Unlikely tale of trio who changed Palm Desert

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Sometimes architectural history is planned, and sometimes it just happens. One such story is a twisty tale of an unlikely alliance featuring three desert characters who, without aiming to, nonetheless created architectural history in south Palm Desert. The three characters were businessmen and developers Adrian Schwilck, Cliff Henderson, and architect Richard A. Harrison.

Schwilck's career in real estate development had always followed the one-man-band-approach. While others might bow to accredited architects or proven engineers, Schwilck relied on only himself to design, construct, market and sell, not just controlling but literally executing every phase in the development process. And why not? His approach led to his owning of over 700 prime acres in south Palm Desert by 1956, Silver Spur Ranch.

After five years and only moderate success, he was forced to take on partners. Finding that intolerable "he sold his share of the whole thing — acreage, the Ranch, all lock stock and barrel of it — to buy 64 substandard lots and a gift-wrapped vision from Clifford Henderson."

Henderson, the founder of Palm Desert, had a branding problem by the late 1950s. Before moving to the desert, Henderson lived in the Pacific Palisades, along the pleasant coastline of western Los Angeles County. The leafy town of large lots and custom-built homes was inspiration for Henderson's plans for Palm Desert, surrounding its signature centerpiece, the Shadow Mountain Club.

The area around the club was restricted in many ways to allow only the building of prestigious, one-of-a-kind homes on sprawling parcels owned by the gentry of the club's membership starting in the 1940s. A decade later, Henderson had bought for himself some 50 acres next to the club where he expected to build a lush 18-hole golf course dotted on its borders by cottages.

And that was a big problem. Right across the street from his own neighbors and best customers, the people who had kicked in on his risky wager to build a showcase of a new desert town, Henderson imagined building multi-unit dwellings on lots that didn't meet the zoning code.



Donald Wexler (left) with Richard A. Harrison (right), partners of the Wexler-Harrison architectural firm in Palm Springs.
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Richard Harrison would produce a solution. Harrison and Donald Wexler, another young desert architect, had a lot in common in the early 1950s. They met while working for William Cody's firm and found they were compatible in ambition, talent as well as in circumstance, both being at the start of their careers and their young families.

Leaving Cody's firm, together they established their own practice in 1952. During this time, they designed many projects in Palm Springs including El Rancho Vista residential tract, commercial buildings and the so-called Steel Houses built by Robert and George Alexander, when Harrison encountered Clifford Henderson and Adrian Schwilck.

By 1958, Cliff Henderson had completed Palm Desert's first 18-hole golf course, designed by Gene Sarazen. The next phase of his long-term plan — edging the Shadow Mountain Golf Course with small homes (or "apartment units" as they were called then) — would require a fight. Henderson faced the wrath of area homeowners, one calling the project "proposed barracks."

Adrian Schwilck cashed out his share of Silver Spur Ranch to buy Henderson's dream, land, plans and name, letting Henderson off the hook. In turn, Henderson guided Schwilck through the minefield of rezoning and approvals with one of his edicts being that Schwilck had to hire an architect of appropriate talent and prestige to ensure a development worthy of its neighbors.

The Shadow Mountain Fairway Cottages, one of the Wexler-Harrison firm's last commissions, was not only an immediate and resounding success, the cottages are characteristic of what can now be seen as Harrison's unique style, with his signature design element of palm trees perforating a low-slung roof, creating a breezy delineation of the front door.

By 1961, Wexler and Harrison were amicably going off on their own and Harrison's solo practice was partially launched by Schwilck. And Harrison's spectacular designs created such success for Schwilck, he was able to buy back Silver Spur Ranch. He further hired Harrison to adapt the multi-unit designs of the Shadow Mountain Cottages into duplexes and houses for Silver Spur, filling in every undeveloped lot and building an entire street of Harrison-designed homes on Feather Trail.

Harrison's roof cutouts are recognizable throughout the Coachella Valley from the Wexler-Harrison design of Alan Ladd's home in Palm Springs to the Shadow Mountain Fairway Cottages through family homes on Feather Trail in Silver Spur Ranch to his later work for Bermuda Dunes Colony.

Further, Harrison incorporated shade with generous overhangs, he specified slump stone on walls interrupted by inset columns of breeze block, luxurious Italian glass-tiled showers, and regularly included a high horizontal window in the master bedroom allowing homeowners to sleep under the gentle cool of the desert evenings.

Harrison's connection to the Shadow Mountain Fairway Cottages and Silver Spur Ranch had been unknown until Susie O'Hair and Luke Leuschner began delving into the history of O'Hair's Harrison-designed house. Their scholarship unearthed a remarkable architectural heritage of some 170 houses in south Palm Desert, with Feather Trail being its own veritable historic district. Designed by master architect Richard Harrison, built by developer Adrian Schwilck as first imagined by Cliff Henderson, this historic enclave in south Palm Desert is the result of their alliance.

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