

An Edwardian Splendor Or Green Tulip Modern?

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

Eloise wouldn't know the Plaza. According to Arthur D. Dooley, vice president and managing director, its Edwardian elegance is being "projected into the world of today and tomorrow." They are making it a "fun place." What they are actually doing is remodeling it downstairs.

An Appraisal The changes do not involve demolition, just the slow erosion of its traditional style and grace.

Mr. Dooley calls the process the "reconstruction, redecoration and reconception of the use of a major group of the Plaza's public rooms."

Since 1966, the Plaza has been an officially designated New York City landmark. But the designation, under the landmarks law, only protects the outside.

What is going on inside shouldn't happen to a landmark. There is now a restaurant called the Green Tulip that the management points out, with awful appropriateness, is "on the site of the traditional Edwardian Room." It is a successful attempt to reduce period grandeur to comfortable, gimmicky ordinariness.

Hope for Oak Room

For those who have fled the Green Tulip for the hotel's still untouched Oak Room, there is hope. An amendment to the landmarks law that would recognize interiors is in the Corporation Counsel's office now, with every indication of early presentation to the Board of Estimate.

Its provisions could keep the Plaza from committing further disfigurement. It would give a new lease on life to landmark interiors in New York, now totally unprotected, ranging from the Oak Room to the vast concourse of Grand Central Terminal or even the embattled stairs of the Metropolitan Museum.

The Plaza, designed by Henry J. Hardenbergh and opened in 1907, has been New York's most celebrated surviving symbol of cosmopolitanism and turn-of-the-century splendor, inside and out. Not too long ago, before Trader Vic's, it was impressively of its own era—de l'époque—a rarity only made better by its quality.

Measure Held Off

According to legend, perhaps apocryphal, Frank Lloyd Wright, who stayed at the Plaza, stopped an earlier remodeling dead in its tracks when it had only gone as far as painting out the ceiling clouds in the Palm Court in favor of some pallid pink lighting.

The imperious Mr. Wright prevented changes in the Oak Room and the Edwardian Room, it is said, with a nonsense lesson in the art of architecture, Edwardian style and landmark interiors.

With the proposed amendment to the landmarks law, the Landmarks Preservation

Commission could designate an interior by the same kind of public hearing procedure used at present to designate buildings.

This power was not written into the original law, according to Harmon Goldstone, head of the Landmarks Preservation Commission, "because we didn't want to bite off more than we could chew before we got established."

"We were skating on thin ice when the legislation was introduced," he asserted. "Now we've won enough court cases to establish the validity and constitutionality of the law."

The amendment would make it possible to designate a landmark interior in a sep-

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arate action, or as part of a total building designation. It could be named independently of an exterior, which might or might not be of landmark quality. Of just part of an interior could be specified, carefully described.

The interior would have to be important, however, in terms of the public interest and welfare, and accessible to the public, which rules out private houses and clubs.

But such things as theater interiors, however, hotels or other public places, entered free or by admission charge, could be protected. Churches might have to be bypassed, since their public status is ambiguous.

Prospects Good

The amendment is being checked by an army of the city's lawyers, and would become law as soon as passed by the Board of Estimate.

If it does pass, and prospects are considered good, and if the Plaza's remaining belle époque interiors are designated, any other changes made in them would have to be approved by the Landmarks Commission.

It is extremely doubtful whether the Green Tulip would have gotten the green light. Mr. Goldstone, viewing it with restraint for the first time last week, remarked simply that he thought it could be restored.

No one connected with the Landmarks Commission was consulted, before or during the remodeling.

Advice was sought, according to the Plaza's publicity releases, from the hotel's "den mother," Betsy Palmer, the actress and television personality, for the word on today's "informal life styles," from couturier and costume designer Donald Brooks, who responded with pink and green waiters and waitresses, and from John Graham, director of design for Sonesta International Hotels Corporation, the owners.

The Edwardian Room was much like the Oak Room—solid chairs and tables planted firmly on the floor, a crisp sea of napery beneath a soaring, dark-wood beamed ceiling. It had substance and style and park views.

In its replacement, the designers have done the impossible: they have upstaged the park.

The same view that glows softly beyond the somber wood and gentle murals of the Oak Room Bar is all but invisible here, for the confusion of multilevel pink and green furniture and carpeting, heavy drapes sporting large butterflies, crudely green-painted iron balustrades and gazebos and imitation Tiffany glass.

The dark wood has been

lightened. Curiously, it has been painted and then re-grained to look like wood. What is real, now looks fake. Class is out. Confusion is in.

By contrast, the dignity, scale and period authenticity of the Oak Room make the Green Tulip look like something out of a shopping center department store. So do the ladies in it; New Yorkers still go to the Oak Room.

The Oak Room's woodwork is like brown pea soup from years of added varnish, but the ambience of grandeur and sophistication is unchanged. It could be cleaned, said Mr. Goldstone, rubbing a door jamb gently under the startled eye of a maitre d'.

The wood-paneled great hall of the Harvard Club was cleaned recently with notable success, he remarked as he examined layers of Plaza goo. It was an expensive process, but the richness of the wood was fully revealed.

Custom House Imperiled

This does not seem to be a process included in the Plaza's leap into the nineteen-seventies. Of greater priority is the nailing up of trellises and the addition of plastic hedges and more imitation Tiffany glass for an "Eloise" ice cream corner in the lobby.

More than the Plaza waits now for protection. There is the interior of Cass Gilbert's Custom House at the Battery, completed in the same year as the Plaza and magnificently Beaux Arts inside and out. It is threatened by the Customs Service's move to the World Trade Center, which will make the building Government surplus.

And there is the Grand Central Concourse, one of the world's great rooms, mutilated by the detritus of commercialism. The city was forced to bargain with a developer recently to try to save that landmark interior in exchange for the defacement of the structure's landmark exterior with an air rights tower over it. Fortunately, the deal fell through.

With the amended law, fine older theater interiors, such as the Belasco or the Lyceum, could be considered for preservation, by giving builders bonuses for saving them under the special theater district zoning.

Office building lobbies such as that of the domed, marbled and muraled Cunard Building on Lower Broadway, and the interiors of museums and public buildings would also be eligible for designation and protection. No one, for example, could straighten out the stair at City Hall.

It's none too soon. The Plaza even misspells Henry Hardenbergh's name. It certainly misunderstands his art. Quite possible, it misunderstands New York.