

HISTORIC *Preservation* BULLETIN

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Neon and Angles: Motels of the Wildwoods



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The Jersey Shore evokes many images: sand and surf, sun and fun, family and friends among them. For many, the Shore brings to mind the grand painted ladies of Victorian Cape May. However, just north of Cape May lies the neighboring communities of North Wildwood, Wildwood and Wildwood Crest that draw praise for their own unique exuberant architecture.

The Wildwoods' wide sandy beach and the amusement-packed boardwalk are well known, but the striking, flamboyant, mid-20th century motels attract visitors to the Wildwoods every year. The architecture of the motels, called Googie on the West Coast, MiMo in north beach Miami or, more generically, Populuxe, is not known to exist outside the Wildwoods in an equivalent density.

This expressive architectural style common in the '50s and '60s incorporated modern, sweeping angles, angular wall and roof styles, vibrant colors, starbursts and even boomerang shapes and merits its own special attention in addition to the standard Jersey Shore fun. Indeed, the Wildwoods are a wildly popular summer spot, not only with local Shore visitors from the Mid-Atlantic, but also with vacationers from Quebec, Canada and beyond.

The Wildwoods began developing as a resort in the last decade of the 19th century with steady growth to the early 20th century. The boom began in the 1950s, due partially to the construction and completion of the Garden State Parkway and the enthusiastic, tail-finned motorists it delivered. With



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Our mission is to assist the residents of New Jersey in identifying, preserving, protecting and sustaining our historic and archaeological resources through implementation of the state's historic preservation program.

We provide assistance through our annual conference, consultation with professionals, training workshops, co-sponsorship of history and historic preservation related activities, the Historic Preservation Bulletin and other free publications.

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Asymmetry found in the Ocean View Motel, Wildwood Crest

summer tourists driving to the Wildwoods, the newly constructed motels needed to meet their needs as motorists. While the automobile played an important role in the form and function of the motels, the post-World War II optimism, confidence and economic prosperity sweeping the nation in the '50s also held large influence in the design and themes.

Take a drive down Surf, Ocean and Atlantic avenues and one will notice a striking similarity among the motels. The architecture, locally named Doo-Wop in honor of the musical genre of the period, implemented important design principles. Common elements include: asymmetry, L- or U-shaped form, the incorporation of a theme, overhangs, pools, and parking. For tourists arriving in the large cars of the era, parking was essential, and all the motels provided perimeter parking, with some spots sheltered under raised sundecks.

The form of each of the motels was relatively simple. Constructed of poured, reinforced concrete, the motels were two or more stories and generally L- or U-shaped. The L plan was a solid line of rooms; the shorter leg could be a lobby, raised sundeck with parking underneath or even more guestrooms. In keeping with the motorist trend and to minimize noise and maximize ocean views, the motels were only one room deep with an open-air, common walkway for guestroom access. Also essential to the form of the motels were the flat roofs that extended well beyond the



Angled walls of the Ebb Tide Motel, Wildwood Crest. The first motel built on the island. Now demolished. Photo courtesy of HABS

walls. These wide, roof overhangs offered protection to the guests on the open corridors but also provided a design element specific to the popular culture of the time. The same wide overhangs were also often found on the lobbies of the buildings. Most were flat, but, depending upon the theme of the motel, the overhangs could be flared or accordion style.

Asymmetry and strong angles were also essential to the lines of a motel in the Wildwoods. This was seen most dramatically in the now demolished Ebb Tide. One of the first motels built in 1952, the Ebb Tide had a sloping facade, with the first floor leaning away from the parking lot while the second and third floors leaned toward the motorists. These

angles were then topped with an overhanging roof and contrasted with the flat elevation of the two-story office. All this combined to give the motel a feeling of movement.

Asymmetry was also often found in the lobbies. The lobby of the Ocean View, with its long sloping roofs, had one side dramatically longer than the other. Large diamond-paned windows augmented the asymmetrical

effect. This lobby roof served a dual purpose by also providing some covered parking. The angles were often incorporated in the theme of some motels. The Casa Bahama, taking on a Caribbean theme, had the basic L-shaped form that incorporated many peaked rooflines along the open corridors. These peaks rose from the sidewalk at the first floor and culminated in a steep peak above the second story roof mimicking

side-by-side cabanas.

While a building's form and wide overhangs were important, themes were established to capture the attention of the tourist. Each motel had an essential designated theme, which created an ambience for the motel and lured potential guests as they drove around looking for accommodations. Common themes reflected in the architecture include exotic locations as found at the Tangiers, the Pyramid and the Caribbean motels; luxury at the Imperial 500 and the Diamond Crest; space exploration at the Astronaut; historic interpretations at the Carriage Stop and the Crusader; and the oceanic at the Blue Marlin, Gulf Stream and Sea Gull. The themes were reflective of the era: expanded contact with new



Stylized entrance of the Attaché Motel, Wildwood Crest.



The cabana-like appearance of the former Casa Bahama creates a Caribbean flare. Also note the palm trees on the doors. Now demolished.

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and exotic locations through travel and the movies, the newly established space program.

The theme of each motel was echoed throughout the building. Large neon signs were mounted on roofs, attached to the side of a building or mounted near the curb, each competing with its neighbor in bright neon. Often the name of the motel was painted on a wall surface along with an image representing the theme. The Gondolier, for example, had an entire wall surface painted with an image of a gondolier in Venice, and the Olympic features a man throwing a discus.

The expression of the theme could also be carried out in the building materials. The three-story Brittany featured false half-timbering, giving it a Tudor appearance. The Singapore had multiple-hipped roofs, which give the impression of a pagoda. The Carriage Stop was faced in red brick with white columns, reminding people of colonial roots.

Just as parking was critical to the motoring tourists, so were pools. Even with the beach just a few steps away, few motels were without pools. The pools were often just as dramatic as the themes themselves, and all were meant to help attract and, most importantly, keep the tourist. The Chateau Bleu pool was heart-shaped, while the pool of the exuberant Caribbean was crescent-shaped. Other motels featured kidney-shaped, standard oval



The Lollipop Motel in North Wildwood has many essential elements: U-shape, second floor sun deck with parking underneath, bright colors, large sign, swimming pool and perimeter parking.

or rectangular pools. Pool decks were invariably dotted with non-native, fabricated palm trees, again lending to the fanciful themes found throughout the Wildwoods.

While architecture and theme were essential to the Wildwoods' motels, they were not complete without a few final details. Large, plate-glass windows in lobbies and guestrooms, railings and colors were added to complete the image. Railings often complemented a theme or lent additional appeal to the motel. The railing types were as varied as the themes themselves: outward and inward curving, asymmetrical and even geometric designs were incorporated into the

railings. Solid doors were often painted colors to match the themes. Room numbers were emphasized with a decal that represented the theme of the motel. The Pink Champagne motel features a champagne glass filled with pink

champagne on each guest room door. Many motels also featured louvered doors, which, when the inner door was left open, allowed for air circulation, an attractive yet functional feature to these buildings.

Located side-by-side for blocks and blocks, the motels create a fascinating scene, unparalleled on the Jersey Shore. The dramatic lobbies, flashy signs and exuberant themes of the motels remain a tangible, priceless link to the popular culture of post-World War II America, allowing one to take a step back in time to the '50s and '60s. The Jersey Shore features miles of fine sandy

beaches and exciting boardwalks, but none except the Wildwoods can boast about its exuberant, mid-20th century architecture. ✨

Sara André is a Historic Preservation Specialist with the Historic Preservation Office

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Little details, such as a railing embellished with the motel's name, all help to attract attention and create an atmosphere. Wildwood Crest.

...TOURIST CABINS BECAME THE MOST POPULAR FORM OF OVERNIGHT ACCOMMODATION. ENTERPRISING CAMPGROUND OWNERS BEGAN TO BUILD TINY CABINS...

Roadside Cabins

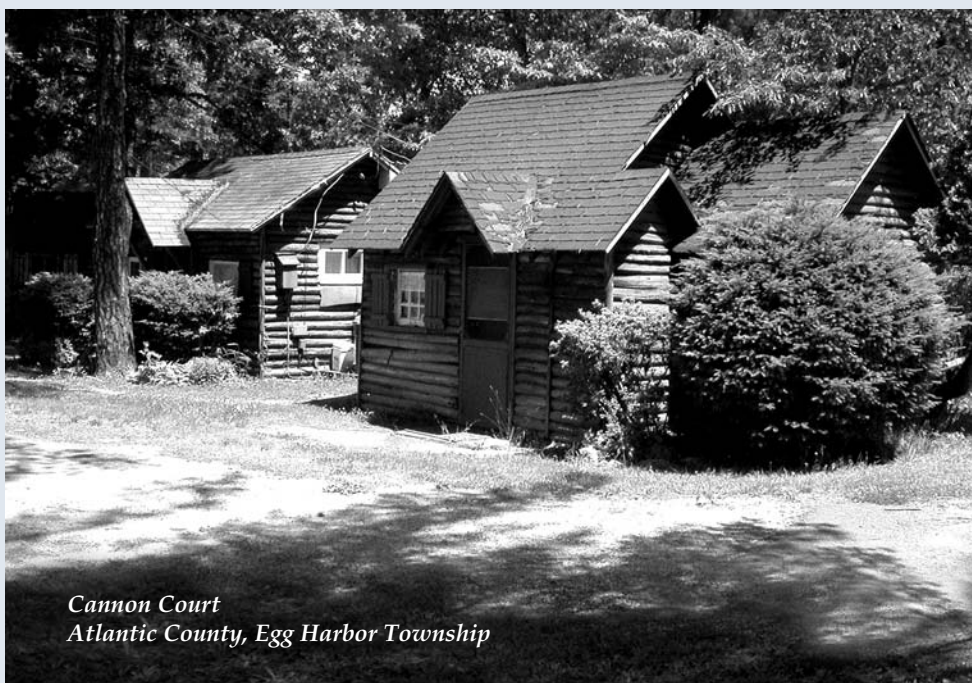
Popularized during the Great Depression, roadside cabins illustrate an important step in the development of the motel. Once common along New Jersey roads leading to the shore, roadside cabins are a rapidly disappearing resource type that illustrates an episode in America's infatuation with road travel and inexpensive accommodation.

Campgrounds first became popular during the 1920s, when car travel enabled families to take advantage of inexpensive getaways. As camp popularity declined in the late 1920s, however, tourist cabins became the most popular form of overnight accommodation. Enterprising campground owners began to build

tiny cabins, charging a higher fee for their use than camping, and cabins caught on quickly. Cabin camping was informal compared to hotels, but provided adequate comforts for many travelers. Eventually, many owners of cabin camps eliminated tent camping

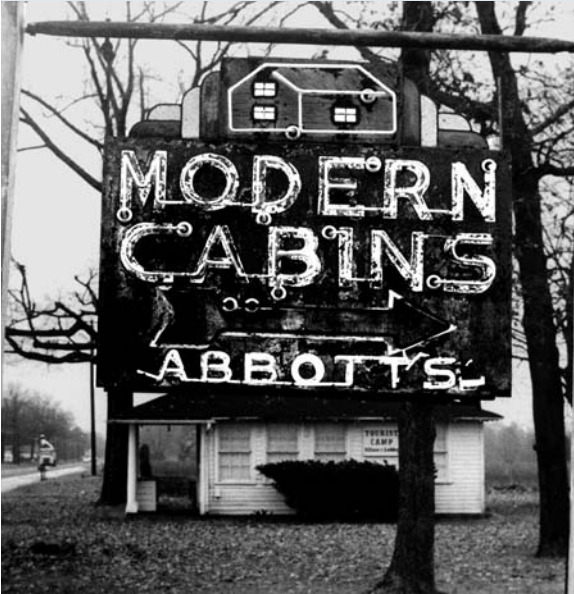
altogether.

The earliest cabins provided only the most basic amenities – sanitary facilities were usually located in a separate building. In rural areas, cabins could be widely spaced for privacy and



*Cannon Court
Atlantic County, Egg Harbor Township*

aesthetic effect, but in more densely-built areas, high property values necessitated a tighter arrangement of cabins, eventually turning into the



construction; a 1-story, side gabled head house; a garage; and an irregularly shaped bath house. The Country Motel, also in Galloway Township, dates to c. 1930. The complex, still in use, is comprised of four, one room, wood framed cabins and a 1-story residence. A set of abandoned, unnamed roadside cabins were also identified in Galloway Township,

camp became isolated from the tourist flow and unable to survive financially. A number of early motels and roadside cabins remain along New Jersey's state highways, but most are post-World War II buildings. The earliest roadside cabins, dating to the 1920s and 1930s, have largely become an obsolete architectural form and are rapidly disappearing. ❖

by Christine Miller, an Architectural Conservator and Architectural Historian with the Cultural Resource Consulting Group.

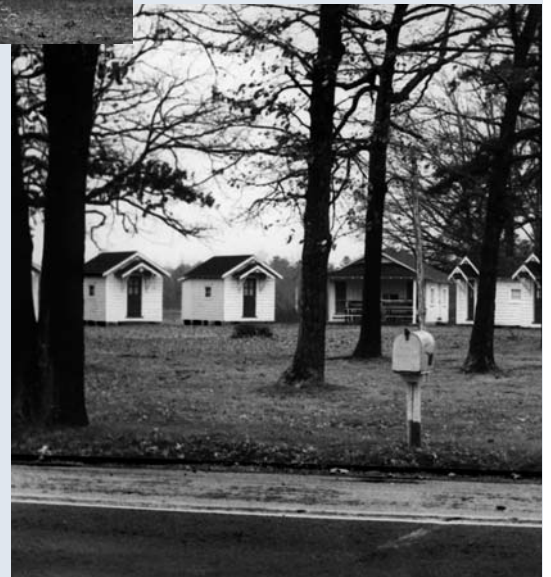
L- or U-shaped "cabin court," "motor court," and finally, "motel." Cabins added more amenities through the 1930s: bathrooms, comfortable beds, soap, and linens. By the 1940s, there was little to distinguish a "cabin" from a hotel room except for convenience, privacy, and affordability.



In the past year, CRCG identified four sets of historic roadside cabins in Atlantic County. The abandoned L'il Abner complex in Galloway Township dates to c. 1930, and includes fourteen, one-story, front gabled, one room cabins, some wood framed and others of log

construction, consisting of six, one room, wood framed cottages and a 2-story wood framed head house. Cannon Court, in Egg Harbor Township, is still in use, and features eleven cabins with varying forms and one head house.

As improved highways bypassed older routes and smaller towns, many cabins and



*Abbott's Modern Cabins.
Atlantic County, Hamilton Township*

Minding the Shore



Lucy, the Margate Elephant fully restored.

1916. But by 1969 the building that had once made passing sailors cry “Elephant!” was a dilapidated building nearing extinction, ironically due to the same real estate development forces she had been built to promote. Thanks to the efforts and long struggle of the Margate Civic Association, Lucy was saved and restored, along with a great part of Jersey Shore history. Today this National Historic Landmark stands as

While the Jersey Shore might be better known for the summer rituals that have captivated us for many generations, the fact is that the sands along this 127 mile-long coastline hold more than just sun, surf, and slot machines. Along this coast, or “the Shore” as locals call it, lies a collection of cultural resources as varied as the visitors that stroll its boardwalks and beaches. From a four-legged historic landmark in Margate City, to one of the world’s largest interior spaces at the Atlantic City Convention Hall, to the Victorian architecture of Ocean Grove and Cape May — the Jersey Shore is a cultural landscape like no other.

One of the best known characters in this coastal landscape is Lucy, the Margate Elephant. She was built for the real estate company of James V. Lafferty, as both an advertisement and office, to help spur development at the shore. The 58-foot tall elephant building has drawn crowds of amazed spectators ever since its opening (to the tunes of a brass band) in 1881. Even President Wilson came to visit her in



Lucy in her seriously deteriorated condition c. 1970.

the oldest functioning example of zoomorphic architecture in the United States and serves as a historic site and museum of its own history.

Another coastal treasure is the Atlantic City Convention Hall, registered as a National Historic Landmark in 1987. "Boardwalk Hall," as it is commonly called, was built between 1926 and 1929. At the time of its construction it contained the largest room with an unobstructed view in the history of architecture (Charleton, James H. National Historic Landmark/National Register Nomination: Atlantic Convention Hall, 02/27/87). Today the Great Hall is still one of the world's largest interior spaces. In addition, the structure houses what it is arguably the largest organ in the world, containing 33,000 pipes in eight chambers. But the importance of this building goes beyond its architecture and engineering prowess. For over 75 years Atlantic City's Convention Hall has played host to numerous events that have helped to map the social

construct of the Shore. Orchestras, bowling, basketball, ice-skating, boxing and concerts are some of the events that have taken place in "The World's Greatest Playground." But the Hall's signature event from 1946 to 2004 had been the Miss

Award given by the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

But the New Jersey Shore is not just lights, splendor, and enormity. Further north on the Jersey



Beach front view of the Atlantic City Convention Hall, 1982

America pageant. In 1998, after many years of use and bad renovations, Convention Hall began a series of efforts to reconstruct its majestic ceiling and restore some of the building's historic features that had been deteriorating.

When all of the work was completed and the Hall reopened in October 2001 it was received with much acclaim by the architectural, engineering and preservation communities, earning a total of nine awards including a 2003 National Preservation

coast lies a Methodist Camp Meeting town built to promote mental and physical health and known as Ocean Grove. The town was founded on the Methodist religious philosophy of the 19th century. It incorporated town-planning practices like setbacks and urban vistas that are normally associated with the 20th century. Now a State and National Historic District, Ocean Grove is the oldest, largest, and most successful camp meeting town still functioning in the United States. In addition, it contains the largest aggregate of Victorian and early 20th century structures in America. In fact, because so much of the original fabric of its structures and grounds still survives, the

Rendering of the Convention Hall's main auditorium, c.1928.





Convention Hall's Main auditorium after its 2001 reopening.

town of Ocean Grove is virtually an open-air museum worthy of recognition among the Shore's most prized cultural resources.

Down at the other end of the Shore, on the southernmost tip of New Jersey, lies the Cape May Historic District. Designated as a National Historic Landmark in 1976, this district is known as "America's Oldest Seashore Resort." Notable figures such as Abraham Lincoln, James Buchanan, and Ulysses S. Grant visited Cape May in their time. Today thousands of people continue to do so each year, lured by a unique Victorian atmosphere created by a collection of buildings that rivals that of Ocean Grove. A stroll through Cape May's streets explains its longstanding popularity – and a walk is the best way view its wonders. The streets contain a seemingly endless array of late 19th century buildings and provide visitors with an almost surreal escape in time. Sites like the Pink House (built by Eldridge

Johnson, it has elaborate fret work on its upper and lower front porches), the Seven Sisters houses (seven identical Italian Renaissance-style cottages in a row), and the Chalfonte Hotel (a long L-shaped building with first and second story verandas and a large cupola on the roof) are examples of Cape May's stellar architecture.

It does not take long to realize that many generations have contributed to a historical richness along the Jersey coast that spans the entire spectrum of cultural resources. These sites and places are just waiting to be discovered or rediscovered. While summer is certainly not the only time of the year when the Shore exhibits its wonder, it is one of the best. The historic fabric of the Jersey coast finds its liveliest expression under the hot sun, amid the childhood-like jubilation of visitors young and old. But our places of history are only as strong as the number of people that visit them. So take a few days this

summer to take part in some of the great things that the Jersey Shore has to offer. Visit "the Shore" and learn about its



Pink House's elaborate street front facade.

numerous and diverse historic sites, and in the process, you will be helping to keep this important part of our history alive. ✨



Row of Victorian cottages at Ocean Grove. Photograph courtesy of HAPBS

Sergio De Orbeta was a Program Associate with the Historic Preservation Office.

Doo Wop Motels Endangered

National Trust for Historic Preservation lists the Doo Wop Motels as one of America's 11 most endangered historic properties. Each year since 1988 the National Trust for Historic Preservation issues its list of 11 sites most endangered by "neglect, insufficient funds, inappropriate development, or insensitive public policy." This year the Doo Wop Motels were listed due to development pressures resulting in rapid increases in demolition. According to the National Trust

nearly 100 motels have been recently demolished often to facilitate construction of market-rate condominiums.

New Jersey sites previously included in the Trust's 11 Most Endangered List include: Thomas

Edison's Invention Factory in West Orange (1993) and the Hackensack Water Works in Oradell (2002).

For additional information about the 11 Most Endangered list go to <http://nthp.org/11Most/>



Rio Motel, prior to demolition.



Site of Rio Motel after demolition.



Demolition in progress at the Palm Beach.



Vacant lot with new condos.



NEW JERSEY'S HISTORIC SITES NEED YOUR HELP.

For far too long, a lack of reliable state funding has forced New Jersey's treasured parks, historic sites and wildlife areas to go without regular maintenance or capital improvements. Today, those much-needed repairs and improvements will cost as much as \$250 million.

You can help.

On Nov. 7, New Jersey voters will be asked to approve a constitutional amendment that would provide a dedicated source of funding for maintenance and capital improvement at the state's parks, historic sites and wildlife areas.

Without requiring any new taxes, the proposal would allow revenues from the existing

Corporate Business Tax Fund to be used for repairs and restorations.

A yes vote would guarantee a stable source of state funding every year for maintenance and capital improvements.

On November 7, New Jersey voters will decide.



**It's up to you
November 7**