

# HOW THE DESERT INN MET ITS DOOM

## Heart of Palm Springs village gave way to unloved development

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After WWII Southern California was enjoying an unprecedented building boom. Howard F. Ahmanson Sr., who had made a fortune selling insurance during the Depression, shifted gears to take advantage of all of the activity by buying Home Building and Loan, changing its name to Home Savings and becoming a major force for good in Los Angeles (unfortunately, his legacy in Palm Springs isn't so positive).

Driving in 1947, just after the war, Ahmanson was dreaming about the banks he would build. By 1953 he'd thought about it enough and dashed off a letter to Millard Sheets, then teaching at the Claremont Colleges: "Have traveled Wilshire Boulevard for twenty-five years. Know name of architect and year every building was built. Bored...Need buildings designed."

Sheets was already well-known for his mosaics, paintings, and decorations on commercial structures and he'd influenced a generation of students and taste-makers. He was working widely at all sorts of projects. Sheets thought he was an unlikely choice to design a signature building for Home Savings, and demurred. Ahmanson insisted and gave Sheets the means and permission to do something spectacular, saying, "don't let anyone else tell you how to design this building. I want it done the way you would do it if you were doing it for yourself."

The concept was revolutionary; Sheets delivered two buildings so remarkable they catapulted Home Savings to immense prosperity. These first two buildings were on Wilshire Boulevard, one in Beverly Hills and one in Santa Monica. They were clad in golden travertine and adorned with striking mosaics. The interiors were carefully choreographed and decorated gorgeously. Patrons rushed to make deposits to be part of something beautiful, something edifying. Ahmanson was deluged with thank you letters. Some one-hundred and fifty more projects would follow.

There is no Sheets-designed Home Savings in Palm Springs. But in the mid-1960s Ahmanson, through a development corporation, purchased the shuttered Desert Inn, the heart of the village of Palm Springs geographically and metaphorically. Ahmanson contemplated a project much bigger than another Home Savings branch.



**Artists painting panels on the construction fence surrounding the Desert Inn Fashion Plaza in February 1967.**



**The gates of the Desert Inn, with a sign announcing its impending demolition, in June 1966.**

PHOTOS BY PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY/SPECIAL TO THE DESERT SUN

Years of despair over economic stagnation in Palm Springs created an atmosphere conducive to the development pitch. Years of wrangling had stymied the Alexanders in their bid to redevelop the site before Home Savings bought it from them. Ahmanson was finally successful and the demolition permit was issued in the summer of 1966.

The executioner of the Desert Inn was Arlin Eddington, vice president of Home Savings. He was offered residence at The Willows (which had also been acquired by Home Savings as it played Monopoly aggregating the adjacent properties) during his supervision of the demolition of the Desert Inn and the subsequent construction of the Desert Inn Fashion Plaza. By 1968, Ahmanson was dead, as were Earl Coffman and George Roberson, the sons of Nellie Coffman, who had sold their mother's Desert Inn to Marion Davies, who then sold it to the Alexanders, sealing its fate.

Nellie Coffman built the Desert Inn to last centuries. Poured in place, reinforced concrete, the Desert Inn was meant to last and its demolition was no easy task. The construction was shielded from view of tourists with a plywood fence, decorated by local artists. Some were accomplished, but this was hardly the same as Ahmanson's commissioning Millard Sheets' decorations of previous projects. There were notices in the Desert Sun about the paintings and an artistic contest, with the disassembled panels being sold after construction was complete.

Ironically, the anchor building at the seminal corner of Tahquitz-McCallum Way and Palm Canyon was not Home Savings, but a Bank of America. The Fashion Plaza would have multiple iterations, with each further expansion failing badly. That the sprawling park-like Desert Inn had been supplanted by a banal shopping mall bothered many citizens who were routinely told that it was necessary; it was progress.

By July of 1969, the Fashion Plaza was a fait accompli and many struggled to accept it and look forward. Ruth Roberson Valeur, George Roberson's daughter, and Nellie Coffman's granddaughter, were appointed to the Planning Commission that summer, perhaps in a regretful effort to do deference to what had been the village. The Desert Sun glossed over her disappointment with the Fashion Plaza as she diplomatically faintly praised urban redevelopment. But the paper did print some more emphatic ideas about maintaining "stringent zoning laws in order to keep Palm Springs one of the most attractive communities in the nation." Valeur continued that "we need more setbacks, more green areas, more open space, so that we will not become another city enclosed by so many cement cubes." Sadly, the city had just removed exactly that in allowing the removal of the Desert Inn.

To Ahmanson's credit he hired Luckman and Pereira for various buildings of the Fashion Plaza. Ahmanson had contributed greatly to the built environment and the culture of Los Angeles with commissions and gifts including the eponymous building at the music center downtown and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. But the project in Palm Springs was not revered and was mostly concrete cubes.

Ahmanson's iconic Santa Monica Home Savings building on Wilshire Boulevard, designed by Millard Sheets, has been treasured by citizens there for decades, protected by historic status. In a painful irony, and karmic come-uppance, Santa Monica voted just a few weeks ago to rescind its protection so that a developer can raze the building. But there is hope for the relocation of the incomparable Millard Sheets mosaic.