

## Architecture

# Hospitality and the Plastic Esthetic

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

THE new American landscape is made of plastic pretensions and false dreams. The unfulfilled promise is the American way of life, from the oversize restaurant menu suggesting farm-fresh succulence and delivering dreary precooked fare, to the die-stamped motel with its celebrated plumbing that is already beginning to fail and synthetic Elizabethan pubs with styrofoam beams and food.

The big sell leads to the big letdown. For some reason the American public is unable to realize that it is being had. This is not necessarily because people like schlock that pretends to be what it isn't—some do and some don't—but because each of these essentially downgraded products is part of a game plan in which the environment is the loser and the consumer is the sucker. The process is "merchandising" and the results are achieved through assiduous corner-cutting shrewdly calculated to get the biggest return.

Caveat emptor, as they used to say, only the buyer is no longer in the position to beware. He takes what he gets.

What he gets in hotels and motels illustrates the point. The modern hotel-motel is an almost symbolic American product. Exported all over the world, it has created super-millionaires, and has the sanctity of success.

And yet I never approach a trip requiring an overnight stay without a sinking heart. It's not that I won't be reasonably comfortable—basic things like beds and baths and ice and Coke machines are the preoccupation of the American "hospitality" industry—it's that I will be so depressed. It is not the impersonality or anonymity of a hotel room, which is not always an unwelcome thing. It is that one is forced into a banal, standardized, multi-billion-dollar world of bad colors, bad fabrics, bad prints, bad pictures, bad furniture, bad lamps, bad ice-buckets and bad wastebaskets of such totally uniform and cheap consistency of taste and manufacture that borax or camp would be an exhilarating change of pace.

All this is arranged in identical, predictable layouts

smelling of stale smoke and air-conditioned at a temperature suggesting preservation of the dead no matter what the climate outside. Like the roads leading to airports everywhere, you never really know where you are. It is complete loss of identity—both personal and place. Ask any psychiatrist about that.

The alternatives are grimmer. You can have seedy grandeur with creaky mock room service and tarnished silver or small town hotel horrors. One takes the standard hotel-motel almost in relief—you know what you're getting—but not through any process of legitimate choice.

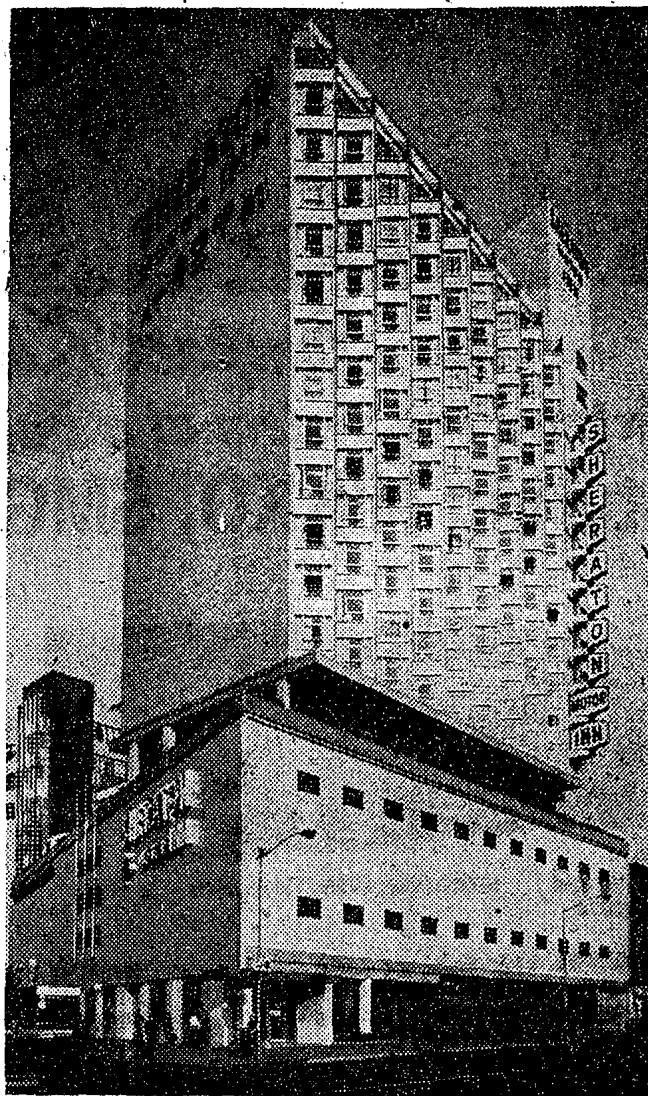
That may come as a surprise to the geniuses of the hospitality field—as much as the falling occupancy rate as their prices rise. This might even suggest that the plastic esthetic of tacky assembly-line lookalikes is not universally considered the promised land, no matter how great the operational expertise. But there is no pride like Holiday Inn, Sheraton, Howard Johnson or Ramada pride, to name a few at the top, and no one can infer that their populist designs are less than divinely inspired. The cash in the till has to be the Almighty word.

It's as if it had all come out of a not-very-bright computer, and it probably has. Historian Reyner Banham. The basic question is, why long the delighted devotee of can't the computer come up "pop" American motel art with anything better? Why and culture (reverse elitism?) does the vaunted American now writes rather edgily of hotel-motel never deviate the "trashbuilt" environment. from mediocrity? Whatever the hotel-motel is a conspicuous part of that scene. It how? When did it turn into isn't that there's anything know-nothingness? wrong with the basic idea of

The accusation of elitist the quick, efficient accommodation, or subjective dation, any more than there's judgment, just won't wash. anything wrong with quick Schlock is schlock. You can feeding; they are both, in make it amusing and preg-principle, good, essential and nant with social innuendo, as satisfactory solutions to mod-in Miami, or you can make it ern life. Quality need not be utilitarian. But there is ab-automatically excluded from solutely no proof that the the equation. But in America great washed American the pendulum swings from masses would be significant-cheap expediency to cheap ly less happy with something pretense; there is nothing, for less hack, that causes less example, between fast food distress among those with and foolish flambé.

greater experience with the Who can argue with 1,549 design process and its prod-Holiday Inns with 237,936 ucts. It doesn't all have to be rooms (as of last July) from plastic orange trees, Mediter-Kyoto, Japan, to Yeehaw ranean modern, pseudo-Buf-Junction, Fla.? Or with pre-fet and costume comedy in dictable Hiltons around the the Olde Shakespeare Grille. world, with a few notable ex-

Even the English critic and ceptions such as the Istanbul



Low Room

Sheraton Motor Inn, New York

Complete loss of identity?

Hilton and the Tel Aviv Hilton by architects Skidmore, Owings and Merrill and Jakov Rechter, respectively? The difference is in design, which leads to amenity, and to genuine ambience, and to pleasure, which is what travel used to be about.

One searches for reasons for the undeviating pattern. I have found two in particular: the Holiday Inn products division and the Cornell Hotel School.

The Holiday Inn system's level of plastic taste is for sale to all the other hotelmen of the world. According to an article by Marilyn Bender in The Times last August, the Holiday Inn products division's Innkeepers Supply Company, through its design department and the Institutional Mart of America, offers "a one-stop supermarket for commercial properties" with three regional showrooms. "In them are displayed acres of motel front desks and lounges with fake rustic

beams... It takes 4,000 items to furnish a motel and the Innkeepers Supply Company sells them all." In a sense, they not only sell, they propagandize the system's taste.

An overnight stay at the Cornell Hotel School's endowed model hotel wing revealed an interesting fact. The existing formula is enshrined here, and no future hotelkeeper is going to learn anything else. The training sample includes every cliché to the stale air.

A request for a place for a simple, quick supper to a charming young man at the desk practicing Miami polish resulted in directions to a hermetically sealed box in a vacant field, miles away. It was a soft spring country evening with a lovely glow, but inside the inspiration was either Aga or Khubla Khan. Metallic flocked wallpaper and ornate silver flatware that stretched a foot on either side of the plate gleamed dimly in candlelight. The accommodation's, as they like to call them in the hospitality business, included tastevin-type rows of heroic empty glasses, unused by nice Norman Rockwell families. The suggestion was debauchery and great burgundies. The menu was steak and steak and steak. The "format," as it is known in the business, is the universal alternative to Elizabethan.

There is almost no way out, anywhere. London has had a new hotel boom as the result of government subsidies and there are now American chains and American formulas rampant. There is nothing wrong with standardization as a rational instrument of design. It's how you do it, and London has been done.

Simon Jenkins, commenting on articles on the new hotels in New Society, says he has a "numb sense of having been transported right out of London in a great supranational package up there in the sky, with a celestial choir of developers' architects and moulded plastic manufacturers."

Oh well, you can't stay home. Gertrude Lawrence traveled with her silver knickknacks and blue satin sheets. But for the rest of us, it's an awfully familiar trip. There is no longer any choice at all.