Design Notebook

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At the resorts, architecture, too, tries to get away from it all.

MY idea of the perfect vacation is a place where there is no architecture at all; but that is understandable since the rest of my year is spent in the all-too-serious appraisal of the built environment. A desert island, perhaps, with all the comforts of home. Or a tent in the wilderness supplied with modern conveniences and services. Surroundings of unspoiled natural beauty, with cordon bleu chefs lurking behind the bushes. Or of artful, ever-blooming luxury, where one's needs are just as artfully anticipated. The idea is escape — from everything that ordinarily dominates and binds, from all things onerous and demanding. Escape laced with enchantment and ease.

It takes a conscious act to create such a place — and the shrewd understanding that it should be no place like home, and a home away from home, as well. Traditionally, such places are called resorts, and they range from the shoddy to the inspired. They are usually the product of a gifted breed of vacation visionaries and their architects, whose dreams have ranged from the earnest and picturesque marriage of man and nature, such as the Smiley family's archetypical Mohonk Mountain House on the edge of a glacier lake in the mountains of New York State, to the Mediterranean stage set of Addison Mizner's totally urbane Palm Beach. They established styles of pleasure and architecture.

Like all styles, fashions in vacations change. The mountain houses with verandas by the mile where the most active sports were walking into seven-course meals and contemplating the view have given way to the activity-centered hotels that feature swimming pools and encounter sessions for singles rather than postprandial promenades.

The sheer luxury of genteel boredom is passé. The fashionable world that sets vacation styles moves on to new settings. The 19th-century belle packed her bustles for Saratoga; the 20th-century flapper took her beaded chemises to Florida.

The objective was the same — amusement and flirtation, or, as it was phrased by those who sold it, relaxation and romance. It was just the background that changed, from wicker and peacocks on the grass to streamlined Deco and flamingos, from sublime sunset vistas to the opalescent ocean.

If only God could make a tree, it took man to plant the palms in Palm Beach, and to build hotels in Miami. But each resort succeeded in supplying some special need in its own time. And that it is all part of history now is the burden of a current wave of exhibitions and publications and National Register nominations treating resort architecture as a subject for scholarly investigation and landmark designation.

Those who think historic district designations are restricted to places like Boston's Beacon Hill will be interested to learn that a mile-square area of Miami Beach with a concentration of 1930's hotels and houses has been placed on the National Register as the country's first Art Deco district.

The Florida Endowment for the Humanities has funded a descriptive brochure of the area, with essays on its social and architectural history, published by the Miami Design Preservation League. (The brochure is available from the league at 1630 Euclid Avenue, Miami Beach, Fla., 33139).

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The rise and fall and sometime regeneration of the Catskills as a favorite vacation spot over the last 150 years is currently the subject of an exhibition at the Cooper-Hewitt Museum (2 East 91st Street through Aug. 27) called "Resorts of the Catskills."

This is a particularly seasonable and delightful show. With the help of grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the New York Council for the Humanities and the New York State Council on the Arts, the photographer John Margolies has put together a visual record of selected resorts, with an accompanying catalogue buttressed by contributions on their sylistic and social significance.

Everything from boarding houses and bungalows to Grand Hotels and "country club" resorts is included. Architecturally, most are ad hoc accretions of wings and functions as they grew from the clapboard rustic of the 19th century to the stucco and high-rise sophistication of the 20th century.

But originally there was a general, overriding style, of vacation if not of architecture, based on getting-away-from-it-all. The 19th century mountain resort stressed its contrast with the city — the healthful air and the room with a view. That room was usually spartan; a small, personal cubicle replaced the sleeping porch as the desire for private accommodations increased. A brass bed supplanted the cot, and floors were plain, bare wood.

The paid vacation, a 19th-century American invention, changed what was a retreat for the rich into a yearly ritual for the working class. But from the most elaborate to the most humble lodging, the rustic scene prevailed, with wicker parlors, vast, echoing, beamed dining rooms and rows of rockers on the piazza.

Surely one of the most unusual and evocative exhibitions ever mounted in a museum is the wicker parlor of Hanson's Hotel in Deposit, N.Y., installed intact in the Cooper-Hewitt show. The hotel was closed in 1977. A group of white wicker settees, rockers and straight chairs, upholstered in flowered cretonne and punctuated by wicker smoking stands creates a magic circle that immediately conjures up the summers of yesteryear.

Set on a display platform, this group becomes a unique artifact of the popular resort culture. For anyone who remembers the crystalline mornings of *New York or New England mountains* in July, followed by the doldrums of the inevitable evening ennui, its ordinariness is sublime.

Today, the American hotel-motel culture has taken over. It has brought the air-conditioned room with paired queen-sized beds and wall-to-wall carpet that makes one resort room indistinguishable from another, anywhere. It has also brought bathrooms, which is not all bad. But the rustic resort and the bucolic pleasure, except for some notable relics, is a thing of the past.

Miami Beach Art Deco is also a thing of the past. It was equally the creation of a setting in response to a mood and a need. And although escape was the objective, as always, at that time it had a special meaning.

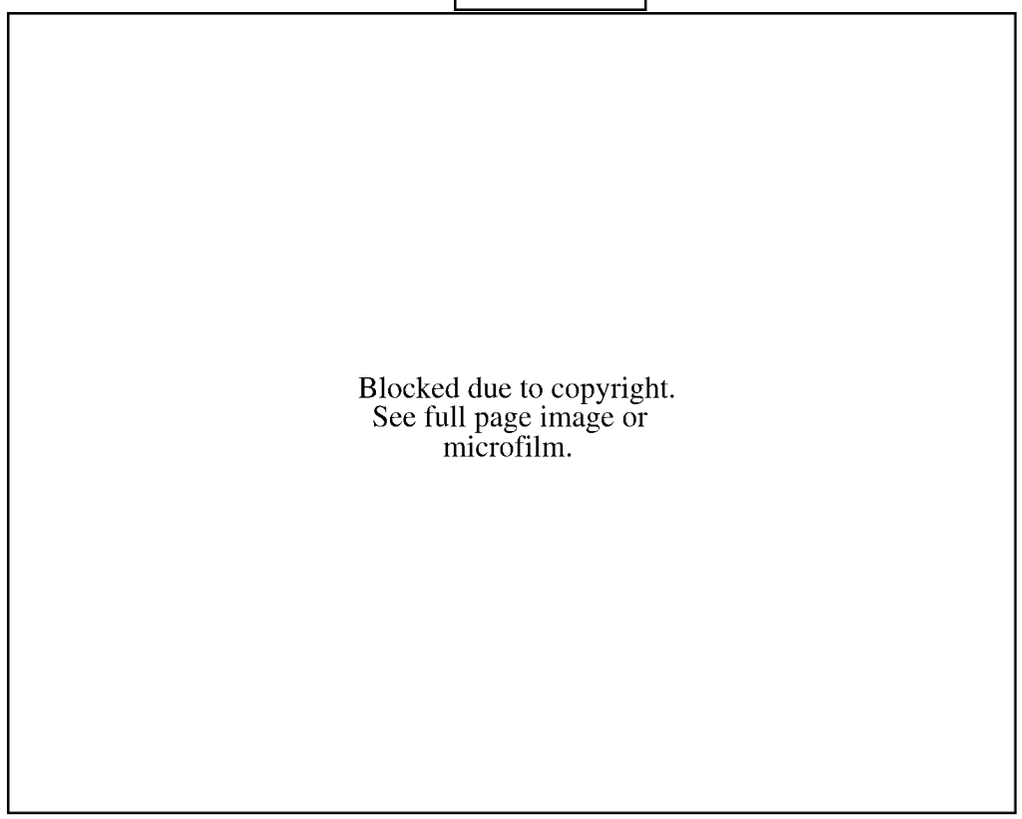
When these hotels and houses were built in the 1930's, according to Harris J. Sobin in the Miami Design Preservation League pamphlet, "Time Present, Time Past," the "modernistic" buildings, with their smooth, color-trimmed white walls, glass brick, sleek curves and pyramided forms were meant to "express the freshness, freedom, excitement, urbanity and mood of escape which a glamorous new seaside resort promised the people of a tired, badly discouraged and disenchanted nation."

"During the Depression people needed to let go," writes Leicester Hemingway, Ernest Hemingway's younger brother who has lived in Miami since 1935. "Architects wanted something modern, so they smoothed the balconies, they smoothed everything until you got the feeling that life was smooth. The buildings made you feel all cleaned and new and excited and happy to be here."

The promise was as transient as the "modernism" of the Deco period, which relied more on effect than on reality and whose effect came more from novelty than from invention; its radicalism masked a traditional, romantic-classical massing of eclectic motifs. The "style" we see now is quite different from the style that was intended then, based on hindsight and the full view of an era, rather than on its own claims to the future.

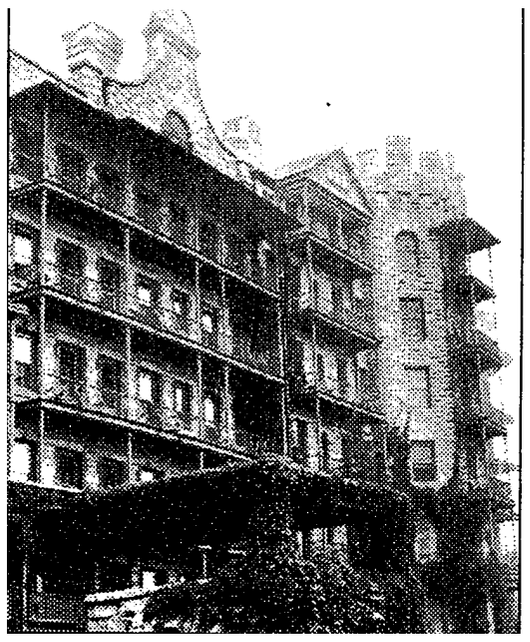
One thing is certain: nothing has vanished so completely as last year's vacation. Escape is short-lived and ephemeral at best — as temporary as the room one makes one's own for a fortnight, as if no one had lived in it before or would again.

And while a few places have kept their moneyed enchantment — Palm Beach and the Hamptons, for example — nothing is as sad as the resort that the fashionable world is done with. But they have all served us well. For a week or a season, we believe in the possibility of something "new and exciting." We even have the feeling that life is smooth again.



One background for vacation relaxation, left, was the Deco architecture and palm trees of Miami.

Earlier, the mountain resorts were popular, typified by Mohonk Mountain House, below left, and the wicker-filled Hanson's Hotel.



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