ARCHITECTURE VIEW: THE FUN AND SERIOUSNESS OF RESORT DESIGN
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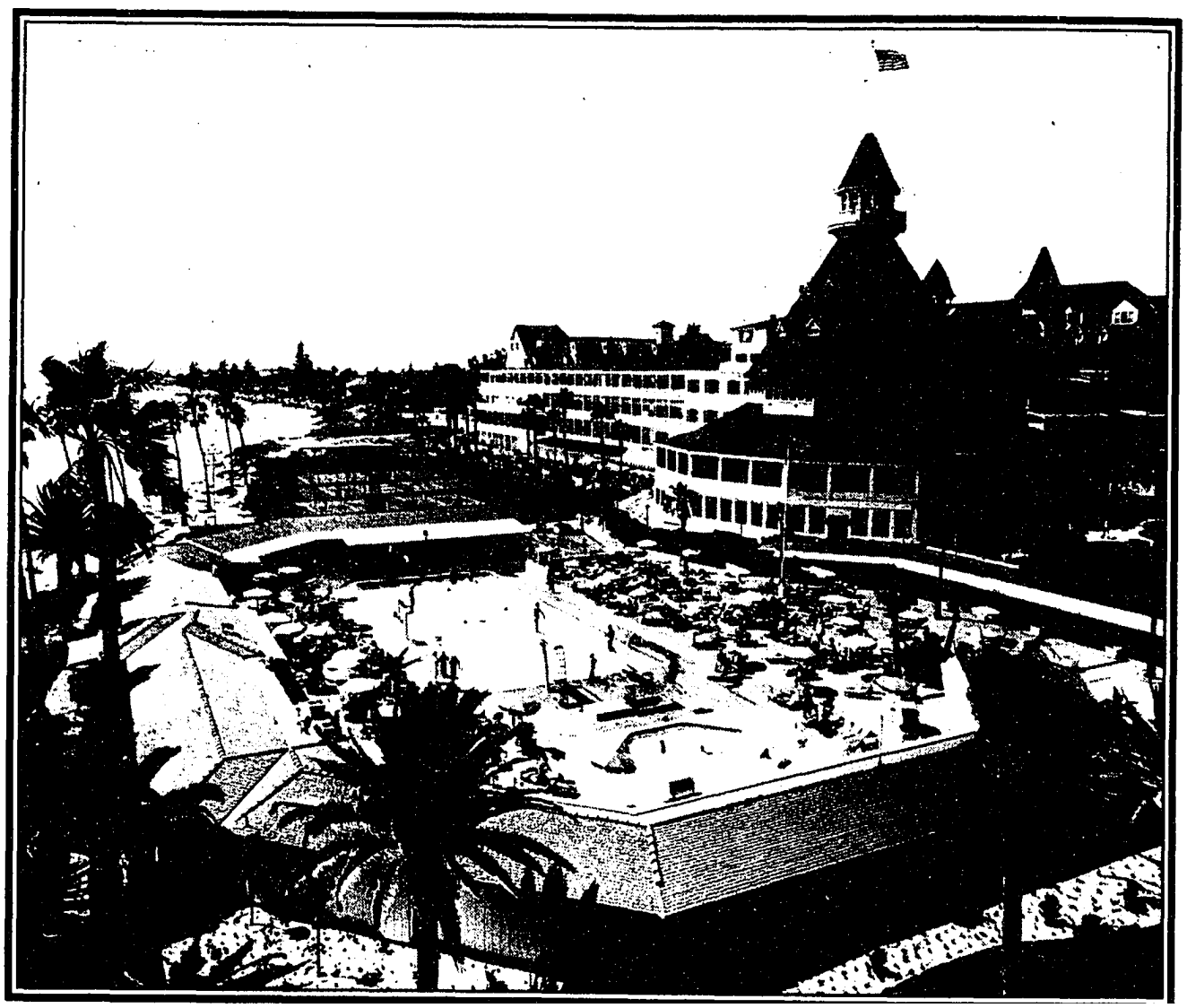
ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

The Fun and Seriousness of Resort Design



The 1888 Hotel del Coronado in San Diego "offered every luxury."

Stuck in New York this summer? Go to the Cooper-Hewitt Museum (2 East 91st Street) for a little vicarious and wonderful resort hopping. An exhibition of resort and vacation architecture called "Palaces for the People" offers instant delight and refreshment through Sept. 11. The photographs, drawings, models, postcards and "artifacts" (actual table settings, menus and matchbooks from a galaxy of celebrated and obscure hotels and motels) packed into the small downstairs gallery cover 100 years of America seriously at play.

The material has been drawn from the collections of such long-term aficionados of the genre as Jeff Limerick and John Margolies (who may be seen around town, when he is not at a motel, sporting his Madonna Inn T-shirt) and from the Library of Congress and National Archives, and the hostelries themselves. It has all been pulled together in a provocative rewriting of American architectural history by Richard Oliver, Curator of Architecture and Design at the Cooper-Hewitt, as part of the museum's continuing summer Architecture Festival.

The show can be enjoyed on one fast, easy level as high camp, or it can be considered more carefully (and correctly) as a perceptive documentation of a coherent and continuous architectural phenomenon that expresses much of the American character and taste, as well as the changing rituals and standards of society. On any level it is a knockout. And from any approach it is fun.

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Historically, these buildings were on the cutting edge of both fantasy and technology—the first to offer elevators, modern plumbing, electricity and steam heat, at the same time that they were designed as calculated stage sets far removed from the ordinary world. The rituals of flirtation, promenade, social gamesmanship and ceremonial dining were carried out against an elaborate and exotic backdrop.

The season stay of the Victorian belle with 40 trunks and a retinue of servants has given way to today's overnight motel stop with a car-pole of leisure suits. But the most ambitious designs have always invited the vacationer to enjoy an atmosphere where reason and restraint were dispensed with in favor of illusion.

There is, for example, the splendor of the 1888 Hotel del Coronado at San Diego by architects James W. and Merritt Reid, which offered every luxury and diversion, including a vaulted, domed ballroom (since remodeled with a dropped ceiling for air-conditioning-by-the-sea) and the earliest hotel electric lighting. At first, there were daily balloon ascents; later there were movie stars.

The Greenbriar at White Sulphur Springs, a 20th-century rebuilding of a 19th-century spa devoted to Hygiea and favored by tycoons who came in their own railroad cars, specializes today in a rich refinement rather than theatrical flamboyance. Still, it could seat 1,200 for a gold-plated banquet in its heyday and even now it maintains vermeil dinner services for special events.

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The now-classic Miami Beach hotels of Morris Lapidus in the 1950's—the Fountainebleau, the Eden Roc, the Americana—the apogee of the gaudily ordinary known as "the architecture of gorgeous," are the dream world of the innocent to whom dross is as good as gold. They have also become a kind of esthetic funk chic for the cognoscenti who dote on architectural malapropism. Equally in favor is the punk Pop of the standard motel. In every case, the senses surrender.

Although the myths and anecdotes about these buildings have been well recorded as social history, their design history is only beginning to be written. Architectural revisionism informs us that this is an important and indigenous art and building form overlooked by the official chroniclers of taste and style. Exuberant spaces and materials, temporal high fashion and careful image-making are all meant to impress and delight. And the evidence of success is overwhelming.

More than any other kind of construction, resort architecture has been directly responsive to geography and culture. The exhibition reflects this in its three sections devoted to the buildings of the seashore, the wilderness and the highway.

The 19th-century worship of nature and the "sublime" landscape was fed by the "scenic wonders" of the new United States—the mountains, lakes, virgin wilderness and ocean coasts. Postcard banners in the show are a wonderful inventory of those features: a storm in the Grand Canyon, cactus blooming in the desert, light breaking through the redwoods, sunset on Lake Champlain and in the Everglades, moonlight on Bar Harbor.

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These magnificent views and spectacular settings determined the location of the hotels. The destination was always fixed. And the grandeur and beauty of the accommodations was what counted. Verandas were measured by the mile. Immense "log" beams, rustic furniture and giant boulder fireplaces set the style of the great National Park Service hotels at Glacier, Yosemite and Yellowstone. Palatial European references fed the aspirations of Addison Mizner's Palm Beach where Leonard Schultze's regal Breakers hotel opened in 1920's. (To point out that many of the best examples, like the Grand Union at Saratoga Springs, are gone, and that others are struggling for survival, is to state the pathetically obvious.)

The big change, of course, came with the automobile, which brought about a 20th-century resort revolution. It inaugurated the vacation sport of "motoring" and the era of the motel, and the practice of seeing as much as possible en route instead of contemplating a single mountain peak from a porch chair.

The postcards began to show views of the roads—the Mohawk Trail, the palm and oleander-lined U.S. Highway 80, the Transcontinental Highway between Colorado and Arizona. But the natural landscape along them was increasingly urbanized and developed. The unprecedented job for the motel builder was to create a sense of place where there was no character or identity at all.

Thus the Madonna Inn at San Luis Obispo— with its 109 incredible "theme" rooms of boulders and round beds and hot pinks and reds, called "Cuernavaca," "Pioneer America" and "Hearts and Flowers," places and images that exist only in the fertile minds of the owners. And the Mount Vernon motels and "colonial villages" that appear in Daytona Beach, and tepee motels in Cheyenne, Wy., and Orlando, Fla. Fantasy transplants its symbols or starts from scratch.

But fantasy and escape are still what resort architecture is made of, and the last part of the exhibition is devoted to some recent projects. The tradition is clearly alive in imaginative schemes by Charles Moore, James Righter, Roger Seifter, Robert Stern and Venturi and Rauch. Still, they have a hard act to follow. ■

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