

The Editorial Notebook

Potted Palms and Wilted Roses

There was an ecumenical groundbreaking this week for New York City's new Palace Hotel, the 51-story, 1,050-room tower that Harry Helmsley will build behind the Villard Houses on Madison Avenue. Representatives of city and church (the land and the Villard Houses are owned by the Archbishopric of New York) joined the builder to tout the new luxury hotel that is to rise on the 95-year-old Italianate brownstone block by McKim, Mead and White. The brownstone landmark will be kept—after a lengthy preservation struggle—as the hotel's entrance, with some of the period rooms incorporated into the new building's public spaces.

Financing has been completed for another significant addition to the New York hotel scene, the remodeling of the Commodore into a Regency Hyatt Hotel by Donald Trump, a developer, and the Hyatt Corporation. Halloran Properties and Howard Johnson are well along on the rebuilding of the Shelton, a historic New York skyscraper, for a Halloran House Hotel. The New York Hilton is said to be thinking about expanding, and there are rumors that a New York realtor is considering a hotel for the site of the East Side Airlines Terminal.

This is all good news, because hotels are a measure of a city's commercial activity and economic health. But

hotels have always been indicators of a city's style and urbanity, as well. Yesterday's hotels had skylit ceilings, painted clouds, potted palms and gilded chairs. But today's hotels are designed by convention specialists and computers and furnished from the sales and supply rooms of something euphemistically called the hospitality industry.

New York's hotel image has been dominated by the Edwardian Plaza and the Art Moderne Waldorf-Astoria, backed up by an assortment of Beaux Arts dowagers. Lost hotels of substance and elegance are legion. In recent years, the Regency and the Park Lane have tried to disguise commercial construction and ordinary proportions with a thin French veneer. The scintillating, sophisticated, geometric mirrored beauty of the new United Nations Plaza Hotel seems to puzzle its franchised management.

But most new hotels are like airports; they follow a standardized formula that makes all cities look alike. The same plans, rooms and fixtures depersonalize both people and places.

The hotels now planned for New York are both investment- and image-conscious. Mr. Helmsley has announced that the Palace will blend European architectural splendor with American craftsmanship—a feat of design legerdemain that demands a sus-

pension of belief in architectural realities. The Commodore remodeling aims for a different effect—the Hyatt mirror-glass, capsule-elevator, suspended-cocktail-lounge ambience that has scattered a Buck Rogers spaceship look across Middle America will be toned down for a more restrained urban gloss. The Halloran House will deliver the mode known to the trade as “traditional,” a melange of barroom borrowings of dubious provenance.

Those who waited under the clock at the Biltmore or tea-danced at the Ritz will be disappointed; but they are a vanishing breed. Most of the new hotels are for programmed businessmen and packaged tourists. Ice and Coke machines stand in the halls; cold toast in aluminum foil on plastic trays has replaced the rose on the room-service table. If the rose comes, it is wilted. The Waldorf has sabotaged Tony Sarg's Peacock Alley. The Plaza's Everett Shinn murals were almost sold by a hotel chain owner intent on re-decorating. The action has moved from subtle intrigue in the Oak Room to swinging singles bars. It is still possible to ring for a drink in the Algonquin's paneled lobby, or to dance, occasionally, on the rosy-skied St. Regis roof. We must cherish what is left and take what we get. So welcome to the hotels of New York.

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