

**Architecture**

# That Silly Time of Year

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

**T**RADITIONALLY, August is the silly season. In the past when the temperature went over 90 degrees rationality seemed to flee.

No more. Summer is the serious season now. Gone is the heat-happy gladdiness of other years, banished by air-conditioning and a world in trauma. The association of heat and riots makes the urban and racial crisis a brutal reality in August. Violence stalks the summer streets.

This does not mean that no one does anything silly any more. But in keeping with the times, silliness is now vested with an awful solemnity. It also appears on a serious year-round basis. Still, most of the following items have come to hand with the warm weather.

\* In Indianapolis, a man wants to build a full-size replica of Independence Hall. Harold P. Ransburg, chairman of the board of the Ransburg Electro-Plating Corp., hopes to demolish three blocks of downtown Indianapolis for the project. He is prepared to spend several million dollars on a detailed duplicate of the Philadelphia landmark, complete to fake Liberty Bell with crack.

Philadelphia's response has been genteel disapproval. Abe Rosen, head of the Convention and Tourist Bureau, allows that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, but suggests that a trip to see the

real thing and to walk where Washington, Jefferson and Franklin walked might be a better idea.

John Smart, writing in the Philadelphia Bulletin, offers a gentlemanly rebuke. "There can be no chain of Independence Halls dispensing a sense of heritage across the land like historical Howard Johnsons." Somewhere, somehow, Mr. Ransburg has missed a basic point or two about history, art and education. This is pretty serious silliness and first prize for the season goes to Mr. Ransburg. (A miniature replica of Independence Hall complete to Liberty Bell with crack.)

For pure, rococo silliness we nominate a tandem team of Block Island and Mystic Seaport. We quote a recent news item: "The Block Island Life Saving Station, built in 1874, will be traded to the recreated 19th-century seacoast community (Mystic Seaport) this week. The historic building will be transported by barge, and in return, a

reproduction will be delivered to Block Island on the return trip." That's even rococo prose. This kind of silliness is pretty fascinatingly far out. The real building goes to the fake seaport and a fake building goes back. But the real thing hasn't exactly been real for some time; it has been moved twice and used as a stable, blacksmith shop and summer cottage. And there is no mention of what will be done with the new fake. Anyone for fake life-saving stations? There are layers and layers of exotic foolishness here for expert unravelers of esoterica in the field.

\* For true silly season aficionados, we suggest a trip to the Historic Towne of Smithville, N. J., est. 1787. "The Historic Towne of Smithville has reached the height of summer activity," says a "friendly flyer" from its "possessioners." Fred and Ethel Noyes.

"Our new Airfield has been

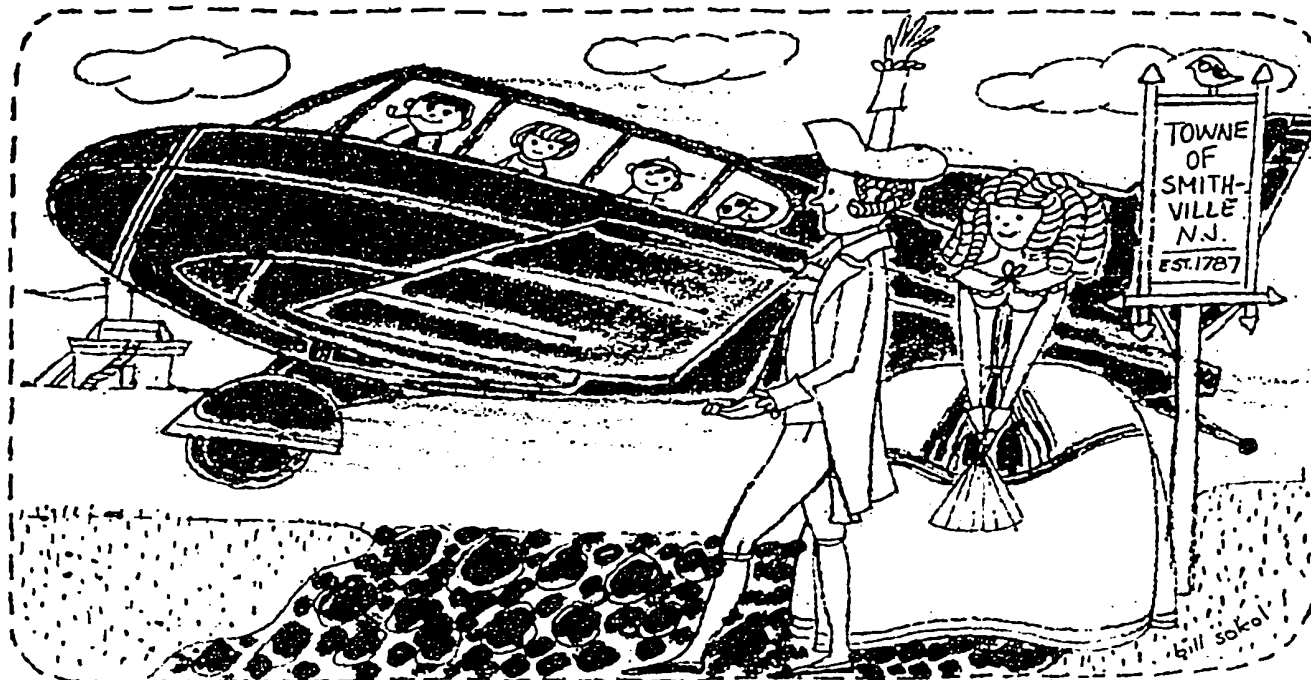
instrumental in the formation of friendships with folks who fly in for fun and good fellowship, 18th Century style. Won't you join us, too? Some folks choose to stroll from the Airfield to the Village; we've three Inns and 25 shops, all reminiscent of Early Americana. Or you may wish to ride in the 'Courtesy Coach' provided by the Airfield Manager." A hard invitation for anyone with a sense of the sublimely silly to resist. A special award for the folks on this one; all the "old-time" hot and cold running bread and relishes they can eat at the Inns.

But you don't have to be an antiquarian to be silly. You can be extremely up-to-date. Take the housing industry. The housing industry has discovered sex. This bit of foolishness was actually released in cold weather, last January, as a kind of teaser for the birds-and-bees season. Minfax, the monthly marketing newsletter of the housing industry, points out, in an

epic to stagger D. H. Lawrence, that "the harnessing of the hard-driving sexual impulses to product promotion results in phenomenally successful sales of everything from yogurt to automobiles."

Why not sell houses as temples of love, Minfax asks. The home industry, Minfax notes (please quote us by name, says Minfax), "is in no position to turn down any approach, including examination of sexual motivations, to improve home sales. A house owes its very existence to the fact of sex; it is the nest of sexual generation."

Funny, we thought it was a roof over one's head. "A house should be the expression of man's animal sensuality as well as his reason," Minfax warns. Don't think shelter. "The response to a house is complex and unlike the single sexual response to a toothpaste or an auto ad cannot be reduced to a flat copulatory equation. Advertising should stress not variations of 'Had any lately?' but



"Fly in for fun and fellowship, 18th Century style"

the tantalizing idea of Union. "If forced against a wall, most builders blushing admit, well, yes, the phenomenon exists but has nothing to do with their trade. Look at this sturdy construction! they cry. Examine this absolutely waterproof roofing system."

You said it, Minfax, we didn't. Up against the wall, builders; turn those rumpus rooms into orgy rooms and let the roof leak! Joint prize for offensive hard-sell silliness to Minfax and the home-builders—free passes to Therese and Isabelle.

And finally, the most serious silliness of all. It had to happen. This is from a promotion brochure for something called hAS, Housing Action System, with a small h for housing. (They haven't heard about sex.)

"Now, for architects and builders—a simple computer program that provides the zoning options for New York City building sites," or how to calculate the zoning envelope scientifically. "It affords the site analyst and developer the opportunity to compute the zoning and economic feasibility for any number or combination of contiguous buildable sites."

At last, the magic money-making formula. How to push a button and get the consistent, ultimate mold for the most profitable building under New York's laws and economics. Feed the factors in and get the highest return out. That's not going to seem silly at all to a lot of builders.

\* As Karl Justin, the architect who passed this revelatory promotional document on to us, pointed out, "With arithmetic restrictions of this type, calculations will produce basically the same 'best' solution for all sites in a zoning district. The algebra guarantees it. Interestingly, the advertised computer would easily allow one to foresee roughly how (badly) a given district would shape up when all lot owners have made the financial most of their property. I suspect that a look at one such analysis would be a real eye opener."

There it is—a city of computer-designed towers and plazas hiccuping their identical, unrelated way along shattered street lines and through disrupted urban patterns, homogenizing anything left of neighborhoods or styles. What a sad commentary on the paucity of design options under New York zoning and investment restrictions. And what a silly ending for the vaunted cybernetics revolution. Well, things could be cooler and saner in the fall.