ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

Atlantic City — Analyzing an Urban Phenomenon

"It was the last stop on a railroad to nowhere, a city built on sand. There is no legend to explain why it is where it is, no mythology to gussy up its origin. It was built there because *there* happened to be the shortest distance between Philadelphia and the sea, between urban congestion and salt breezes, between hundreds of thousands of people and a handful of men who knew a good thing when they saw it. And before the 60 miles of track were laid between the City of Brotherly Love and the Queen of Resorts, it was nowhere, just sand and some marshes, a wilderness."

That poetic passage, written by a man named Charles Funnell, is a description of Atlantic City, a community spawned by and devoted to speculation and pleasure. The real-life Monopoly game that started in the 1850's with the building of the railroad is being played today for bigger stakes than ever. With legalized gambling and the construction of the new casino-hotels, Atlantic City is rising from a long, slow decline into impoverished tackiness that followed half a century of resort glory.

But regeneration is not an easy or painless process. Prosperity has not arrived for all, in spite of million-dollar-a-day profits for the casinos. The lively kitsch of the Boardwalk's small businesses, priced out by the new land values, is going the way of the 50-foot sand dunes that were sacrificed to the hotels' views of the ocean. Ecology has never been any match for economics, and the sociology of the urban poor is not a factor in this kind of high-flying gamble. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder with a winning streak.

For the urban and architectural historian, the story of Atlantic City is an irresistible chronicle of how money, taste and the main chance create a unique environment. Atlantic City was, and is, a middle-class playground, from the pre-casino to the post-casino age. It is the stuff of which architectural studio projects are made at the better universities.

"Beach, Boardwalk and Boulevard" is just such a project, carried out by students of the Departments of Architecture and City Planning of the Graduate School of Fine Arts at the University of Pennsylvania. The results of the study — exhibition boards of photographic montages and analytical exposition — are on display in the ground-floor gallery of the Cooper-Hewitt Museum, the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Design (2 East 91st Street) through Oct. 19. The presentation is the result of three months of intensive research under the direction of Steve Izenour of the Philadelphia architectural firm of Venturi, Rauch and Scott Brown, Mark Hewitt, Steve Kieran and George Thomas. The work was funded and sponsored by the New Jersey Office of Historic Preservation and the university.

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Dorothy Twining Globus and Richard Oliver of the Cooper-Hewitt staff have installed the exhibition with an appreciative eye for its infinite nuances, and it is not their fault if it is virtually undecipherable. After an entrance display of memorabilia bound to bring on a case of terminal nostalgia, including a turn-of-the-century rolling wicker boardwalk chair (everything but the sea breezes), one is faced with a densely detailed display packed with text and heavy on history and verbal analysis, with so many images that one tends to see none at all. That is too bad, because many of the pictures are individually quite wonderful as photographs, and always as the product of a discerning eye. But this is the inevitable result of a studio project in this form. Unfortunately, there is really nothing less visual than the complex visual elements of urban subjects, which defy one to grasp their immediate pictorial meaning or their larger expository framework. Since architec-

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ture and urbanism are inescapably visual, that failure is all the more distressing.

Again, it is too bad here, because there is much that is genuinely fascinating in this serious analysis of an urban phenomenon and its popular architectural forms. The professed purpose of the student exercise — like that classic, ground-breaking study of 10 years ago, "Learning From Las Vegas," in which a fresh vision of the realities of the built environment was pioneered by Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, working with a Yale architecture studio — is "to focus on symbolic communication in architecture and the city." But it does much more. It embraces Atlantic City, warts and all; both its history and its destiny are examined with intimate concern. There are sections on the course of land speculation and development, the architecture of hotels and motels, the phenomenon of the Boardwalk, the rise and fall of Main Street (Atlantic and Pacific Avenues), the reasons for the city's decline, and recommendations for the future. What is lacking in political pragmatism or financial guile in the student analysis is more than made up for in the quality and objectivity of the research and the overwhelmingly accurate sense of place.

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One can take or leave the obligatory emphasis on the now-familiar signs and symbols of the popular environment and the non-judgmental attitudes toward taste (the ultimate elitism?) that have been the basis of the Gans-Venturi-Scott Brown cultural studies axis. They have their place and value. But the plea for a Boardwalk Historic District to include everything from T-shirts to taffy offers touching ironies for those with vintage memories, and the section on the failure of the city's planning policies as the casinos expand, leaving the poor, the elderly and the minorities deprived of housing and hope, is particularly moving. Thoughtful questions are posed about the kind of place Atlantic City will be in its casino incarnation, ranging from design to sociology.

The material would make a much better book than an exhibition, but I am very glad that the Cooper-Hewitt is showing it. Although I would not suggest it to anyone else, I stood and read until my feet ached, rewarded by the unfolding of a unique chapter in American urban history and those crystalline insights that come only from the passionate detachment of the young. What comes through is a generation concerned with history and tradition, dedicated to the continuity of past and present, aware of the artifacts of an indigenous American art and culture. The demolition of two of the great old Atlantic City hotels, the Traymore and the Marlborough-Blenheim, is scored at the same time that the new esthetics of "casino dominance" are skillfully defined.

Each section of the show has been prepared by different students, and I quote, with delight, from Terry Kornblum's analysis of the new casino-hotels: "The design and operation of these buildings is shrouded, like Fort Knox, in real and imagined secrecy, which makes it difficult for the layman and the professional alike to understand why things are done as they are. These slot-machine supermarkets can earn more per square foot than any other building — which makes them the next best thing to a private mint for their owners and their not-so-silent partner, the State of New Jersey. This fact controls the speed with which they are designed and built, as well as the overall configuration of the building.

"The casino space is immense. We found what we defined as a 'new monumentality' in these vast, low spaces. With no visible edges, no tangible walls and ceilings; the space is defined only by furniture, gambling machines, light and people — people psychologically unaware of time and space, day and night."

The new, non-judgmental morality slips occasionally. There is a strong set of mixed feelings at work here, a sense of the seductive appeal of popular palaces in an architectural Sodom and Gomorrah. We are told that "the Atlantic City of today shudders under the weight of a past of multitudinous sins and in anticipation of those that have yet to be committed." Read it, sitting down. ■