

Topics

Smoldering Black Rubber Architecture

The Odds on Joy

The idea was to light a fire under Atlantic City, not to burn down the Boardwalk. But the casinos have had some curious side effects. Lately, the sun's rays have been bouncing off the golden prisms of Caesar's Boardwalk Regency, causing small fires and smoldering planks. A few warped panels, explains the management, are the culprits; when they're replaced the golden glow will return to normal.

Normal for Atlantic City now means what is normal for Las Vegas or Miami Beach — a style of calculated insubstantiality and theatrical illusion that has come to be known for some reason as "the architecture of joy." The mode was virtually invented by Morris Lapidus, the designer of such pleasure palaces as the Fontainebleau and the Americana, where all that glittered was definitely not gold.

Mr. Lapidus made the original Fontainebleau look like an understatement. A superb psychologist, he provided grand stairs for grand entrances to nowhere, in a stage-set of paint, plaster and kitsch. He devised the "moth" effect to draw the visitor in to-

ward bright colors (very useful for casino operators). Everything seemed larger and lusher than life.

This art of the preposterous was carried to great heights in Las Vegas, where Louis gave way to Caesar. A neon and fiberglass Rome dazzled tourists and bemused intellectuals. When Vegas came to Atlantic City, the style just came along. The sedate and solid old Beaux Arts hotels of brick and stone are disappearing behind glittering, fantasy plexiglass facades. Where there were once string quartets for tea, there are now one-armed bandits for breakfast. The odds change, even for taste and joy.

Joy Now, and Then

If the architecture of joy has an apogee, it is the disco, and the apogee of disco may be Studio 54. But even the ultimate can pall. Suspecting that "the rich, the famous, the eccentric and the glamorous" might be getting a little bored with the same old scene, Studio 54 has just completed a \$1.5-million renovation to raise joy to ecstasy.

A select 2,500 customers were in-

vited to the reopening. For the rest of us, a description may suffice. A red-walled foyer has been embellished with Burmese bamboo and a chandelier that once hung in the governor's mansion in New Hampshire. A moving bridge over the dance floor has special lights and spigots for fog. There is a black rubber lounge.

Perhaps in some ways it outflashes Bullfinch and Bernini. But they were able producers of spectaculars in their time. The crowds have never stopped coming to Bernini's 17th-century colonnaded outdoor anteroom to St. Peter's — still splendid theater without benefit of redesign. His Piazza Navona — flooded and filled with gondolas, music and moonlight for aristocratic Roman diversions — offered some very special effects, without piped-in fog. Inigo Jones, more spectacular still, created masques for the Queen of England in which rocks were split (for thunder) and lightning flashed, and Hell appeared and disappeared while gods descended upon the beautiful daughters of the Niger, in a moving temple. There was a multimedia event with class. The architecture of joy has been slipping.