The Canyon Country Club: New York builder Boris Gertzen's unprecedented gift to Palm Springs

Tracy Conrad, Special to The Desert Sun Published 10:44 p.m. PT Jan. 11, 2020 | **Updated 8:03 p.m. PT Jan. 12, 2020**

Aerial of Canyon Country Club showing extent of the huge project *(Photo: Palm Springs Historical Society)*

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The New York Times in September 1951 reported, “After more than thirty years as a custom builder, Boris Gertzen is turning to the lower-priced home to sell for $29,750 to $48,500. The builder, who has been erecting dwellings in the $100,000- price range, said he was induced to change his policy of building because technological advances made possible the inclusion of custom standards in production-built homes. Mr. Gertzen has started work on a community of forty ranch residences in Old Hewlett, Long Island and plans to make deliveries between six to ten weeks from the date of signing the contract. Two finished dwellings are being opened for inspection today. The new homes will contain six, seven and nine rooms, two and three tiled baths, full cellars and expansion space."

Russian-born New York master builder Boris Gertzen had extensive experience in the 1950s developing tony neighborhoods on Long Island including the Whispering Woods tract, some 700 acres of the previous Griffing Estate on Gardiner Bay. He had building down to an efficient science, delivering houses within “six to ten weeks from the date of signing the contract.”

Intending to retire, he relocated to Palm Springs making a splash when he completed the Canyon Country Club in December 1961.

Canyon Club Inn, later renamed the Canyon Hotel, just finishing construction. Photographed by William Plachta. *(Photo: Palm Springs Historical Society)*

The centerpiece clubhouse was described as one of the finest in the country, it’s 40,000 square feet costing $1 million and having been completed in an astonishing 73 days. Designed by the local architectural firm of Wexler & Harrison, the clubhouse quickly became a local favorite.

After building the clubhouse, Gertzen embarked on the construction of Canyon Country Club Villas, marketing them with newspaper ads that screamed, “WANT The Best? See Canyon Club Villas, Designed & Built by Nationally famed Boris Gertzen. Situated on the beautiful Fairways of Canyon Country Club, the Prestige Location. Offering a choice of Elegant Custom Built Villas –Decorator Furnished or unfurnished – featuring 3 bedrooms, 3 bath, complete with cabana, pool and landscaping, From $55,000.00. Model Open Daily.”

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By desert and second-home standards, these were large, luxury, custom homes sited along the club’s golf course fairways. Described in advertisements as “Palm Springs’ most elegant homes,” the residences afforded striking views of the surrounding mountains and conjured up the swanky midcentury spa e the model home for Canyon Club Villas was located, were built in the early 1960s du beautiful patterns.)

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Gertzen's development was certainly ambitious and not seemingly consistent with retirement. Aerial images of the grading reveal just how expansive his plans were. Partnering with Charles Dwight Construction Corp., and First National Realty and Construction, Gertzen hired Jack Quigley as vice president in charge of operations for the joint venture.

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In addition to the large subdivision of homes, he envisioned a very fancy hotel. Described in marketing brochures as "Palm Springs' only hotel with its own 18-hole championship golf course. In addition to the excellent golfing facilities, Canyon Club Inn offers luxurious accommodations, of with oversize beds, outstanding cuisine, swimming and therapeutic pools, complete health spa and solarium, tennis and horseback riding. The answer to a complete and perfect vacation."

Designed by K.M. Burgess of Los Angeles, the Canyon Club Inn was under construction in late 1964 and cost some $4 million. Situated on 7½ acres between the South and North golf courses, at the corner of Murray Canyon Road and Palm Canyon Drive, it also commanded unrivaled views. With his characteristically ultra-speedy construction schedule, Gertzen slated it to open in early 1965.

The architecture was described at the time as "three-story, hi-style, Mediterranean modern," whatever that meant. The footprint was U-shaped surrounding a pool and patio, and the Cabana Club. Rooms featured private sun decks. "Dotting the periphery of the lobby will be smart shops, such as hi-fashion sport togs, complete golf pro shop, barber and beauty salons, gift-sundries, plus a coffee shop."

The pool at the Canyon Hotel (Canyon Club Inn) situated inside the U-shaped building. Photographed by William Plachta. *(Photo: Palm Springs Historical Society)*

The hotel did indeed open in 1965 and offered 201 lavish rooms connected to the golf course. But it hadn't been easy. The 440-acre development required a contract between the First National Realty and Construction Corporation and no less than 20 individual Indian lessors. All parts of the very complicated 70-year leases, the largest of their kind in the nation to date, had to be approved by the Riverside County Superior Court, the Bureau of Indian Affairs California Office in Sacramento and in Washington D.C. by the Secretary of the Interior.

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Th t may have contributed to Gertzen's untimely death in 1966.

The Canyon Club Inn, later renamed The Canyon Hotel, was very glamorous, attracting movie stars and socialites. The golf courses became the site of The Frank Sinatra and Chuck Connors Golf Tournaments.

Charity functions were regular occurrences and businessmen flocked to conventions where they could play on the golf courses.

Throughout the 1970s it defined desert chic. Changing ownership in the following decades and the economic downturn of the desert in the 1980s and '90s led to its demise, and the termination of its lease.

Eventually the building was razed.

The Gertzen-built homes are prized today for their style and surrounding open space. The clubhouse of the Canyon Country Club persists despite numerous threats to its existence through the last few decades.

Canyon Club Inn's "Mediterranean Modern" architecture. Photographed by William Plachta. *(Photo: Palm Springs Historical Society)*

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