse stables back in the 1920s and 30s. There were remnants of board houses now abandoned. The squalid condition of many of the buildings stood in stark contrast to the dreamed-of luxury accommodations of the Hilton and the Spa hotels.

"The Spa was the first of the plush new developments which have developed on major intersections of Section 14 since 1959" the article noted. Having secured the ability to make long-term land leases, Vyola Ortner and her all-female council, hired Victor Gruen & Associates, the prestigious national architectural and planning firm, to launch the economic development blueprint for Section 14. The plan was never fully realized. The next decade would see hundreds of apartment units and condominiums constructed on Section 14.

But the Tribal Council's very first deal, to build the Palm Springs Spa and Hotel, started other development in earnest.

There had been many unsuccessful efforts to lease the hot mineral springs before. But in 1957, Sam Banowitz convinced the women of the Tribal Council that he could build a bathhouse that would be profitable not just for the developers, but for the tribe. The agreement stipulated that Banowitz relocate the sacred palm trees on the property. The transaction was the first of its kind in the United States.

The spa building itself came first, and after negotiating a 99-year lease, Banowitz built the adjoining hotel. The tribe was to receive all the income from the hot spring's fancy new modern facility. Postcards contrasting the original wooden bathhouse with the gleaming new Spa were dispersed internationally.

The design of the new buildings was extremely courageous for the time. Instead of the Spanish Mediterranean style predominant in town and advocated by Mayor Frank Bogert, the Tribal Council selected local architects working in the cutting-edge modernist idiom. Wexler & Harrison, William Cody, Parker-Zehnder & Associates and Philip Koenig were commissioned to design the ambitious project. Years of surveys done by geologists and engineers allowed control of 104-degree therapeutic water on the historic site so construction to begin.

Palm Springs Spa, Inc. conceived a thirty-thousand-square-foot spa on the ancient mineral spring and an adjacent three-story, 131-room hotel. Though Banowitz originally anticipated investing \$200,000 in the project, the final cost was an astronomical \$1,800,000. Later, two more stories would be added to the hotel.

The geographically unique setting, surrounded by mountains, on the flat valley floor, provided the backdrop for a dramatic porte-cochere entrance to the Cody-designed hotel. The east façade of

the hotel featured varied fenestration creating a reflective, geometric pattern. The spa building boasted an equally dramatic colonnade entrance designed by the local firm of Wexler & Harrison. The entrance to the spa was the first thin-arch, post-tension concrete colonnade to be built in California. Footsteps and voices reverberated when walking beneath this unusual structure, sheltering a shallow reflecting pool and creating a hallowed atmosphere.

A 12-foot sculpture titled "Dancing Water Nymphs" designed by Los Angeles sculptor Bernard Zimmerman marked the entrance to the stunning colonnade. Water features designed by John Mason and Dale Clark flowed from inside through the building to the outside and sculptures adorned the pools located in a central courtyard. Elegantly patterned block walls and intricate mosaic tile work were reflected in long shallow pools juxtaposed against the stark desert surroundings. This jazzy, sophisticated aesthetic delighted guests with a modern and sexy feel.

Optimistic, with clean lines and open vistas, the buildings attracted everyone from Hollywood stars to local residents accustomed to bathing in the healing waters.

The design of both the spa and the hotel were among the finest examples of the Palm Springs Modern architectural style that is now internationally famous itself.

Unsympathetic alternations and additions made to the buildings over the ensuing six decades covered up the sublime mid-century heritage.

The buildings were demolished in 2014 to make way for the tribe's new vision, still centered around the hot mineral spring water that has attracted visitors for the last hundred years and served the Cahuilla people for countless centuries more.

The new construction is just finishing in 2020 and begins another chapter in the history of Section 14.