

ARCHITECTURE VIEW: ATLANTIC CITY-- THE WRONG TICKET ARCHITECTURE VIEW SABOTAGE?

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New York Times (1923-Current file); Nov 19, 1978; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times
pg. D31

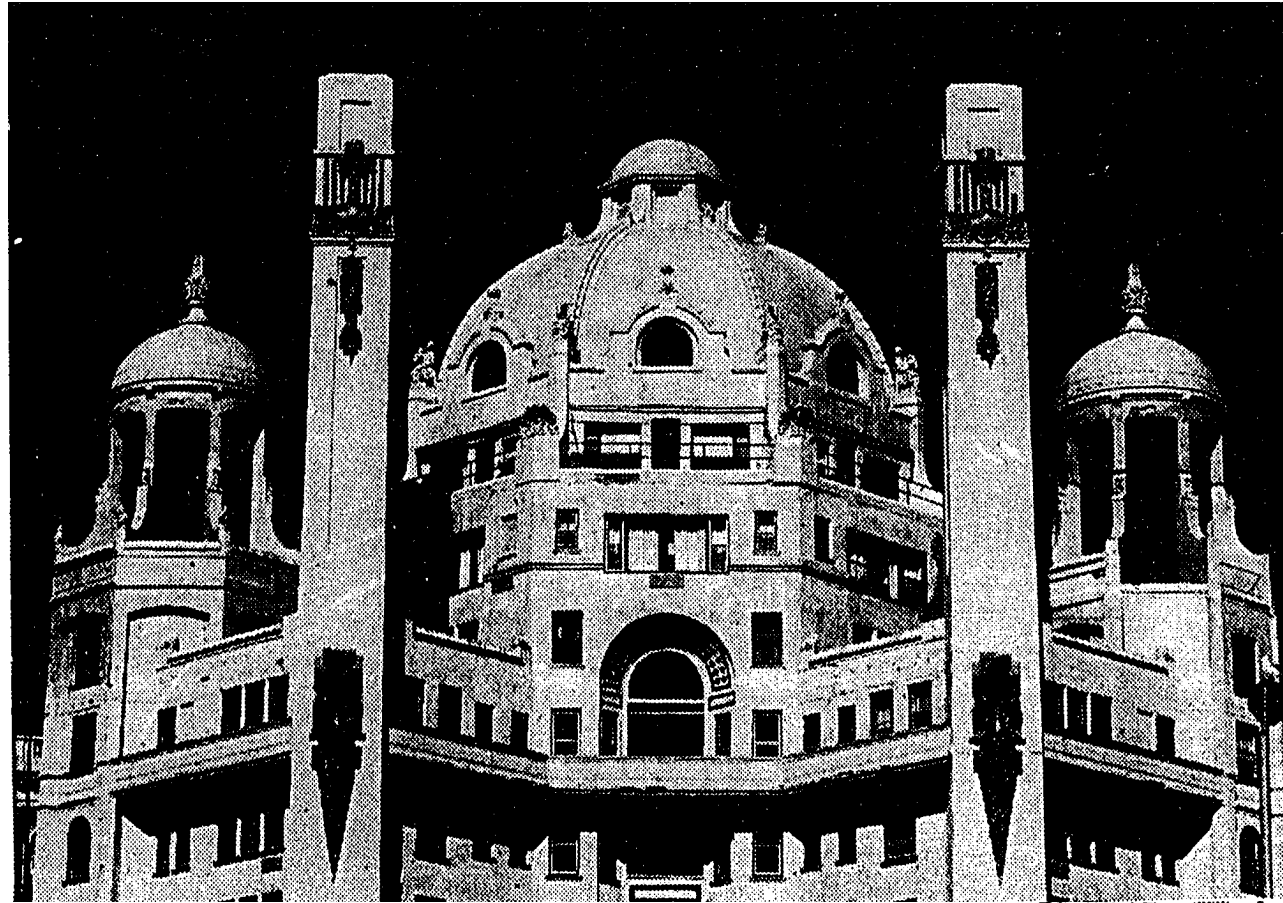
ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

Atlantic City — The Wrong Ticket

Atlantic City is a mess. It is not even faltering, phoenix-like, from the ashes of its cataclysmic decline to a new and glorious future as the gaming resort of the 1980's; it is rushing off relentlessly in all the wrong directions. It seems determined to use legalized gambling to get just another flashy, jerry-built strip, that will have no advantage in planning, character or quality over any other flashy, jerry-built strip. The state of New Jersey, in its anxiety to become the Las Vegas of the East, is missing the chance to create a winning ticket. The future is being thrown away through ignorance, inertia and wrongheadedness, and the failure to capitalize on those things that once made Atlantic City a great resort — a superb site, a distinctive style, and genuine substance.

The situation in Atlantic City is not exactly crystal clear; it takes labyrinthine analysis and second sight to get through the laws, politics and finances involved to understand what is going on. But it seems obvious that Governor Brendan Byrne of New Jersey is calling some very wrong



The New York Times / William Sauro

The Blenheim—"If Gov. Byrne means what he said, he is sabotaging Atlantic City."

signals, and the city is understandably overwhelmed and unsure of what it is doing.

Other characters in the cast include an onslaught of developers bent on big bucks, the displaced elderly and poor, a confused local planning group inevitably plunged beyond its depth, and state agencies dealing with the environment, including matters of coastal conservation and historic preservation, at odds with other state agencies interested in development at all costs.

The problem focused with a bang last week with the dynamiting of a large section of the landmark Blenheim Hotel as a first step toward new casino construction by the Bally Corporation on one of Atlantic City's prime boardwalk sites, from Michigan Avenue to Park Place.

That demolition was legal; New Jersey's Office of Historic Preservation recognizes the developers' needs for cleared sites for new buildings. In an attempt to strike a balance between preservation and construction, permission was given for partial destruction of the old hotel; Bally has been asked to save its architecturally important section and incorporate it into the new plans. But Bally is pressing for total demolition and that permit will either be granted or denied at a hearing next Wednesday. Permission to demolish can only be given by the state's Department of Environmental Protection, and only if the agency finds that the loss of the landmark will not adversely affect New Jersey's natural or historic resources.

This is not a consideration that evidently weighs much with Governor Byrne. The Governor has come out strongly, in two press conferences, for all new construction in Atlantic City, in the apparent belief that new is good and old is bad, and he has ordered the Casino Commission and all state agencies to get in line or feel his displeasure. Political pressures are building up on Bally's side, and Bally, no stranger to state politics as a result of its operations in Nevada, is playing these pressures with skill.

Against this political in-fighting, there has been an endless stream of feasibility studies and environmental impact statements on both sides that set up a variety of conflicting

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Sabotage?

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and often self-serving "findings." Only one thing is certain. If the present trend toward legalized gambling in Eastern cities continues (add greed to death and taxes as eternal constants), and the current confusion and lack of standards prevail, Atlantic City will have

forfeited a superb opportunity to beat everyone out and break the bank; and it will have done so by deliberate default.

Battle lines are currently drawn between Bally and the Office of Historic Preservation of the State Department of Environmental Protection, which has been putting up a persuasive argument for saving the 1906 Blenheim, which is listed on the National Register, and incorporating it into the new scheme.

The stumbling block is that Bally thinks the Blenheim is a dirty old building. No amount of distinguished testimony about its structural soundness and architectural merits can convince the corporation, whose architectural experience has been limited largely to the production of slot machines and similar equipment, that the Blenheim is a potential asset.

Architects and preservationists see this domed Moorish sand castle of pioneering reinforced concrete as a unique "set-piece" that would give character and appeal to the bland anonymity of new building.

Bally sees the Blenheim as a debit that would give them what they call a "second-class" development. Second class means anything old. First class means glass and formica, over marble and bronze. Elegance, in the milieu of one-armed bandits, means hard-edged and new; nothing need apply from the idiosyncratic past.

Las Vegas, the only world that Bally really knows, does not fool around with things like history. First of all, Las Vegas has no past. It is instant architecture based on the esthetics of expediency and glitz and the proteanly vulgar. It is still the Old West; entrepreneurs do pretty much as they please, and local and state agencies say thank you.

The New Jersey Department of Environment Protection isn't saying thank you. It is saying save the Blenheim. Bally has offered "reparations" to the state on a name-your-own-figure basis for demolition. A department study calls this a dangerous precedent for all New Jersey landmarks. And it is saying this in the face of opposition by the Governor and local officials. To get a more favorable reading for its plans, Bally has changed architectural horses in midstream, moving from California contemporary to Eastern establishment, by hiring the firm of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill. With Cushman and Wakefield as real estate advisors, Bally now has a fine team for an office building. A casino hotel is something else again.

In the meantime, back on the boardwalk, Resorts International has been able to begin spectacularly profitable operations by pasting together the old Chalfonte-Haddon Hall with some basic-depressing motel décor. A lot of other people who have acquired old hotels apparently have the same idea of doing a fast, rock-bottom, patch-and-paint job which would make the new Atlantic City not the queen of the ocean but the jackpot of sleaze. In his zeal to condemn this kind of operation, Governor Byrne has made no distinction between quick-and-dirty conversion and quality restoration. He either does not know or does not care that there is a difference, and that the difference is crucial to Atlantic City.

The Governor is evidently unaware that such publications as *Business Week* have called the "boom" in recycled older hotels one of the hottest things around. The prestige properties, the biggest draws and the steadiest moneymakers are what are called the "classic" hotels of Belle Epoque grandeur, through the 1920's. Chains here and in Europe are knocking themselves out to acquire and restore these hotels, and even make feeble replicas of their features when they cannot get them. But the message has not gotten through yet to the casino community.

For a pertinent example, it pays to look at Puerto Rico's El San Juan Hotel, an unprofitable old building that was transformed into the most profitable casino operation on the island by constructive remodeling; its carefully detailed period charm (ersatz, alas, but it makes the point) now pulls gaming patrons from the more "modern" places in the Miami-Vegas image.

It may be news to New Jersey, but cities everywhere are investing in creative restoration and expert conversion of landmarks, in conjunction with quality new construction, as their ticket to the future. If Governor Byrne means what he said, he is effectively sabotaging Atlantic City, as well as demonstrating that he is out of step with everyone else.

The choice is not between crummy new and crummy old. If that poor, beleaguered remnant of a once-glamorous resort needs anything for a new lease on life in its next incarnation, it is an infusion of style and class. These qualities are there for the finding, in some of the best hotels of a great hotel period. Selectively upgraded and combined with new facilities, their grand spaces and fine materials put paperboard and plastic to shame.

Atlantic City once was, and can be again, a special place. It doesn't need, or deserve, what it is getting. But with Bally and Byrne calling the shots, we're not placing any bets.