Saratoga: Losing Race
By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE
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Architecture

Saratoga: Losing Race

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

THE latest beautification and preservation bulletin comes from Saratoga, N. Y., a community known for its historic Victorian heritage and its new cultural center. It is not news to make anyone easy about the cultural state of Saratoga or the nation. It follows a familiar pattern of esthetic and environmental erosion.

Saratoga's news is a little more interesting than most because it is a little more outrageous. The city will hold a public auction on March 19 to lease over four acres of Congress Park for a 150-room hotel. Turning a park into real estate is a barbaric betrayal of the public trust anywhere, but in Saratoga it has particularly interesting cultural connotations.

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The city's past is firmly linked with hotels—some of the most luxurious of the Gilded Age. This is a community still rich in fine late 19th-century houses, and in the park about to be violated is the celebrated Canfield Casino, now shabby-elegant, a semi-museum, and a preservation problem. Not much more remains of Saratoga's vanishing record of high Victorian society, a historical and esthetic phenomenon that few cities, anywhere, could match.

The extravagant hotels, with their baroque opulence, elaborate gingerbread and eleven course dinners have gone the way of the dinosaurs that they grew to resemble. It is not without significance that on the site of one of the greatest hostelries, the Grand Union, there is now a Grand Union supermarket and parking lot that has stamped Saratoga's once-great main street with a back alley look. It is impossible to get more environmentally ordinary than that.

Ironies abound in the Saratoga saga. As the old hotels were bulldozed and the new cultural center was built, a shortage of hotel space developed. The timing was bad in more ways than one. Now that it no longer seems impossible to restore and modernize old buildings—we are seeing a small, swelling groundwave of striking preservation successes in several cities that would have been called pie-in-the-sky projects ten years ago—it is probable that not everything of the past had to be sacrificed. The supermarket-motel image doesn't do a thing for Saratoga except downgrade it. Some of its unique heritage could have been fitted into the city's cultural renaissance by sensitive, civilized planning.

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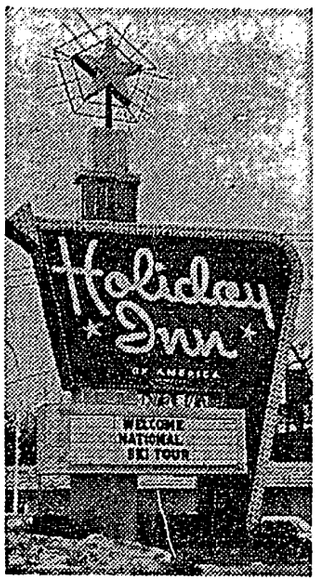
It has been touch and go with the park and casino since 1957, when a referendum was passed approving the leasing of park space for a hotel which did not materialize at the time. Instead, a hotel was built just outside of the park. But the authorization is still on the books and now a "luxury motel" chain is interested. It would renovate and use the first floor of the casino for public spaces. This kind of "preservation" is akin to the successful operation where the patient dies.



Friedman-Abeles
Holiday Inn Sign
Coast-to-coast atrocity

The new project offers all kinds of "guarantees" of appropriate design and tasteful signs. Unfortunately, there is no such thing as an appropriate design for the destruction of a public park. As for tasteful signs, this would be a classic case of locking the barn too late. In front of the hotel that was built instead of the one in the park, as beacon, focus and image of the new Saratoga, is the Holiday Inn sign, the granddaddy horror of them all.

This visual monstrosity poisons the environment wherever it is, and it is everywhere because the Holiday Inn corporation insists on it as identification all over the country. The sign seems to be a prime clause of the franchise. A coast-to-coast atrocity, it could undo a dozen natural beauty programs. It would be a hole-in-one triumph for Mrs. Johnson's campaign if all Holiday Inn signs disappeared tomorrow, outlawed in the public interest.

This does not mean that all signs everywhere are bad, or that they must be in discreet Williamsburg script to be O.K. Public graphics is another environmental subject that needs clarification.

Subway advertising, for example, is generally excellent. It gives brightness and scale and an emotional and visual lift as well as waiting-time distraction to a dreary setting, and it seems rather sad that the new Washington subway, in an excess of architectural purity, will have none. The ads on New York's buses, also bitterly fought by the purists, add a flash of moving color and wit to the city's tense, gray streets.

What one of the professional magazines, Progressive Architecture, calls Supergraphics, a highly imaginative public use of bold lettering, image and color, can be an environmental pickup. Even those telephoto shots of highway vulgarization with their shoulder-to-shoulder neon and plastic, used as arguments for beautification, become quite smashing graphic compositions in their own right—the photo result, curiously, is an art form in itself.

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There is a thin line everywhere today between art and accident, or even art and atrocity; it is a characteristic of our time. Current architectural theory calls for complexity and disorder (in a kind of tastefully arranged, properly evocative counterpoint of esthetic experiences, of course), using the happy accidents of unplanned construction as examples. The unhappy accidents don't count. There is a perfectly good case to be made for subtleties and variations of design outside of Cartesian order, but the idea is already being carried to extremes of heady intellectual irrelevance.

Billboard blight is fought by concerned citizens in a losing battle against a powerful business lobby, and yet billboard art, as sophisticated abstraction and out of environmental context, becomes Pop Art, translating the punch-in-the-stomach assault of the highway into the esthetic punch-in-the-eye of the gallery. The line grows steadily thinner.

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But even with this precarious balance of values, there is still simple environmental malpractice. When an Indianapolis-based store chain called Vonnegut's (to take a typical, all-American example) gets a pat on the back from a trade publication for its "new look"—one of those totem pole accretions of towering mix-matched and mismatched humdrum graphics to lure the helpless driver—it is archetypal bad. It is really bad, because it isn't even bad enough to be good.

Certainly Saratoga is no more confused or much worse off than any other community today; its "new look" is national. It is only that Saratoga's unique architectural history makes its transgressions a special study of environmental abuse. What the next abuse will be is always a gamble, although the outrages and odds are reasonably predictable. But that's what makes horse racing, anywhere.