



## **HISTORIC SITE PRESERVATION BOARD STAFF REPORT**

DATE: May 4, 2022

PUBLIC HEARING

SUBJECT: AN APPLICATION BY CARLOS SERRAO AND MONICA MAY, OWNERS FOR HISTORIC DESIGNATION OF "THE ROBSON CHAMBERS RESIDENCE" LOCATED AT 695 SOUTH WARM SANDS DRIVE, (APN #508-216-002), CASE HSPB #143. (KL).

FROM: Department of Planning Services

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### SUMMARY

The owners are seeking historic designation of the Robson Chambers residence. The home was designed by Chambers as his family home and constructed in 1946 with additions by Chambers in 1950 and 1956. The Chambers family lived in the home from 1946 until 1961. The proposed period of significance reflects the time during which the Chambers family lived in the home.

If designated as a historic resource, the property would be subject to the regulations outlined in Section 8.05 of the Palm Springs Municipal Code.

### RECOMMENDATION:

1. Open the public hearing and receive public testimony.
2. Close the public hearing and adopt Resolution HSPB #143, "A RESOLUTION OF THE HISTORIC SITE PRESERVATION BOARD OF THE CITY OF PALM SPRINGS, CALIFORNIA, RECOMMENDING THAT THE CITY COUNCIL DESIGNATE "THE ROBSON CHAMBERS RESIDENCE" LOCATED AT 695 SOUTH WARM SANDS DRIVE, AS CLASS 1 (LANDMARK) HISTORIC RESOURCE HSPB #143, SUBJECT TO CONDITIONS (APN 508-216-002)."

### BACKGROUND AND SETTING:

A historic resources report dated November, 2021 (Revised), prepared by Steven Vaught in association with the Palm Springs Preservation Foundation for the owners ("the report") and a site inspection are the basis of this staff report.

<i>Related Relevant City Actions by HSPB, Planning, Fire, Building, etc...</i>	
December 2021	HSPB members received the Historic Resources Report.
April, 2022	Site inspection by staff and members of the HSPB.

<i>Ownership Status</i>	
July 2018	Purchase by the current owner.

BELOW AN AERIAL VIEW OF THE RESIDENCE.



**ANALYSIS:**

Historic Preservation activities in Palm Springs are regulated under Municipal Code Section 8.05 ("*Historic Preservation*"). The purpose of the Historic Preservation Ordinance is:

*"...to stabilize and improve buildings, structures or areas which are*

*considered to be of historical, architectural, archaeological or ecological value, to foster civic beauty, to strengthen the local economy and to promote the use of historic resources for the education and welfare of the citizens.”*

Standard Conditions that apply to Historic Resources

The following shall apply to a Class 1 or 2 Historic Site or Resource:

1. It shall meet the definition of a Class 1 or 2 historic resource as outlined in Municipal Code Section 8.05.020 including the findings outlined in Section 8.05.070 (C).
2. An archival file shall be maintained on the property by the City.
3. It may be qualified as ‘historic’ at the federal, state, and/or county level.
4. A marker explaining the historic nature of the site may be installed at the site in a location viewable from the public way.
5. Compliance with all rules and regulations for Historic Resources and Historic Districts under Chapter 8.05 of the Municipal Code.
6. If designated, the findings in support of designation shall be stated in a resolution of the City Council that shall be recorded with the County Recorders’ office within 90 days of the effective date of the Council’s resolution.

Evaluation of the Application. Pursuant to Municipal Code Section 8.05.070 (C,1,a), the HSPB shall evaluate the application and make findings in conformance with the following criteria:

*Criteria for the Designation of Class 1 Historic Resources. A site, structure, building or object may be designated as a Class 1 historic resource, provided both of the following findings (“a” and “b”) are met:*

- a. The site, structure, building or object exhibits exceptional historic significance and meets one or more of the criteria listed below:*

The Chambers Residence reflects the modernist tenets of architecture widely applied in Palm Springs in the mid twentieth century. It reflects the design talent of an architect who is widely recognized for his collaboration with master architects Albert Frey and John Porter Clark. Its construction is unique in the manner in which Chambers utilized plain, utilitarian materials such as corrugated sheet metal and plywood for exterior surfaces.

*(Criterion 1) The resource is associated with events that have made a meaningful contribution to the nation, state or community;*

The report does not list any events associated with the home that contributed to the nation, state or community. Thus, it does not qualify under Criterion 1.

*(Criterion 2) The resource is associated with the lives of persons who*

*made a meaningful contribution to national, state or local history;*

The report asserts that the site should be deemed historic for its association with the life and work of architect Robson Chambers. The report notes that Chambers made a meaningful contribution to local history based on the many architectural commissions he participated in while in partnership with Albert Frey from 1946 until 1966.

In 1966, Chambers left Palm Springs and began a new phase in his career as campus architect for the University of California, Santa Barbara, a role he played until 1982 when he moved to the desert community of Borrego Springs where he had a steady flow of commissions until his return to Santa Barbara in 1998 and it was there he passed away at age 80 in 1999.

The report lists some of the many architectural commissions on which Chambers collaborated with Frey and many of these co-designed buildings have been recognized as part of the basic collection that became known as “Desert Modernism” or “The Palm Springs School of Architecture” was formulated. Thus Chambers was not only a person of significance because of the quantity of commissions for which he was associated, but for the influence these commissions had in the emergence of a particularly unique form of Modern architecture – one that was both influenced by and responsive to the harsh climate of the desert. For these reasons, the site qualifies as a historic resource under Criterion 2.

*(Criterion 3) The resource reflects or exemplifies a particular period of national, state or local history;*

As noted in the report, the many buildings that Chambers designed in collaboration with Frey collectively reflect the post-World War II period in which Modernist architecture was embraced enthusiastically by residents, business owners, school districts and civic leaders for its forward-looking style and material simplicity and efficiency of construction.

The minimalistic designs from this period seemed to reflect the casual, simple leisure lifestyle that many families in the post-war period embraced. For these reasons, staff concurs that the site qualifies as a historic resource under Criterion 3.

*(Criterion 4) The resource embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period or method of construction;*

The Chambers residence, with its simple forms and open flexible floor plan lent itself to simple materials. The scarcity of many types of building materials, coupled with the efficiency of construction that could be achieved with large thin sheets of corrugated metal and recent mass-production techniques of products like plywood and laminated plastics gave architects in the post War era a new palette of materials with which to design and build. The Chambers residence is quite unusual in its use of plywood and cement board panels for exterior wall surfaces; using rough, raw materials as the finished surface. This

“honesty of materials” and visibly exposing the fasteners and structure can be considered similar to the tenet of Modern architecture of structure becoming the ornament on the building. Thus, staff would assert that it is eligible as a historic resource relative to Criterion 4.

*(Criterion 5) The resource presents the work of a master builder, designer, artist, or architect whose individual genius influenced his age, or that possesses high artistic value;*

Robson Chambers work, in collaboration with Frey and Clark represented a departure from traditional architectural style and use of materials. The expansive use of glass, generous eaves, exposed simple materials all contribute to the particular style of Modern architecture that has recently been referred to as “Desert Modern”. Chambers work contributed to this unique, regional style for which Palm Springs is known. Current designers and architects who embrace the characteristics of Desert Modern are influenced by the simplicity and straight-forward designs of Chambers and his peers. Thus staff would agree that the building qualifies as a historic resource based on Criterion 5.

*(Criterion 6) The resource represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction, as used in evaluating applications for designation of historic districts, for parcels on which more than one entity exists; or*

The report does not assert that the Chambers residence qualifies under Criterion 6.

*(Criterion 7) The resource has yielded or may be likely to yield information important to national, state or local history or prehistory.*

No information has been provided in the historic resources report on any pre-historic significance of the site.

*Analysis of Integrity. (PSMC 8.05.070 (C,1,b). The site, structure, building or object retains one or more of the following aspects of integrity, as established in the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards: integrity of design, materials, workmanship, location, setting, feeling, or association.*

The Chambers residence is evaluated in terms of its historic integrity as follows:

*1. Location:*

The Chambers residence remains in the same location that it was constructed, thus it retains integrity of location.

## *2. Design:*

The design of the Chambers residence was one of flexible use of space and spatial volumes designed to accommodate growth and expansion of the home as the family grew. The additions made after the period of significance, such as the swimming pool and air conditioning (1966), the addition to the living room (1973) and the perimeter garden wall (2019) do not materially impair the design integrity of the home.

The home has a good degree of design integrity.

## *3. Setting:*

The report does not provide information about the nature of the surrounding neighborhood at the time the home was constructed, however staff believes it is reasonable to assume that at the time of construction, the residence was one of the first homes built in the vicinity and the area was mostly open desert. Today the neighborhood is fully built out, thus the setting of the home has changed from that of open desert to a neighborhood of single family residences.

## *4. Materials:*

The simple exterior materials used in the exterior of the home remain mostly intact and thus material integrity remains.

## *5. Workmanship:*

The home is of average workmanship common for the era of the 1950's although the creative use of industrial materials such as curved corrugated steel panels for soffit and fascia reflect a talented craftsman. Rough materials were well-crafted to become finished surfaces that have survived the test of time.

## *6. Feeling:*

The residence retains its feeling as a modest home from the 1950's. Its unique use of common materials for finished surfaces continues to draw attention thus retains integrity of feeling.

## *7. Association:*

The Chambers residence continues to reflect and convey its association with the mid-twentieth century period in Palm Springs when young architects were experimenting with simple materials in creative ways to create modest affordable and interesting dwellings.

In summary, the home retains sufficient integrity to qualify as a Class 1 ("Landmark")

historic resource.

## DEFINING HISTORIC CHARACTERISTICS

In considering a recommendation for historic resource designation it is important to distinguish those physical elements that are original or from the period of significance that contribute to the resource's historic significance from alterations, additions or features that were added at a later time that may be sympathetic to the original character, but which may create a false sense of historicity. Distinguishing original character-defining features from non-original elements aids the HSPB when it is tasked with evaluating future alterations to the historic resource.

### Character-defining features of the home are as follows:

- Flat roof
- Deep eaves and overhangs constructed of curved corrugated metal panels.
- Large expanses of floor to ceiling glass.
- Open carport.
- Low cost "industrial" material such as Flexboard, corrugated metal, plywood and pumice blocks for the fireplace.
- Simple form and massing with no ornament or decorative elements.

### Non-contributing elements:

- The swimming pool.
- The hardscape and landscape.<sup>1</sup>
- The perimeter walls.
- The screening around the rooftop mechanical equipment.

## ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

The proposed historic resource designation is not subject to the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to Sections 15060(c)(2) (the activity will not result in a direct or reasonably foreseeable indirect physical change in the environment) and 15060(c)(3) (the activity is not a project as defined in Section 15378) of the CEQA Guidelines, California Code of Regulations, Title 14, Chapter 3, because it has no potential for resulting in physical changes to the environment, directly or indirectly.

## NOTIFICATION

Pursuant to section 8.05.140 of the Municipal Code of Palm Springs, all residents within five hundred (500) feet of the subject property have been notified and notice was

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<sup>1</sup> The report suggests the Washingtonia Robustas on the site as contributing, however it was not clear from the report photos that these trees were from the period of significance.

published in a newspaper of general circulation.

CONCLUSION:

The Chambers residence meets the definition of a historic resource based on Criteria 2, 3, 4 and 5 of the Palm Springs Historic Preservation Ordinance. The home has a good degree of historic integrity. As such the property qualifies as a Class 1 historic resource.



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Ken Lyon, RA, Principal Planner  
Historic Preservation Officer



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David Newell, AICP  
Assistant Director of Planning Services

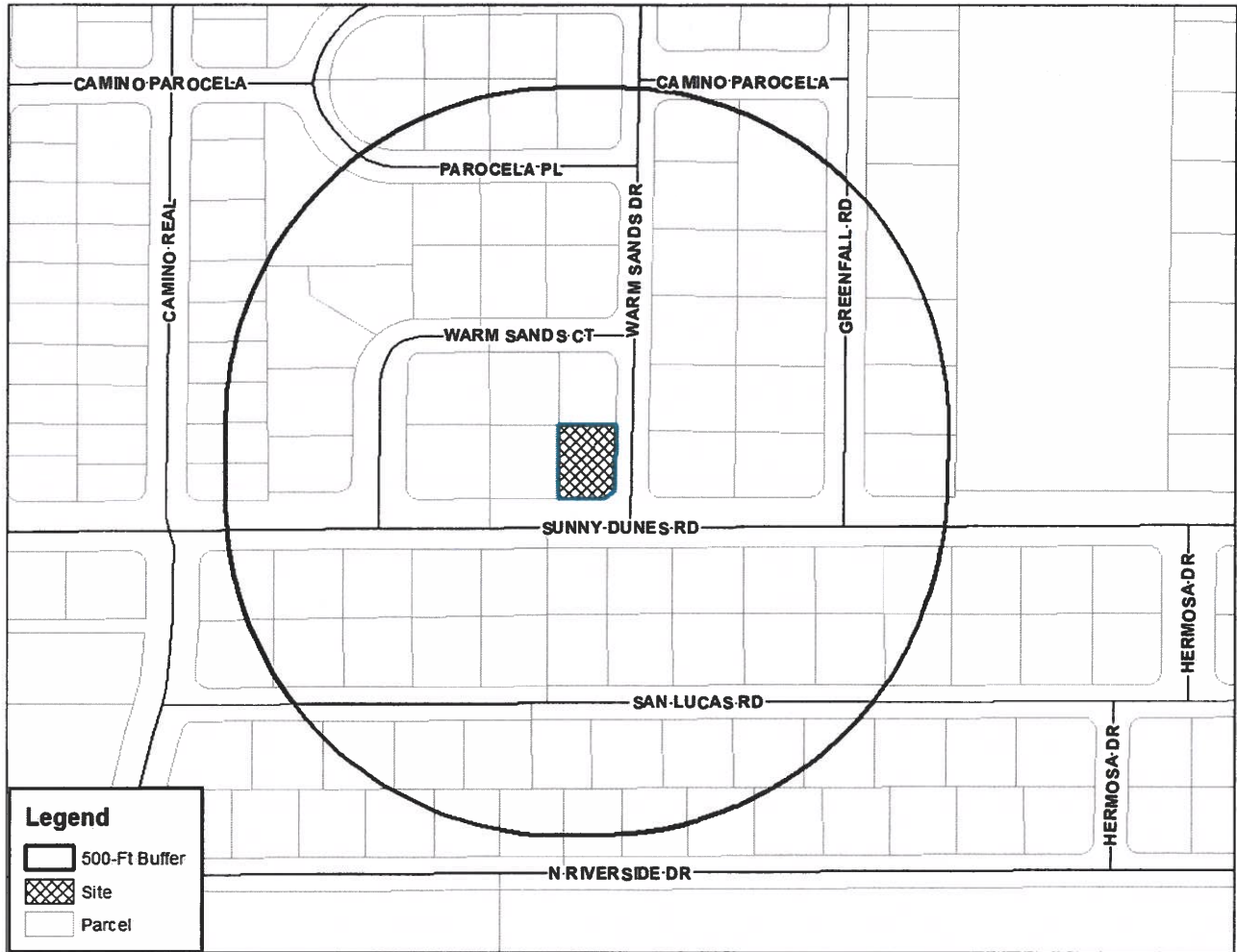
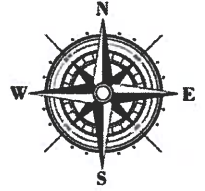
Attachments:

1. Vicinity Map
2. Draft Resolution
3. Application, related background materials, photos (under separate cover).





# Department of Planning Services Vicinity Map



**CITY OF PALM SPRINGS**  
**HSPB #143 – “The Chambers Residence”**  
**696 South Warm Sands Drive**