

City of Las Vegas

STAFF REPORT

HISTORIC PRESERVATION COMMISSION MEETING DATE: 10/26/11

DEPARTMENT: PLANNING

ITEM DESCRIPTION: For possible action regarding National Register of Historic Places nomination for the Morelli House, located at 861 Bridger Avenue (APN 139-34-701-002), C-V (Civic) Zone, Ward 5 (Barlow)

BACKGROUND

- 05/17/00 The City Council approved a request for Rezoning (Z-0010-00) of property generally located on the northwest corner of Bridger Avenue and Ninth Street from R-4 (High Density Residential) to C-V (Civic) for a proposed Museum/Cultural Center/Office.

- 12/21/00 The Planning Commission approved a request for a Site Development Plan Review [Z-0010-00(1)] for a proposed 3,300 square-foot office, museum, and cultural center on 0.48 acres located at the northwest corner of Bridger Avenue and Ninth Street.

- 10/01/01 The Morelli House, located at 861 Bridger Avenue (APN 139-34-701-002) was designated on the Nevada State Historic Property Register.

- 12/06/06 The Historic Preservation Commission approved the request to designate the Morelli House to the Las Vegas Historic Property Register, located at 814 Bridger Avenue, (APN 139-34-701-002), C-V (Civic) Zone, Ward 5, (Weekly).

- 03/07/07 The City Council approved a request to designate a parcel of land as a Historic Property within the City of Las Vegas on 0.51 acres located at 861 Bridger Avenue (DIR-18616).

ANALYSIS

The Nevada State Historic Preservation Office has requested review and comment regarding the nomination of the Morelli House to the National Register of Historic Places. The attached nomination report is in draft form. Additional work needs to be completed on the bibliography and photograph log.

The following statement of significance is from the DRAFT National Register of Historic Places Registration Form for the historic Morelli House, submitted by the Junior League of Las Vegas, September 20, 2011.

The Morelli House is eligible for listing in National Register of Historic Places under Criterion C as a dwelling representing an upper-middle-class example of Mid-Century Modern style developed in the late 1950s and early 1960s, a period of the city's flamboyant and rapid growth. Although it has been moved, the outstanding degree of its integrity, particularly regarding its significant interior spaces, combined with the fact that it is an excellent expression of this style of architecture, warrants its listing in the National Register under this criterion.

In addition, to the consideration of the resource under Criterion C, it is possible to document the building's significance under criteria A and B. Documentation under these criteria is presented only for context since listing under these criteria is not possible given that the structure has been moved.

The Morelli House is documented under Criterion A for its association with the emerging image of Las Vegas as an international capital of the entertainment industry, and for Antonio Morelli's association with the famed "Rat Pack." Because no other Las Vegas resources survive that are related to the Southern Nevada emergence of the Rat Pack, the Morelli House can be regarded as having national significance. Unfortunately, the move of the structure diminishes its integrity, and it is not possible to assert its national significance to warrant listing as a National Historic Landmark.

The Morelli House is documented under Criterion B at the local level for its association with the builder and owner, Antonio Morelli, who played an important role in the community through his work as music director at the Sands Hotel and his involvement in the musical activities of the community.

The Morelli House is listed on the Nevada State Register of Historic Places and the city of Las Vegas Historic Property Register. The property is owned and operated by the Junior League of Las Vegas.

The nomination is scheduled for review by the Nevada State Board of Museums and History on December 2, 2011 at the Springs Preserve (meeting time and room number TBA).

National Register Criteria for Evaluation

The quality of significance in American history, architecture, archeology, engineering, and culture is present in districts, sites, buildings, structures, and objects that possess integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association, and:

- A. That are associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history; or
- B. That are associated with the lives of significant persons in or past; or
- C. That embody the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction, or that represent the work of a master, or that possess high artistic values, or that represent a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction; or
- D. That have yielded or may be likely to yield, information important in history or prehistory.

Findings

The HPO has reviewed the nomination and has determined that the Morelli House meets the National Register Criteria for Evaluation.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

APPROVAL

BACKUP DOCUMENTS

DRAFT National Register of Historic Places Registration Form, Morelli House, September 20, 2011.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in National Register Bulletin, *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form*. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional certification comments, entries, and narrative items on continuation sheets if needed (NPS Form 10-900a).

1. Name of Property

historic name Morelli House

other names/site number 52 Country Club Drive

2. Location

street & number 861 East Bridger Avenue

☐ not for publication

city or town Las Vegas

☐ vicinity

state Nevada code _____ county Clark code _____ zip code 89101-5539

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended,

I hereby certify that this ___ nomination ___ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60.

In my opinion, the property ___ meets ___ does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant at the following level(s) of significance:

___ national ___ statewide ___ local

Signature of certifying official/Title

Date

State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government

In my opinion, the property ___ meets ___ does not meet the National Register criteria.

Signature of commenting official

Date

Title

State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that this property is:

___ entered in the National Register

___ determined eligible for the National Register

___ determined not eligible for the National Register

___ removed from the National Register

___ other (explain:) _____

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

Morelli House
Name of Property

Clark County, Nevada
County and State

5. Classification

Ownership of Property (Check as many boxes as apply.)

☒ private
☐ public - Local
☐ public - State
☐ public - Federal

Category of Property (Check only one box.)

☒ building(s)
☐ district
☐ site
☐ structure
☐ object

Number of Resources within Property (Do not include previously listed resources in the count.)

Contributing	Noncontributing
1	buildings
	sites
	structures
	objects
1	Total

Name of related multiple property listing (Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing)

NA

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

NA

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions (Enter categories from instructions.)

DOMESTIC/SINGLE DWELLING

Current Functions (Enter categories from instructions.)

SOCIAL

7. Description

Architectural Classification (Enter categories from instructions.)

MODERN

Materials (Enter categories from instructions.)

foundation: CONCRETE

walls: STUCCO, WOOD, CONCRETE BLOCK

roof: TROPICOL (CRUSHED ROCK)

other:

Morelli House

Name of Property

Clark County, Nevada

County and State

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current physical appearance of the property. Explain contributing and noncontributing resources if necessary. Begin with a **summary paragraph** that briefly describes the general characteristics of the property, such as its location, setting, size, and significant features.)

Summary Paragraph

See Continuation Sheet.

Narrative Description

See Continuation Sheet.

Morelli House
Name of Property

Clark County, Nevada
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8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- ☐ A Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- ☐ B Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- ☒ C Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- ☐ D Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- ☐ A Owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- ☒ B removed from its original location.
- ☐ C a birthplace or grave.
- ☐ D a cemetery.
- ☐ E a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- ☐ F a commemorative property.
- ☐ G less than 50 years old or achieving significance within the past 50 years.

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions.)

Architecture

Period of Significance

1959

Significant Dates

Significant Person

(Complete only if Criterion B is marked above.)

Antonio Morelli

Cultural Affiliation

Architect/Builder

Hugh E. Taylor, Antonio Morelli, Richard Small

Period of Significance (justification)

The Period of Significance is the year in which the Morelli House was constructed.

Criteria Considerations (explanation, if necessary)

In 2001, to avoid pending demolition the Morelli House was relocated and rehabilitated by the Junior League of Las Vegas.

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Statement of Significance Summary Paragraph (Provide a summary paragraph that includes level of significance and applicable criteria.)

See Continuation Sheet.

Narrative Statement of Significance (Provide at least one paragraph for each area of significance.)

See Continuation Sheet.

Developmental history/additional historic context information (if appropriate)

N/A

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography (Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form.)

See Continuation Sheet.

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

☐ preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67 has been requested)
☐ previously listed in the National Register
☐ previously determined eligible by the National Register
☐ designated a National Historic Landmark
☐ recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # _____
☐ recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____
☐ recorded by Historic American Landscape Survey # _____

Primary location of additional data:

☐ State Historic Preservation Office
☐ Other State agency
☐ Federal agency
☐ Local government
☐ University
☐ Other
Name of repository: _____

Historic Resources Survey Number (if assigned):

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10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property .51 acres
(Do not include previously listed resource acreage.)

UTM References

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

1 Zone Easting Northing

3 Zone Easting Northing

2 Zone Easting Northing

4 Zone Easting Northing

Verbal Boundary Description (Describe the boundaries of the property.)

The National Register boundaries for the Morelli House include the .51-acre parcel identified as Assessor's Parcel Number 139-34-701-002, Clark County, Nevada.

Boundary Justification (Explain why the boundaries were selected.)

The National Register boundaries for the Morelli House conform to the parcel on which the house is sited.

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Junior League of Las Vegas together with Ronald James and Sara Fogelquist, NV SHPO
organization date September 20, 2011
street & number 861 East Bridger Avenue telephone 702-822-6536
city or town Las Vegas state Nevada zip code 89101
e-mail

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

- **Maps:** A USGS map (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.
A Sketch map for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources. Key all photographs to this map.
- **Continuation Sheets**
- **Additional items:** (Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items.)

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Photographs:

Submit clear and descriptive photographs. The size of each image must be 1600x1200 pixels at 300 ppi (pixels per inch) or larger. Key all photographs to the sketch map.

See Continuation Sheet.

Property Owner:

(Complete this item at the request of the SHPO or FPO.)

name Junior League of Las Vegas

street & number 861 East Bridger Avenue

telephone 702-822-6536

city or town Las Vegas

state _____ zip code 89101

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C.460 et seq.).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Office of Planning and Performance Management, U.S. Dept. of the Interior, 1849 C. Street, NW, Washington, DC.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Morelli House*Name of Property***Clark County***County and State*

NA

Name of multiple listing (if applicable)

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DESCRIPTION

In 1959, Antonio and Helen Morelli built their home at 52 Country Club Drive within the confines of the prestigious Desert Inn Estates, overlooking the world-class Desert Inn Golf Course. In 2001, to save the home from demolition, a fate which befell the other homes within the Estates, the Morelli House was relocated to a parcel at Ninth Street and Bridger Avenue. At its new location, the Morelli House is owned and operated by the Junior League of Las Vegas, who faithfully maintains the 1959 appearance of the home while rehabilitating it as an office, a history museum, and a gallery.

The 1959 “dream house” began with careful planning. Morelli collaborated with Richard Small, a carpenter foreman and colleague at the Sands, to create approaches to the new home. Finally, with the approach established, Morelli retained Las Vegas architect, Hugh E. Taylor, to draw the plans. Morelli and Small dedicated two years to the planning and constructing of the modern residence. Thoughtful preparations and attention to detail distinguished the home from other homes in the Estates. The rear of the house faced north, overlooking the golf course and its sprawling lawns. The view through the living room’s expansive glass windows invited in the outdoors. While other swimming pools in the Estates were in the backyards, the Morelli pool was strategically placed in the front yard, hidden from the street by a cement-block wall and tropical plantings. Where the neighbors’ backyard view of the golf course was obstructed with swimming pools and pool equipment, the Morelli backyard presented an unobstructed view. From the golf course, the Morelli House appeared unified with the landscape.

The resulting home was ultra-modern for its day and in a sense continues to defy architectural classification. In some regards, the Morelli House fits McAlester and McAlester’s “Contemporary.” The flat-roofed subtype of Contemporary is a derivative of the earlier International style, sometimes referred to as American International (McAlester and McAlester 1990, 482). The house also meets the design intent of Populuxe, which according to author Thomas Hine includes such qualities as “fun, fashionable, fantastic, and futuristic” (1987, 38). According to National Register Bulletin 16A, modern movement styles might be classified as International Style, Miesian, New-formalism, Brutalism, Neo-expressionism, or Ranch style. However, none of these descriptions are exclusively applicable. It is known from individuals employed in the construction of the house that the Morellis were influenced by the works of R. M. Schindler, who built modernist houses in southern California, and by Philip Johnson, who built the Glass House (listed as a National Historic Landmark, 1997) in New Canaan, Connecticut, Mrs. Morelli’s home town. Drawing upon the influences of the first half of the twentieth century, the term to best describe the Morelli House is simply “Modern.” Not that “Modern” is all that simple, drawing as it does on diverse and often drastic responses, from American and European, to a new age.

Despite relocation, the Morelli House retains its original massing and fenestration. Essentially rectangular in plan, the overall appearance of the Morelli House is long and low, blending into the landscape. The flat roof is covered with crushed white rock. The architectural plans identify the tar-and-gravel roof as “Tropicool with 2 inch gravel surface.” It is assumed that Tropicool is a trade name, although conclusive evidence has not been found. The crushed rock glitters in the sunlight. The roof compliments the Modern styling of the house, and provides reduced surface temperature.

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Morelli House*Name of Property***Clark County***County and State*

NA

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The widely-overhanging eaves are supported by exposed redwood beams. Natural stain provides contrast against the pale gray of the walls and the white of the rock roof. The wall surface is stucco as well as painted redwood with vertical battens, which counteract the structure's extreme horizontality. In several places along the front approach of the house, walls are screened with decorative open-work cement blocks. A row of windows top the screens. Between the top of the screen and the eaves, is an area identified as a gallery by the architect. The decorative cement block screens have been appropriately reconstructed following the relocation and complete the front façade.

The wall of the rear façade consists of vertical wood on the outside of the kitchen and a small ell, which contains the master bedroom and extends a few feet past the rear wall. Between the bedroom and the kitchen is a bank of floor-to-ceiling glass panels, including a sliding glass door, which create the living room wall. A concrete patio extends the length of the rear elevation and is covered partially by broad eaves. This new patio replicates the footprint of patio at the original site. Four futuristic metal light fixtures hang from the beams, with smaller matching sconces attached to the metal framework of the windows. The windows and doors are set into aluminum frames and are either fixed or sliders. All of the exterior doors feature full glass panels, with the exception of the redwood double entry doors.

The double entry doors, painted "robin's egg blue" open to the foyer, which is separated from the living and dining room by a redwood paneled partition designed to conceal a coat closet on the entry side and to reveal china and collectibles on the dining side. The foyer retains the original 1959 feeling and appearance. The original vinyl composition tile remains with a Greek-key design in the corners. Morelli's careful details in the foyer continue throughout the house.

Flanking the double entry doors in the foyer are panels of colored art glass with a roughly corrugated "raindrop" or "teardrop" texture. Above the doors, a leaded-glass panel situates the Morelli House within the history of Las Vegas. The panel was created by Isabel Piczel who also designed the windows for the Mid-Century Modern Guardian Angel Cathedral of Las Vegas, which in 1963 was designed by Paul R. Williams. The stunning panel was gifted to the Morellis recognizing their volunteerism and support of the Catholic Church community, including commissioning the windows for the Cathedral. The artwork and its symbolism of generosity define the entrance of the Morelli home.

Adjacent to the foyer is the kitchen, complete with breakfast nook and utility area. Representing the height of modernity, an antique-copper colored oven, stove with hood, and refrigerator, all classics of mid-century product design, provide harmonious definition to the kitchen. Other original features include a "bun warmer" drawer, two corner "Lazy-Susan" cabinets, a special cabinet for a Mixmaster, and an enclosed storage area behind the sink. A large built-in island faced with pleated upholstery, echoes an era of stylish Las Vegas lounges. Large, frosted egg-shaped light fixtures hang from the wood plank ceiling. Conical down-lights with small perforated holes add sparkle to the modern kitchen.

For the Morellis, the breakfast nook was central to the home, providing a convenient place to gather. For Antonio, the nook became a functional place to work on his music. For Helen, however, who loved to cook and to entertain, this arrangement likely would not last. Shortly thereafter, a portion of the

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breeze-way was enclosed as Morelli's music studio. In 2001, the concrete pad foundation, on which the music studio addition was constructed, prevented the studio from being relocated.

The breakfast nook retains the original look and feeling of 1959. On the west wall, a custom-designed television cabinet swings to reveal a fully equipped bar for entertaining. Following the Morelli's decorative style, memorabilia is displayed on the shelves above the table. Photographs from the 1950s and 1960s depict the house, as well as the guests who frequented it, including Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, and Sammy Davis, Jr.

Adjacent to the kitchen is the utility area. A partition between the kitchen and utility area allows light from the clerestory windows to reach the kitchen and family room. The Morellis later converted a half-bathroom in the utility area into a laundry room. The space was innovative, with a wall of double-sided redwood storage cabinetry, a steel utility sink, and a combination washer-dryer. In 2007, the Junior League eliminated the laundry area in order to restore the original bath. The original linoleum flooring remains with white streaks against an orange background set in a grid of blue-green stripes.¹

The kitchen leads to the dining room, with an original, low cabinet-partition dividing the foyer from the dining room to provide storage on either side. The dining room extends to the living room, a showcase of Mid-Century Modern design. Unpainted redwood beams span front to rear of the house, complete with indirect cove lighting and soffits. A prominent feature in the living room is the fireplace with a raised "floating" marble-topped hearth and a massive, hammered-copper hood. The Morelli's considered the room's north elevation to be the primary façade. Here, floor-to-ceiling glass panels, a section of which includes a sliding-glass door, create the north wall of the living room. Sweeping draperies cover the glass wall and operate electrically to "tuck into" a panel next to the fireplace. The living room emphasizes natural materials with Philippine mahogany wall paneling, copper fireplace hood, and expansive glass exposing the landscape. The living and dining rooms exemplify the Mid-Century Modern ideals of beauty in natural materials and harmony in space-defining planes.

Since the Morellis' furnishings were long absent, selecting new furnishings in the living and dining room to complement the home's architectural integrity presented a challenge. Vladimir Kagan, regarded as the "grandfather of modern furniture design," provided design consultation for the furnishings and collaborated with his manufacturers to donate pieces. The cubist dining room set, the grey Nautilus sofa and the royal blue tri-symmetric foot stool in the living room are from Kagan's personal, private collection. His designs are also evident in the living room's burgundy Serpentine sofas and ottomans as well as the cocktail table and barrel chairs.² Kagan's iconic mid-century furniture compliments the architectural style of the Morelli House and the features of the living room and dining room.

¹ Dr. Robert Fielden, a prominent architect in Las Vegas, and Alan Hess, a well-known preservationist and writer specializing in Mid-Century Modern architecture, confirm that the use of such colorful, modern manufactured materials and patterns is in keeping with the period: Fielden, Interview; Hess, 18.

² Kagan is an internationally known designer. His furniture is in the permanent collections of many museums including the Albert Museum in London, the Cooper Hewitt Museum in New York and the San Francisco Museum of Modern. The World Market Center honored him with their Design Icon Award in January of 2007. Interviews with Sherry Colquitt and Dedee Nave.

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Beyond the living and dining rooms are the two bedrooms, identified in the plans as the master bedroom and the guest room. The master bedroom, down a short hallway from the guest bathroom, exhibits Mid-Century Modern architectural features. The high ceilings are modulated by dropped soffits and beams, which repeat those in the living room. Originally, the bed was located on the west wall. The innovative light and security controls for the house are still present on each side of where the bed was located.

The master bedroom includes separate dressing rooms; Helen's with built-in three-way mirrors, drawers and closets and Antonio's with a mirrored cabinet for his ties, are typical of well-planned storage in a Mid-Century Modern home. The dressing rooms lead to the master bathroom, a "primary space," restored to former luxury. The bath, with a sunken custom-tiled-shower and an elevated sink, accommodated Antonio's tall frame. Dual sinks, colored plumbing fixtures, a step-down open shower, and Antonio's monogram "AM" on the faucets highlight the space. In the mirror over the dual sinks is the original and still operable modernistic clock. Custom turquoise gold-flecked ceramic tiles cover the sinks and the shower. During the move, some shower tiles were damaged beyond repair. Since it was not possible to match the original tile, the damaged tiles were replaced with harmoniously contrasting tiles. The separate dressing rooms and bathroom retain their original feeling and appearance.

Opposite the master bedroom, is the spacious guest bedroom with an elegantly-appointed connecting bath with custom tile. Decorated by the Morellis, the original yellow wallpaper, yellow tile and bathroom fixtures remain. The workmanship around the tile sinks and the detailed floor evidence the care of the architect and builder. The faucets in the sink exhibit Morelli's signature monogram. The guest bedroom and bathroom complete the interior of the home.

From planning the front approach of the home to monogramming the bathroom faucets, Antonio Morelli scrutinized every detail of the home. One detail would distinguish the Morelli House from all other homes within the Desert Inn Country Club Estates, namely, a crawl space. With the exception of the Morelli House, the other homes were constructed on a concrete foundation. The detail of a crawl space allowed the Morelli House to be saved from demolition and moved to a new location.

At its original location at 52 Country Club Drive, the rear of the house faced north, overlooking the golf course and its sprawling verdant lawns. The view through the living room's expansive glass windows blurred the distinction between indoors and outdoors. At its new location at 861 East Bridger Avenue, the Morelli House again blends with its environment. The governmentally mandated "desert landscape" compliments the home's pale grey exterior walls, exposed redwood beams, and Edward Durell Stone decorative open-work cement screen. The latter feature is similar to that used by Stone at his celebrated 1958 American Embassy in New Delhi. Although the original cement screen was destroyed an appropriate new screen replicates the original. The Stone screens are topped by clerestory windows through which one can see the beams extending from the exterior into the interior of the house. The Morelli house is an excellent early example of Modern architecture in Las Vegas, and is important to understanding the architectural history and the development of the area.

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Section number 7 Page 5**Integrity**

The Morelli house suffers a loss of integrity having been relocated from its original location. In its new location, the house sits adjacent to the Las Vegas High School Historic District (listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1991) and across from the Las Vegas High School (individually listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1996). Since 1993 the Las Vegas High School has served the greater Clark County area as the Las Vegas Academy of International Studies, Performing and Visual Arts, and thus harmonizes with the history of the Morelli House. The proximity of the high school and the Morelli house has proven mutually beneficial. The Junior League utilizes the high school as a location for larger civic events while the High School utilizes the Morelli House as a location for smaller musical performances. As a result of the relocation, the music continues in the Morelli House.

The interior and exterior of the home retain great integrity. The primary spaces, including the exterior, entrance, foyer, kitchen-breakfast nook, dining room, living room and the guest and master bathrooms, have been restored to their original state under the *Secretary of the Interior Guidelines for Rehabilitation*. The secondary spaces, including the master and guest bedrooms, have been rehabilitated for office purposes. Even utilized as offices, the open rooms retain the original sense of the space.³

The integrity of the Morelli House has been faithfully maintained throughout the decades. In 1979, following Antonio's death and Helen's subsequent relocation to the East,⁴ Mr. Kay G. Glenn, Howard Hughes' press secretary, purchased the Morelli's home. For over twenty years, Glenn meticulously maintained the home and property.⁵

In 2000, Steve Wynn purchased the Desert Inn Resort and approximately 30 lots within the Desert Inn Country Club Estates.⁶ Wynn proceeded to acquire the remaining lots in the Desert Inn Country Club Estate in preparation for new development. Plans for the new Wynn Megaresort along the famed Las Vegas Boulevard development necessitated demolition of the Desert Inn Resort and all structures located in the Desert Inn Country Club Estates, including the Morelli House.⁷ This monumental land acquisition bordered by the Strip and Paradise Road and Twain Avenue jeopardized many Mid-Century Modern homes. Wynn's negotiators, members of the Molasky Group, including the elder Molasky, who in 1952 developed the original community, presented offers well-above appraised value to the estate homeowners. Some homeowners willingly accepted the agreement price and provisions, while others delayed acceptance for up to four years with protracted courtroom disputes.⁸

In the midst of the contractual dealings with the homeowners, Steven Wynn and Kay Glenn noted the Morelli House was integral to the city's entertainment history and was exemplary of Mid-Century

³ Dr. Janet White of UNLV's Department of Architecture evaluated the architectural significance of the Morelli House to the City of Las Vegas. (cite correspondence)

⁴ Helen moved back East in 1979, five years after her husband's death, due to health related issues. She was one of nine siblings and needed to be nearer to family members. In an oral interview with Jerry Massini, 1976, she stated she intended to remain in Las Vegas until her death.

⁵ Carole Cosgrove Terry. *The Morelli House - Rescued and Restored*. 2010, 7.

⁶ Heather Rawlyk. "Former D.I. Homeowner tells of decline of golf estates," *Las Vegas Sun*. Monday, November 10, 2003.

⁷ Grace Long. "Wynn sues homeowners in battle for control of D.I. Association," *Las Vegas Sun*. Friday, November 3, 2000.

⁸ Adrienne Parker. "Rift between Wynn, estate residents grow" *Las Vegas Sun*. Tuesday, May 28, 2002.

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Modern design. Since the Morelli House was the only house in the Estates constructed with a crawl space, it could be moved.⁹ Wynn and Glenn determined that the Molasky Group, on their behalf, should appeal to the directors of the Junior League of Las Vegas to preserve the Morelli House and relocate it to a parcel on Bridger Avenue adjacent to the historic district by Las Vegas High School. (The Bridger Avenue parcel was purchased with the assistance of the Nevada Commission for Cultural Affairs).

On September 30, 2001, the League relocated the Morelli House to the Bridger Avenue parcel.¹⁰ There was no way to save the decorative screen imbedded in the ground, Morelli's music room built on a concrete slab, nor the front yard's concrete carport and the swimming pool. Following the move, the screen has been recreated and it is the intent of the Junior League to rebuild Morelli's music room. Although the Bridger parcel does not comfortably allow for either the carport or the swimming pool, parcel does allow for the potential to reconstruct the music room addition.

The Morelli House continues to be integrated within its environment, despite relocation, and is sited diagonally to the corner with a circular drive fronting the dwelling.¹¹ Foliage complements features of an earlier time, while rock groundcover conforms to drought resistant landscape codes. The rear façade, which once faced the second fairway, now faces the new site's northern perimeter.

The loss of integrity as a consequence of the relocation is mitigated to a degree by the proximity of the Las Vegas High School, now the Las Vegas Academy of International Studies, Performing and Visual Arts. The institution focuses on education in the arts, a mission Morelli strove to promote.

Although the Morelli House is the only Mid-Century Modern home in the Las Vegas High School Historic District vicinity, the distinctive architecture complements the other historically-important buildings within the district. The nearness to downtown Las Vegas makes the Morelli House serviceable as a community cultural venue and as a meeting place for organizations promoting volunteerism. The Morelli House Public Program provides public access to view the house and to learn its architectural and historical significance. Constructed in 1959 and relocated in 2001, The Junior League of Las Vegas has restored Morelli House in both its exterior and interior appearance in accordance with the United States Secretary of the Interior's Standards.

⁹ Hess, House Essay, 6.

¹⁰ Mohor, "House finds a New Home". *Las Vegas Sun*. October 1, 2001

¹¹ Hess, 6.

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In 1959, Antonio and Helen Morelli built their home at 52 Country Club Drive within the confines of the prestigious Desert Inn Estates, overlooking the world-class Desert Inn Golf Course. In 2001, to save the home from demolition, a fate which befell the other homes within the Estates, the Morelli House was relocated to a parcel at Ninth Street and Bridger Avenue. At its new location, the Morelli House is owned and operated by the Junior League of Las Vegas, who faithfully maintains the 1959 appearance of the home while rehabilitating it as an office, a history museum, and a gallery.

The Morelli House is eligible for listing in National Register of Historic Places under Criterion C as a dwelling representing an upper-middle-class example of Mid-Century Modern style developed in the late 1950s and early 1960s, a period of the city's flamboyant and rapid growth. Although it has been moved, the outstanding degree of its integrity, particularly regarding its significant interior spaces, combined with the fact that it is an excellent expression of this style of architecture, warrants its listing in the National Register under this criterion.

In addition, to the consideration of the resource under Criterion C, it is possible to document the building's significance under criteria A and B. Documentation under these criteria is presented only for context since listing under these criteria is not possible given that the structure has been moved.

The Morelli House is documented under Criterion A for its association with the emerging image of Las Vegas as an international capital of the entertainment industry, and for Antonio Morelli's association with the famed "Rat Pack." Because no other Las Vegas resources survive that are related to the Southern Nevada emergence of the Rat Pack, the Morelli House can be regarded as having national significance. Unfortunately, the move of the structure diminishes its integrity, and it is not possible to assert its national significance to warrant listing as a National Historic Landmark.

The Morelli House is documented under Criterion B at the local level for its association with the builder and owner, Antonio Morelli, who played an important role in the community through his work as music director at the Sands Hotel and his involvement in the musical activities of the community.

Criterion C¹

The Morelli House is eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places under criterion C, for its modernistic style of architecture. The Morelli House was built in 1959 in prestigious Desert Inn Estates overlooking the second fairway at the world-class Desert Inn Golf Course. The Desert Inn

¹ As indicated above, the discussion under Criterion C draws heavily from the corresponding discussion in Harmon, "Morelli House." In addition, the importance of the architecture is discussed in Ronald M. James and Elizabeth Safford Harvey, *Nevada's Historic Buildings: A Cultural Legacy* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2009).

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was the fifth property to be built along the Las Vegas Strip, and was its premier resort for more than a decade. Although it was the first country club community built in Las Vegas, it was not originally set up as a housing development. The first homes on the resort grounds were for the use of the owner/developer, Wilbur Clark, his executives, and certain high rollers, including Howard Hughes. Desert Inn Estates was developed in 1952, two years after the opening of the Desert Inn casino/resort. The 65 parcels encircled the golf course to the east of the hotel, with open desert land beyond. A few years later 15 interior parcels were opened for development under the name of Desert Inn Estates 2. The average parcel size was .25 acre, but interspersed were a few double lots. Desert Inn Estates was the first Las Vegas development with modern design. A number of notable performers built homes in the Estates including Keely Smith and Betty Grable and her husband, bandleader Harry James. Bob Miller, Nevada's governor from 1989 to 1999, grew up in Desert Inn Estates.

The Morelli House was built in 1959 by Antonio Morelli, who chose the modernistic design for his house in Desert Inn Estates and approached Sands' carpenter foreman, Richard Small, with his ideas. Together, for over two years, the two men designed and built the house at 52 Country Club Drive. Las Vegas architect Hugh E. Taylor was engaged to draw the plans. Small was the master carpenter at the Sands, but he also built several custom homes in town. Small first came to Nevada from his home state of Montana during the depression to work in the silver mines at Silver Peak. Small traveled back to Montana, but returned to Las Vegas during World War II and later worked as the carpenter foreman at the Nevada Test Site, where he built structures used in the atomic test shots.

Small's son Michael, now a lawyer in Las Vegas, was a teenager when the Morelli House was built. Michael and older brother Richard helped their father with the construction. Michael recalls details of the construction, as well as conversations with Morelli about his vision for his home. According to Small, the Morellis were influenced by Rudolf Schindler's "window wall" houses in Palm Springs, and Philip Johnson's "Glass house" in New Canaan, Connecticut, Mrs. Morelli's home town.² The Las Vegas house was to be comfortable and casual. Natural wood was important to Morelli, as it was to Schindler. Small recalls redoing the redwood ceiling three times before it satisfied Morelli.

The modern style of the Morelli House was revolutionary for Las Vegas. Other custom homes of the time were merely expanded ranch-style forms. The Morelli House brought vaulted ceilings to the desert and the concept of integrating the building with the site, particularly effective in a golf course development. In a May 2, 2001 telephone conversation, UNLV professor of architecture, Janet White, interpreted the site plan of the Morelli House and its relationship to its setting. The window-wall façade, facing the golf course, was the front of the home - its monumental façade. The site was of the utmost importance to the structure, as were its proportions. The original plans show a different front arrangement, with a 6-foot-high block wall set in zig-zags, creating a dynamic approach. The pool was built behind the wall, sheltered from the street. A number of Morelli's neighbors built pools on the golf course side of their homes, providing no privacy for swimmers, and interfering with the

² Michael Small, personal communication May 9, 2001.

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buildings' interplay with the golf course. Morelli understood the relationship between building and grounds, and sought to emphasize it. Morelli loved clean lines and eschewed ornamental plantings on his property. The only plantings were in the niches of the wall along the street.

That Rudolf Schindler served as inspiration for the Morelli House is appropriate, since Schindler developed his architectural style in the 1920s in the warm, sunny climate of southern California, an area that has strongly influenced Las Vegas architecture for decades. Schindler studied architecture and engineering in his native Austria. Inspired by Adolf Loos, Schindler came to the United States in 1914. Disappointed with America, Schindler was planning to return to Austria when he landed a position at Frank Lloyd Wright's Taliesin studio. In 1920, Wright sent Schindler to Los Angeles to oversee the construction of the Barnsdall house, known as the Hollyhock house. Upon completion of the Hollyhock house, Schindler stayed in California and opened his own practice. By 1928, Schindler developed a particular vision of architecture that is reflected in Morelli's plans for his own home, "The sense for the perception of architecture is not the eyes, but living. Our life is its image."³

Philip Johnson was an early proponent of the International Style and worked with the early modernist masters from Europe, the likes of Mies van der Rohe, Walter Gropius, Le Corbusier, and J.J.P. Oud, and those from America, including Schindler, and his colleague and fellow Austrian, Richard Neutra. Beginning in 1946, Johnson undertook the building of his own home in New Canaan, Connecticut that would interpret "the worship of glass we inherited from [German pioneers] Scheerbart and Taut."⁴ Johnson's ideals are also reflected in the Morelli House: "I was building an American house. I like to get outdoors quickly, so I raised it [only] two steps above the ground...."⁵

Philip Johnson went on to other design realms, like postmodernism, but Schindler, who died in 1953, practiced his art in the temperate regions of southern California, as well as the desert environment of Palm Springs, with a climate similar to Las Vegas. Even his early houses sported flat roofs with wide overhangs, and window walls to bring the outdoors in and meld the building with the site. One of Schindler's design principles was that nothing be tied down, "Once an architect begins to worry about tying things down and about correct spacings, he arrives only at formal harmonies, and these have little to do with living."⁶ The Morelli House displays this sense of not being tied down, and Mr. Morelli's goal was to avoid formalism, for his home was a place for living, rather than for show.

The Morelli House drew on the legacies of two great architects, and helped to establish for Las Vegas a tradition of distinctive and adventurous architecture. Despite the fact that some integrity was lost when the house is moved from its original location along the Desert Inn Golf Course, the Morelli House remains a significant element of Las Vegas' architectural history.

³ McCoy 1960:149-150.

⁴ Webb 1994:36.

⁵ Webb 1994:36.

⁶ McCoy 1960:174-175.

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According to Robert Fielden, a prominent architect in Las Vegas, and Alan Hess, a well-known preservationist and writer specializing in Mid-Century Modern architecture, the Morelli House is a fine example, particularly in its interiors, of the California Movement of the American International School of that style. The Morelli House fits McAlester and McAlester's label of "Contemporary," another term for American International, which is a derivative of the International style seen since the 1910s in the works of R. M. Schindler and Richard Neutra in Southern California and of the internationally-known architect, Frank Lloyd Wright.⁷ The Morelli House also meets the design intent of "Populuxe" which author Thomas Hine describes as "fun, fashionable, fantastic and futuristic."⁸ Directed by the owners, Antonio and Helen Morelli, the architect, Hugh E. Taylor, incorporated Mid-Century Modern features in his design such as the widely overhanging eaves and expansive glass windows.⁹ The modernist houses of R. M. Schindler and the "Glass house" of Philip Johnson inspired the Morellis and Taylor to adopt these features.¹⁰ According to Alan Hess, the Morelli House is a "mature and excellent design that illustrates the popularity and progressiveness of Modern architecture in mid-century Las Vegas."¹¹

To quote Hess: "The historic Antonio and Helen Morelli House preserved by the Junior League of Las Vegas...is a vibrant reminder of the newness, optimism and style in Las Vegas in the mid-twentieth century. The house's bold horizontal lines, glass walls, open plan, and natural materials embody the fundamental tenants of [Mid-Century] Modern architecture and Modern living in that period."¹²

Mr. Kay Glenn purchased the home from Antonio Morelli's widow in 1978. Kay Glenn had been Howard Hughes' press secretary from 1951 until the millionaire's death in 1976. Glenn made only two changes to the house in the 22 years he owned it, and that was to change paint color in two places. In April 2000, Steve Wynn purchased the Desert Inn with plans to demolish it, the golf course, and the surrounding homes in Desert Inn Estates. The Las Vegas Junior League subsequently moved the house to the League's parcel in the face of its impending demolition.

Criterion A

The Morelli House is eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places for the critical role that its owner played in developing a persona for Las Vegas as an entertainment capital of the world.

⁷ Dr. Robert Fielden, oral interview by Carole C. Terry, May 25, 2010. Alan Hess, "A New Architecture for a New City." *The Morelli House*. (Las Vegas: Junior League of Las Vegas, 2008) 25. Lee McAlester and Virginia McAlester. *A Field Guide to American Houses* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990) 482.

⁸ Thomas Hine. *Populuxe*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986) 38.

⁹ Taylor was inspired by architect Wayne McAllister when creating the large, sheltering roof at the Morelli House entrance. Hess, "Architecture." 10.

¹⁰ Johnson's "Glass house" is located in Helen Morelli's home town, New Canaan, Connecticut. Hugh E. Taylor, oral interview by Alan Hess, April 7, 2007; Hess, "Architecture." 19.

¹¹ Hess, "Architecture." 19.

¹² Hess, 1

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Antonio Morelli set a high bar at the Sands Hotel Casino with creativity, musical perfection, and a generally classy presentation, affecting the way Las Vegas stages would present themselves for the rest of the century and into the next. In particular, Morelli played a role in the debut of the "Rat Pack," which first performed on his stage.

When Jack Entratter, president of the Sands Hotel, suggested that Morelli should relocate to Las Vegas, Morelli had much to consider. In the post World War II era, with the popularity of the television, the East Coast theater circuit was declining. As a result, employment opportunities in traditional theater were becoming scarce. Morelli thoughtfully assessed that Las Vegas might be an unexpected opportunity worth pursuing. Las Vegas provided "a newly minted realm of entertainment,"¹³ wherein Antonio Morelli would soon be known as "Maestro Morelli."

During what would become his twenty year career in Las Vegas, Morelli assisted in transforming the city into a popular, highly regarded entertainment venue. Along with the celebrity headliners, Jack Entratter promoted Morelli's Las Vegas presence with regular billing on the Sands pylon sign reading "Antonio Morelli and his Music" or, at other times, "Antonio Morelli and his Orchestra."¹⁴ People came to know Morelli. As stated by an aspiring student vocalist who one day would become the musical director at the First Christian Church, it was hard to miss him [around town] with "his mustache, elegant demeanor and Caddy Convertible. He was ...an elegant gentleman in our city."¹⁵

When Morelli arrived in town, he realized, "the Sands was the envy of the other hotels" with its domination of headliners, including Frank Sinatra, Danny Thomas, Red Skelton, Lena Horne, Dean Martin, and Sammy Davis Jr.¹⁶ Morelli also realized, that the Sands 18-member orchestra may have been the best in town, but it was essentially only a brass band since "string sections were not the norm" in Las Vegas.¹⁷ To meet the string needs of his entertainers, the Copa Room Orchestra was periodically augmented by up to 32 instrumentalists.¹⁸ Morelli immediately sought to add a year-round strings section to his orchestra and with perseverance he was successful. Union musician president Frank Leone stated this was "the significance of Antonio Morelli."¹⁹

Local musicians who were present during the Sands heyday in the 1950s and well into the 1960s, agree that "playing at the Sands was the pinnacle of an entertainer's career," and "they all wanted to be part of the Morelli Orchestra,"²⁰ The orchestra leader provided stiff demands mandating that

¹³ Ortwein, Dr.Dennis, Written Testimonial of Antonio Morelli, March 25, 2011.

¹⁴ Deacon, Maxine, Written Testimonial on Antonio Morelli, March 2011.

¹⁵ SOURCE NEEDED

¹⁶ Frank Leone, panelist, "Morelli and His Music" Las Vegas Academy, Auditorium, April 2 2009.

¹⁷ "Morelli" Panel Discussion.

¹⁸ Coffey, 20.

¹⁹ Leone, "Morelli," Panel discussion.

²⁰ Leone and Mulidore agreed "everyone wanted the job."

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instrumentalists read and play music instantly or as stated by Leone, "you were out the door."²¹ Nevertheless, Morelli, conceded to musicians with promising talent, notably strings players. Bertine Corimby, a locally prominent violinist and viola player today, shared her long ago personal audition terror when Morelli demanded she play a scale of perfect fifths on the Viola, something she could not do at the time. Though he initially scoffed at her inability, she was still inducted into the orchestra as the second viola player.²² Corimby reported that later, when she left the orchestra, her skills had considerably improved as a result of performing with the Morelli.

As Morelli strove to improve the Copa Room's Orchestra's level of performance, he had unpleasant exchanges with musicians who resented the power of this new-to-town, easterner, with his unrealistic demands and his high-handed ways and they tended "not [to] like him."²³ Some musicians never forgave him. In the Coffey interview, Morelli delicately addressed this issue stating when he first arrived in town, most of the available Las Vegas musicians "were young men from the territory bands and smaller communities."²⁴ As the popularity of the town grew, qualified musicians from all quarters sought positions in his Strip orchestra and, by the mid 1960s, over one third of his players were "men with degrees in music" who had performed "in important orchestras around the world."²⁵

The exacting standards to which Morelli held his musicians, he also held himself. As the Sands' music director, Morelli spent considerable time writing orchestra arrangements. Although headliners brought musical directors with them, Morelli would write new scores or recompose an evening's musical composition to present a better, integrated production. On occasion, the music flowed easily; at other times, he deliberated over troublesome arrangements until late at night at home in his music room. When an extended effort became necessary, each orchestra player might receive a new part the following day.²⁶ Morelli fully involved himself knowing it was his responsibility to ensure that only quality productions were featured in the Copa Room, known widely as "the Jewel of the Strip."²⁷

Morelli is credited on a multitude of albums²⁸ for showroom recordings of celebrity entertainers in the Copa Room. Morelli's efforts improved entertainers' performances and as stated by Florence

²¹ Ibid.

²² Corimby, Bertine, "Morelli and His Music" 2009. Panelist Ken Hanlon attested to Bertine's exceptional talent as a violinist and viola player.

²³ Mulidore, Jimmy, "Morelli". Proctor, Cork. Oral recollection of musician's feelings. Telephone Conversation. March 12, 2011.

²⁴ Coffey, 20. Reddie, Written testimonial.

²⁵ Coffey, 20-21. Reddie's written testimonial makes it clear over time Morelli regretted the clash he had with some of these men he came to respect.

²⁶ Coffey, 21.

²⁷ "Morelli", *Program*, 10.

²⁸ "Sands Hotel: Legends of the Copa Room" <http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sands_Hotel (accessed April 10, 2011).

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Henderson, Morelli made “every show seem like opening night.”²⁹ The shows performed nightly in the Copa Room. Crowds gathered to see world famous, celebrity headliners on the “intimate stage.”³⁰ To avoid performance mishaps, Morelli was attuned to the mental disposition of his soloists and other noted performers. Morelli shared this strategy: “When I’m conducting for a star ...I talk to him twenty minutes before the performance. I want to hear the sound of his voice. See how he feels. Has he eaten too much? Missed dinner? Any of these things can influence a performance. I want to coordinate my thinking with that of the artist; feel with him; identify with his mood.”³¹ In this way, the Maestro found few surprises once a performance started. Morelli had control and this was important because as pointed out by Bertine Corimby, “when he was on stage, it was his world.”³²

Though there were many special moments for Morelli leading the Copa Room Orchestra, his most publicized occasion was when Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin and Sammy Davis, Jr. joined with Joey Bishop and Peter Lawford in Las Vegas during a three-week period in 1960 while filming *Ocean’s Eleven*. Amazingly, this was the first time these men performed together on stage. The group entitled their Copa Room collaboration: *The Summit at the Sands*. In short order, the group would be known as the Rat Pack.

The name switch was not well received by Frank Sinatra because as it was explained in an article by the singer’s younger daughter Tina, “Rat Pack” is what Lauren Bacall had dubbed the daily, visiting friends of her ailing husband, Humphrey Bogart.³³ Yet, for whatever reason, the Rat Pack name stuck and, more importantly, the notable group – in its Sands engagement and with Morelli leading the orchestra – became famous under the odd moniker.

During this time, as Helen Morelli recounted to Massini, the Rat Pack appeared nightly at the Sands “[they] would do two shows ... and they spent the whole time playing tricks on one another.”³⁴ The audiences were enthralled. Historic photographs depict a tall, smiling, elegantly mustachioed Morelli on stage in front of his orchestra, laughing at the Rat Pack’s clowning and stage antics.³⁵ This was one of the most successful collaborations of Morelli’s career and the photographs clearly indicate his awareness that something wonderful was occurring. These images became internationally famous.

²⁹ Coffey, 21.

³⁰ Ken Hanlon stated that with the stage’s physical shape, drinkers along the side were within close proximity of the players. Hanlon, “Morelli and His Music,” Las Vegas Academy Auditorium, April 2, 2009.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Corimby, “Morelli” panel discussion.

³³ Newman, Melinda, “Tina Sinatra Laments the Loss of Her Dad Frank and the Death of Rat Pack Cool,” <<http://www.spinner.com>> (accessed February 14, 2011).

³⁴ Massini, 2.

³⁵ Historical photograph on display in Morelli House.

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Though photographs of the Rat Pack on stage show both Sinatra and Morelli standing together as close colleagues, this was not always the case. As written in the *Review Journal's* news article "Standing Ovation," the two, on several occasions, "locked horns."³⁶ Still, as they each had become accustomed to controlling others, personality disagreements over time were to be expected. Notably, even with Frank Sinatra, Maestro Morelli stood his ground.

The association of the Rat Pack with the Morelli House is by virtue of the importance of Morelli to the origin of the act. Otherwise, the connection of the house to the Rat Pack is weak, but it survives as the best surviving resource associated with this nationally famous entertainment phenomenon.

Besides the Morelli House, one other surviving resource is known to have limited association with the Rat Pack. On June 20, 1965, three members of the Rat Pack – Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, and Sammy Davis, Jr. – performed at the Kiel Opera House in St. Louis, Missouri, the only time members of the Rat Pack performed together on television. The television appearance solidified the mythic status of the Rat Pack in the popular mind, but the Copa stage was the most important place in association with the legend of the Rat Pack. The Kiel Opera House was listed in the National Register of Historic Places on February 11, 2000. Its association with the Rat Pack is limited because only three members performed there and only on one occasion, but the resource has significance because of its association with the only televised performance of the Rat Pack, albeit with only part of the group. The performances at the Sands and in association with Morelli was seminal and therefore of greater importance. Unfortunately, the Sands was demolished, leaving the Morelli House as a unique survivor of this Las Vegas story, which quickly attained national significance.

Historical photographs document a multitude of special celebrations and noteworthy personal occasions for the orchestra leader. Two instances provide examples. One was the celebration of the Sands' twelfth anniversary with celebrity guest star Danny Thomas, a Copa Room favorite. A photograph shows a beaming Thomas, Entratter, and Morelli on stage with an elaborate cake depicting the popular Sands Resort as it would appear with its planned 17-story tower, joining the many multi-story Strip resorts built after 1952.³⁷ The second photographed occasion is believed to have occurred in 1964³⁸ when President Lyndon Johnson visited Las Vegas during the final days of his election campaign against Barry Goldwater. Morelli, in a center position, was photographed with President Lyndon Johnson and Nevada's two prominent U.S. Senators, Howard Cannon and Alan Bible. No other individuals appeared in the formal photograph.

³⁶ "Standing Ovations", *Las Vegas Review Journal*, April 2, 2009. At the "Morelli and His Music" event, Jimmy Mulidore described a few sparring incidents between Sinatra and Morelli.

³⁷ Historic photograph on display at Morelli House. The Sands Hotel, as originally built, was a single story resort.

³⁸ Alvarez, Brian. LVCVA, verified photograph archives show casino signs welcoming Lyndon Johnson to town October, 1964. March 4, 2011.

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An unexpected privilege for Morelli in leading the Las Vegas Sands' Orchestra was that it allowed him to socially interact with a pillar of the East Coast musical community. In the early 1960s, Leonard Bernstein, the Music Director of the New York Philharmonic, arrived for scheduled performances at the Las Vegas Convention Center. During his desert visit, Morelli invited Bernstein to his home for dinner when the two apparently discussed the ill-mannered nature of the western audience. Though Bernstein was initially embarrassed and insulted that audience members were not stationary during his concerts, he chose to overlook the unintended slights. He surmised it was of greater importance to appreciate that these artistically deprived music patrons were coming voluntarily to hear him. Morelli attested (to Coffey) that Bernstein's words regarding the West's lack of cultural exposure strongly affected him.³⁹ This conversation perhaps renewed Morelli's resolve to vigorously continue with his time-consuming pop concerts for the people of Las Vegas (see discussion below under Criterion B).

Besides Bernstein, many others visited Morelli's House. On special weekends and following select performances, strip headliners, musicians, prominent locals, colleagues, and treasured friends congregated at the Morelli House. Jimmy Mulidore admitted that "the parties were truly magnificent."⁴⁰ Morelli loved inviting people to his custom, Mid-Century Modern home which he had helped build with his own hands. He sincerely believed that this dwelling defined his essence and was "one of the greatest challenges of [his] life."⁴¹ Mozart, the Morelli's poodle, greeted visitors at the door, while Helen made tasty appetizers or luscious entrées in their ultramodern kitchen. During these occasions, many performers gathered in Morelli's music room to rehash evening performances or to collaborate on difficult musical compositions. During the day, it was not uncommon for Morelli to find his varied dinner guests playing the second hole along the fairway behind his home.⁴² The Morelli House became an entertainment center for the musical icons who entertained Las Vegas.

In 1987, the *Las Vegas Sun* publisher, Hank Greenspun, fervently proclaimed that the Sands was the "resort that made Las Vegas famous."⁴³ Although earlier casinos opened along the Strip, and established the corridor as a center of gaming and entertainment, the opening of the Sands on December 15, 1952 occurred at a time when the city began an unprecedented period of visitor and Strip construction growth. The impressive list of hotels that appeared on the Strip during these glory days is as follows: Dunes (1955), Riviera (1955), Hacienda (1956), Tropicana (1957), Stardust (1958), Castaways (1963), Caesars (1966), Aladdin (1966), Circus Circus (1968) and the off strip hotels, Landmark (1969) and International (1969), latter was renamed Hilton Hotel in 1971. Of the key hotels built from 1946 to 1971, only the Sahara, the Riviera, the Tropicana, Caesars, Circus

³⁹ Coffey, 25. Leonard Bernstein. Thank You Note, September (day/yr. need verification)

⁴⁰ Mulidore, "Morelli" panel discussion.

⁴¹ Morelli was referring the thrill of working with his hands. Coffey, 22

⁴² "Sands Hotel: Legends of the Copa Room" <http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sands_Hotel (accessed April 8, 2011).

⁴³ Greenspun, Hank, editor's column, *Las Vegas Sun*, 1987, <<http://www.lasvegassun.com/history>, (accessed March 20, 2011).

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Circus, and the Hilton remain, and several of these are likely to be demolished in the near future.⁴⁴ The Sands' domination of the Strip showcasing the best celebrity entertainers and the best entertainment could not last forever. Inevitably, as Las Vegas Boulevard and its magnificent hotels began to thrive, visitors and headliners would slowly start to explore new entertainment venues. It was probably hurtful to both Entratter and Morelli when for example, Dean Martin, who was given a minority shareholder's interest, chose to contract at the Riviera or when Frank Sinatra contracted with Caesars Palace.⁴⁵ Nonetheless, with significant casino and city advances within a short period of time, Hank Greenspun correctly assessed, that both Entratter and Morelli were instrumental in the growing stature and popularity of the Las Vegas Strip worldwide.

Criterion B

Antonio Morelli, was born July 22, 1904 in Rochester, New York, spending his youth in Erie, Pennsylvania. His father, Cesare Carlos Morelli, a professor of fine arts and a symphony flautist provided the young Morelli early training in violin and piano. In 1914, Morelli's father, took him to Italy where he would remain for 11 years to pursue studies at Milan's San Celso Military Academy and the Royal Conservatories of Music in Milan and Parma.⁴⁶ Morelli returned to the States in 1925 before his 21st birthday and became the pianist for a concert group at a hotel resort on the East Coast.

Morelli spent the next few years touring the country, traveling to places including Dallas, Denver, New Orleans, Chicago and New York to conduct theater and civic orchestras. For two seasons, he served as the musical director of the St. Louis Musical Opera. In 1935, while assisting as the orchestra leader for the newly opened RKO Palace Theater in Albany, New York, he married Helen Collins. Thereafter, Morelli continued to "travel the entertainment circuit...guest conducting for the pit orchestras at Warner, Paramount, RKO, Pantages, Shubert and other theater chains when stage shows still accompanied the movie feature."⁴⁷ In the Coffey interview, Morelli noted some of the musicals he conducted for the Shuberts: "*High Button Shoes*, with Eddie Foy; *Spring in Brazil*, with Milton Berle; *Three to Make Ready*, with Ray Bolger. *Touch and Go*; Victor Herbert's *Eileen*; Friml's *Vagabond King*; *Bohemian Girl*; and many others..."⁴⁸ He enjoyed his life because, as he viewed it, there was "nothing like the excitement of a Broadway opening."⁴⁹

Despite the excitement of life, life itself was rather painful for Morelli. In the East, Morelli lived

⁴⁴ History, Las Vegas. Casino map. *Las Vegas Sun*. <<http://lasvegassun.com/history>, (accessed March 15, 2011). Thanks to Michael Green for assistance with this material.

⁴⁵ Ken Hanlon, Telephone conversation with Sally Rycroft, March 8, 2011.

⁴⁶ Hess, House Essay, 2.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 21.

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with back pain, arthritis, and bursitis; the searing pain of one or more of these afflictions frequently left him bedridden. On one occasion he was compelled to undergo major surgery, which, as he told Coffey, confined him to his home for forty weeks. As it turned out, Morelli used this time advantageously to compose music: "This period encompassed some of the major accomplishments of his career, including such commissions as writing the music for three shows at the Canadian National Exhibition in Toronto, in association with Leon Leonidoff, senior producer at Radio City Music Hall."⁵⁰ Fortunately, he was able to do what he loved while his body slowly recovered. During this time, Morelli adopted his trademark look, which would make him famous in Las Vegas: the courtly mustache with waxed pencil-tip endpoints. As Morelli shaped his career, he also shaped his identity.

Morelli's captivation with Las Vegas was remarkable given his first unpleasant encounter in the desert. In 1953, Morelli traveled to Southern Nevada with the Olsen and Johnson comedy team; during their Vegas stopover, the blowing winds aggravated his allergies and caused him severe discomfort.⁵¹ During this trip, Morelli became acutely aware of the tribulations of arid living, and was relieved to return to New York City. However, this was not to be his last trip to Nevada. Following discussions at the Copacabana Club, Jack Entratter, president of the Sands Hotel, telephoned and offered Morelli the resort's coveted musical director's position; for the classical conductor, the plum of this flattering proposal was the Copa Room Orchestra.⁵²

Despite his earlier frustrating desert experience, Morelli tentatively accepted Entratter's proposal and in the summer of 1954, Morelli flew to Las Vegas without his wife, Helen, to explore the feasibility of employment. This time, as Morelli disembarked the airplane, he was greeted by the unrelenting 117 degree summer heat. Rather than recoil in horror, Morelli discovered the dry heat alleviated his constant, throbbing, arthritic pain. He was thrilled and that evening in a telephone conversation with Helen, proclaimed he never felt better. Miraculously, the desert provided a respite for him from the soreness of his joints.⁵³ The health benefits alone were reason to relocate to Las Vegas. Entratter and other local casino operators were delighted that Morelli would consider their offer, as they believed that the Strip's economic growth required attracting the Eastern elite and a more high-end audience.⁵⁴ The casino operators believed that Morelli's elegant presence and polished manner

⁵⁰ Coffey, 22,16; "Morelli and His Music," *Program*, Junior League of Las Vegas, Las Vegas Academy Auditorium, April 2, 2009, 3.

⁵¹ Hess, Alan, "A New Architecture for a New City". *The Morelli House*. Junior League of Las Vegas, 3. Coffey, Helene L., "Antonio Morelli: From Broadway to Las Vegas," *Sage*, Summer, 1967, 22.

⁵² Hess, 3.

⁵³ Massini, Jerry, Written copy of Oral Interview of Helen Morelli, 52 Country Club Lane, Desert Inn Estates, Las Vegas, NV. March 6, 1976, 1.

⁵⁴ Panel discussion at "Morelli and His Music" noted the downtown casinos drew in a more country western crowd and the Strip moved to attract the wealthy nightclub types and Eastern audience. Copa Room would be named after the Copacabana Club and where Entratter came in contact with Morelli.

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on the Copa Room stage would counter the negative rumors about Las Vegas and would entice wealthy, educated tourists to journey westward. As Alan Hess asserted in his article, "Morelli truly represented a new icon for the city: a man very unlike the rougher, gangster type figures popularly portrayed as making up Old Vegas"⁵⁵ Bill Reddie, a longtime Las Vegas composer and musician, who would ultimately succeed Morelli as the Sands' music director, commented on the Maestro's appearance when he arrived in the city: "With his waxed moustache, wavy white hair and authoritative demeanor, (Morelli) gave one the impression of someone who had been lifted out of the 19th century and somehow plunked down in Las Vegas."⁵⁶

Though Morelli's distinguished look and impeccable credentials were in order, the casino operators' confidence in Morelli's innate ability to draw a wealthy crowd was amazing. It would not be easy to offset the public's perception that crime syndicates were managing many of the seven "luxury" motor inns - the Sahara, El Rancho, Thunderbird, New Frontier, Desert Inn, Sands, and the Flamingo - along Fifth Street (aka Las Vegas Blvd or "the Strip").⁵⁷ Furthermore, Las Vegas was perceived as a hot, dusty, crude, and garish community, only acceptable for the downtown's country western crowd. There remained the question if such unpleasant characteristics would be tolerable to the more discerning groups of the Strip's potential market back East. Even Helen, who ultimately embraced the desert lifestyle, offered critical reflections about the early community. She described the Strip as a wild, two-lane, not totally paved, roadway lacking lights and signals. She was also stunned that each casino had its own "sewer plant" culminating in foul smells all over the city when "the wind [blew]... the wrong way."⁵⁸ The desert city's rough lifestyle and image mixed with touches of glamour and glitter, perhaps burdening it with what Alan Hess referred to as an "unflattering *nouveau rich* perception."⁵⁹ To lure people westward, Morelli needed a significant amount of magic in his conductor's baton. Looking back, Morelli's career was indeed magical.

The provincial nature of Las Vegas may be why even Helen decided, at the outset, to remain at their beautiful, traditional home on Long Island. In 1957, after it became evident that her husband was comfortable with his Sands' position and desert surroundings, she relocated to Las Vegas. Nevertheless, they retained their New York home until 1959, when they concluded that along with their pet poodle Mozart, they would be spending the balance of their lives in Las Vegas. With the proceeds of their eastern home and the security of his new job in Las Vegas, the Morellis' began to plan and to construct their carefully crafted, Mid-Century Modern, Las Vegas dream home. Antonio and Helen Morelli's acceptance of Southern Nevada was beneficial to the development of Las Vegas. Morelli exceeded the Strip leaders' desires and expectations. His presence and stage effort assisted in

⁵⁵ Hess, 4.

⁵⁶ Reddie, Bill, Email testimonial on Antonio Morelli. March 13, 2009

⁵⁷ "History - Las Vegas," *Las Vegas Sun*. <<http://www.lasvegassun.com/history>> (accessed Mar 2, 2011).

⁵⁸ Massini, 5.

⁵⁹ Hess, "Architecture", 3.

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luring the well-heeled traveler to visit Las Vegas and to lavishly spend money. In addition, he extended himself to help the ever-growing flock of "relocated" western locals to unite as a community. With Morelli, visitors and locals felt welcome in the emerging desert town.

Besides Morelli's important career at the Sands, outlined above under the discussion for Criterion A, he had other important roles within the community. As stated, Jack Entratter, at the urging of his cohorts, brought Morelli to Las Vegas to offset the city's impaired image. Job security on the turbulent and notoriously competitive Las Vegas Strip never existed, but given that Morelli was retained as the Sand's music director until his health failed in the early 1970s, it is evident his employers believed they acted wisely in retaining him. Morelli's accomplishments surpassed everyone's expectations. The story does not end with his role on the Strip. On a wider examination of Morelli's life in Las Vegas, his contributions include not only his professional accomplishments as orchestra conductor at the Sands, bringing music to the tourists, but also his personal accomplishments during his off-duty time as the city's cultural architect, bringing music to the residents of Las Vegas.

Each night, after he put down his baton in the Copa Room, Morelli began assembling various musicians from along the strip to provide free public concerts. These orchestras, which were much larger than the commercial strip orchestras, first performed as the *Shirt Sleeve Symphonies* and later as the *Las Vegas Pop Concerts*.⁶⁰ In 1955, Morelli held the first local concert at Cashman Field with production going as well as he could have hoped. His effort to perform this event, with 125 brass playing musicians giving freely of their time, began months in advance of the scheduled summer performance.⁶¹ The concert went from 8:00 pm to midnight and crowds filled the stands with wild cheers of approval. A major challenge at this event was transporting the entertainers and musicians between the Strip casinos to Cashman Field so they would be there in time to perform for their shows. The Las Vegas solution was to whisk them in and out via a sheriff's car. As Helen recalled, people paid \$1.50 to \$2.00 to attend this initial performance; future events cost less or they were free.⁶²

This concert set the tone for future annual productions; and in 1959 when the Las Vegas Convention Center opened, Morelli had a venue to hold larger public concerts on a more regular basis. For these public performances, Morelli formed a community chorus composed of 50 to 60 members of all age groups and, as stated by Dennis Ortwein, a then young teacher, joined the chorus early on and participated in many of the Maestro's musical performances. Ortwein stated "Morelli was definitely a taskmaster but, that he "achieved outstanding quality by skillfully motivating us all to get better."⁶³

The Community Chorus was an important piece for Morelli in his plan to hold multiple public performances each year. Looking back, Ortwein stated "what most distinguished Maestro Morelli

⁶⁰ "Morelli" Program, 4.

⁶¹ Massini, 4.

⁶² Massini, 4.

⁶³ Ortwein, Written testimonial.

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was his amazing talent for bringing the community together for the spectacular concerts and holiday celebrations.”⁶⁴ Morelli’s annual series included an Easter Pageant in March or April, a Mother’s Day Program in May, often an opera in June, a patriotic program in July, and a Christmas Concert in December.⁶⁵ On two occasions, Morelli also had a Jewish-focused program in February. Morelli said of his operatic efforts: “In Las Vegas, we have produced three operas in concert manner: *Cavaleria Rusticana* in English; *Il Trovatore* in Italian and *Aida* in two languages – Italian and English – in costume, to S.R.O. [standing room only] audiences. All local talent and an orchestra of sixty-five.”⁶⁶ Through these lavish, regularly scheduled, free performances, the people of Las Vegas truly came to know Morelli. They appreciated the extraordinary effort he went to on their behalf. Helen proudly stated that, in one publication, her husband was referred to as “the Toscanini of the Desert.”⁶⁷

The Convention Center and accompanying production equipment was, apparently, provided free of charge and a Music Performance Trust Fund compensated the musicians, but Morelli personally financed whatever he could not get donated. Maxine Deacon, one of his young production singers, verified that “he gave generously of his time and money to bring music to [the people of] Las Vegas.”⁶⁸ Helen, following her husband’s death, corroborated this point stating “I could have had many mink coats with all the money he took out of his own pocket to pay for these things.”⁶⁹ But she supported his efforts because “he enjoyed it and the people enjoyed it.”⁷⁰

Morelli provided the best performance possible at each of the seasonal events. Bertine Corimby indicated that they were “spectacular productions.” At one concert, she recalled his having “every type of imaginable animal; big ones, too.”⁷¹ Morelli was able to do such things because, as Ortwein stated, “Morelli had access to everyone ... a call [by Morelli] to a business, a construction company or a publicist would bring positive action.”⁷² They would give what they could to make the specific event successful; what they couldn’t give, Morelli covered.

Several celebrity performers and soloists, including Dean Martin, Nat King Cole, and Red Skelton, agreed to perform *pro bono* on his community stage. When it circulated that the caliber of celebrity headliners gave of their time, other qualified, aspiring performers agreed to participate in the productions for free. Helen enjoyed sharing the story that Dean Martin, on the eve before his act, jokingly stated his need for rest because the following day he would be “in concert at the Convention

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Coffer, 23.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Massini, 3.

⁶⁸ Deacon, written testimonial.

⁶⁹ Massini, 3.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Corimby, “Morelli” panel discussion.

⁷² Ortwein, written testimonial.

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Center.”⁷³ Amazingly, whereas many working Las Vegans could not afford to see Strip entertainers in the casino showrooms, Morelli enabled “these locals” to see favorite personalities “for free” at his pop concerts on Sunday afternoons. A sense of community began to blossom. Audience members began to muse that maybe Las Vegas really was a proper community in which to raise families.

The Good Friday Concert, held in 1966, was for Morelli and others, his most spectacular liturgical performance as there was an estimated 10,000 spectators. The people in attendance were regally entertained. It was reported that the gospel of St. Matthew was dramatized by a large cast in period costume. Danny Thomas served as the Gospel narrator. Moreover, a well known local district judge was commentator and Pontius Pilate was played by the chairman of the Clark County Commission.⁷⁴

The following year, Morelli wrote a musical version for an Easter Sunday Sunrise Service. This service also had an overflowing crowd in attendance. Moreover, Morelli proudly stated that for this event his wife “designed and cut out one hundred costumes.”⁷⁵ The number of participants in these productions required intense planning on the showman’s part, but it apparently provided a greater level of excitement for the audience and, thus, made the extra effort worthwhile to him.

In an interview with Coffey five years before his retirement, Morelli commented that his community musical accomplishments “were his special pride.” Having the opportunity to share the magic of music and all its variety with his fellow Las Vegans was the spark that provided life’s special meaning. In his words, “The idea is to expose the people to all kinds of music: give them a little bit of everything. Nothing... can take the place of a concert hall when it comes to a musical education. Why is that? If you get an audience together and play to them for two hours ...a program that includes Brahms, Strauss, a little Wagner, and a little Sousa on the same program – you’ve achieved something.”⁷⁶ And, he added, “...people ...seldom get any variety... [but] when they come to my concerts I will put Sousa, Gershwin, Verdi, Rachmaninoff, with a Liszt piano concerto on the same program. I want to hold their interest and that’s the way I do it.”⁷⁷ Morelli, a true cultural architect, hoped that, with time, the attendees would grow in refinement and develop manners appropriate for these occasions. He could see he was having a certain measure of success. In the meantime, Morelli contented himself knowing concert attendance numbers were, in showman’s terms “off the charts.” Despite his professional success Morelli’s health remained a constant concern. He rebounded from a stroke in 1967 but was plagued by smaller strokes. In July 1971, following a brain hemorrhage, he was forced to retire as the Sands’ orchestra leader.⁷⁸ On June 17, 1974 just shy of his 70th birthday, Morelli quietly passed away at his home from an apparent heart attack. Helen was at his side and in a

⁷³ Massini, 4.

⁷⁴ Coffey, 24.

⁷⁵ Ibid. 22.

⁷⁶ Ibid. 25.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Reddie, Written Testimonial.

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final tribute to her husband, she was quoted in the *Sun* as saying that the people of Las Vegas had, "lost a good and dear friend in the music field."⁷⁹ Morelli "set the bar" for what Strip entertainment should be and through his pop concerts, he promoted the cultural growth of Las Vegas. Although sometimes controversial, Morelli strove for musical excellence in himself and in those around him.

Though the Clark County population was approximately 60,000 in 1954 at the time of the classical musical director's arrival, the area grew to nearly 360,000 people in 1974 on the eve of his death⁸⁰ Moreover, during his many years in the Copa Room, Morelli saw Las Vegas firmly establish its place on the world entertainment stage.

Three years after Morelli's death, in 1977, the University of Wyoming recognized the entertainment and cultural significance of the musician and became the repository for many of his musical papers.⁸¹ After the many historical photographs and recordings of his community concerts preserved by Helen Morelli were given to the Junior League of Las Vegas Endowment Fund, the organization donated them to the Special Collections Department of the University of Nevada, Las Vegas and to the Arnold Shaw Popular Music Research Center at the University of Nevada.

Conclusion

The Morelli House is eligible for listing in National Register of Historic Places under Criterion C as a dwelling representing an upper-middle-class example of Mid-Century Modern style developed in the late 1950s and early 1960s, a period of flamboyant and rapid growth in Las Vegas. Although it has been moved, the outstanding degree of its integrity, particularly regarding its significant interior spaces, combined with the fact that it is an excellent expression of this style of architecture, warrants its listing in the National Register under this criterion. Given its relocation, this nomination calls for an exception under Criterion Consideration B. Constructed in 1959 and relocated in 2001, The Junior League of Las Vegas has restored the Morelli House in both its exterior and interior appearance in accordance with the United States Secretary of the Interior's Standards.

⁷⁹ Obituary

⁸⁰ All Strip hotels are in the county. Even at that time, the visitor volume at any one time added greatly to the perceived population of Las Vegas. In 1980, Clark County's population would hit 463,087. Clark County's present day population is 1,951,269.

⁸¹ Letter verifying Receipt from University of Wyoming, 1977.

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