If It's Good, Leave It Alone
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Architecture

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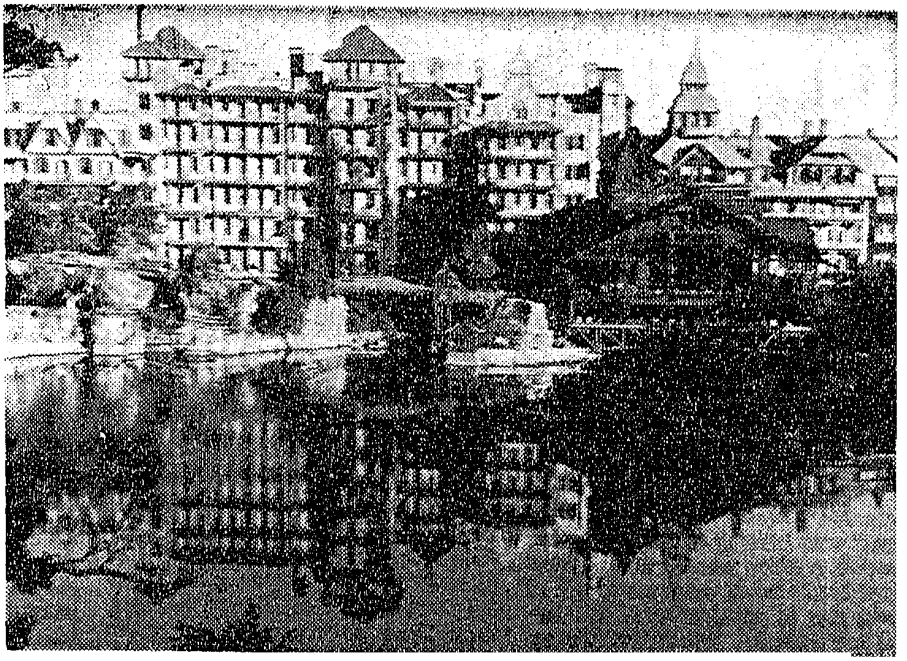

Mohonk Lake Mountain House near New Paltz, New York
Nobody has tried to project it into the world of today and tomorrow

THIS is a tale of two hotels, each one a very special and quite different kind of period piece. One is the celebrated Plaza Hotel in New York, and the other is the Mohonk Lake Mountain House 90 miles north of the city in New York State near New Paltz.

I love both hotels, in a funny kind of way. Growing up in New York, with teas at the Plaza from a very early age, my appreciation of the past and even my feeling for New York is undoubtedly conditioned by associations with that solid structure. I did not learn until years after those teas that the architect was Henry J. Hardenbergh and the date of its construction 1907, and that it was a high point of Edwardian design, inside and out. I thought it had been there forever, and was something absolute.

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Alas, it is not absolute. Although it is an official New York City landmark, the Landmarks Preservation Commission has jurisdiction only over what happens to its exterior. What is going on inside, where the interiors were of a piece, or to be more elegant, de l'époque, is a kind of creeping, crawling bad taste in which even the authentic is being made to look fake.

Through atrociously ill-advised remodeling, touted as the hotel's entry into the 1970's, the Plaza is being adulterated to look and feel like any number of other older big city hotels of residual grandeur, cheapened with tricksy restaurants full of familiar and rather loathesome design gimmicks and arch menus and publicity to match. This is meant to appeal, I assume, to a clientele that equates style with novelty and foolish elaboration, and wit with turgid coyness, and for whom the artifacts of the Edwardian era are less familiar than the surface of the moon. Or it might simply be the taste of the corporate management that has devised the truly awful name of Sonesta (for owners Sonny and Esther) for the Plaza and its other hotels.

New rooms such as the restaurant called The Green Tulip, "on the site of the Edwardian Room" says the management (R.I.P.), are disaster areas. Fortunately, much detail remains and fake Tiffany glass can be removed. The room could be restored. And the Oak Room is inviolate so far—if not to ladies' lib, at least to the spoilers.

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The Mohonk Mountain House is unspoiled. It does not have the Plaza's grandeur and its style is a kind of casual continuity from 1880's Eastlake to quite fine turn-of-the-century, and it survives through exemplary maintenance and family love while making sensible functional compromises with the years.

Mohonk could be termed a phenomenon. It is an eighth of a mile of wood and stone buildings that have been called a cross between Charles Addams and early Walt Disney on the edge of a lake surrounded by dramatic, glacier-swept and tumbled rock, among 4,500 acres of Shawangunk Mountain woods in the Catskill region.

It is, and always has been, owned and run by the Smiley family, who love every leaf and stone around it. They are ardent ecologists and "esthetic" foresters. They have converted 60 per cent of the land, now worth between $10 and $15 million, to the Mohonk Trust, to insure that it will be carefully used and "forever wild."

With the projected, adjacent Minnewaska State Park of 6,725 acres, and another protected 4,000 acres at Sam's Point, there is now a spectacular 30-mile stretch safe from developers.

The Smileys are Quakers, and there is no bar, no smoking in the dining room, and you will please not play the piano in the lounge between two and five P.M. There are nature walks and bird talks and 110 miles of carefully laid out roads and trails rimming the lake and threading the woods, with 150 thatched summer-houses or gazebos along them framing stunning views, with easy spans for the geriatric.

Those walks and views are fascinating for the student of 19th-century landscape art. Many were laid out in the 1870's, 80's and 90's, and there is no fudging what the Victorians really admired.

They wanted the "sublime" and the "picturesque" and at Mohonk they got it. Whether the desired effect was created or totally trouvé, it was cultivated with no-holds-barred fervor. No one had invented understatement. The landscape is, therefore, groomed into a Skinnerian maze of promised pleasures, anticipated reflexes and carefully set pieces. No smarty pants has "redesigned it for the 1970's." Nature is eternal and art is enduring — at least at Mohonk.

Architecturally, you could say that the buildings just grew. But they grew with the help of some of New York's better architects — Napoleon Le Brun in the 1880's and James Ware at the turn of the century. The place is homey, in spite of accomodations for for 500 and a vast, wooden dining room that could float the Mauretania.

The older interiors are not pretty Victorian, they are plain Victorian. That is often the best kind. Long corridors widen into lounges with wood wainscoting and ceilings and fireplaces with turned, cut and mirrored overmantels, austerely bare. The furniture is of the period, dun-colored, or in later, warmer hues. Lining the corridors are pictures of former guests, with heavy emphasis on bearded ministers and naturalists and a couple of unbearded Presidents, Harding and Taft.

The parlor wing, built by Ware in 1901, is carried over the water on huge steel trusses, its dark brown wood and shingle exterior suggesting the then-popular Queen Anne style with echoes of Swiss chalet. Inside are two notably good rooms, the Lake Lounge and the Lake Parlor.

The Parlor, in particular, is an interior of distinction. It measures 45 by 60 feet, with a high beamed ceiling and mahogany - stained, carved and pierced birch paneling, square columns with carved capitals and leaded, textured glass over generous windows and doors.

There are two fireplaces, and room-size, settee enclosures in three corners, their seat cushions covered in a pullman-green frieze. The enclosing balustrades are topped by large iris jardinieres of plants. For scale, there are five-foot high Japanese cloisonné vases, for ambience, an embroidered wisteria screen in a carved teak frame, and for nostalgia, a Metropolitan Opera House seat. I like this room so much that I would be sorely tempted to put its authentic period elegance more in formal order, but not at the risk of destroying its air of easy survival and comfortable use from past to present.

It is, in fact, a perfect illustration for the Boston Atheneum's Walter Whitehill's mythical Let-It-Alone-Club. If it's good, let it be; don't "improve" it, "restore it back," or "remodel" it.

Above all, to quote the Plaza's unfortunate press release about its even more unfortunate remodeling, don't "project it into the world of today and tomorrow." That's idiocy, and sabotage. If it's sound and beautiful, it will project itself, with a little functional or mechanical help where necessary. Because art endures, as we have said, subject only to the ignorance and meddling of man.