

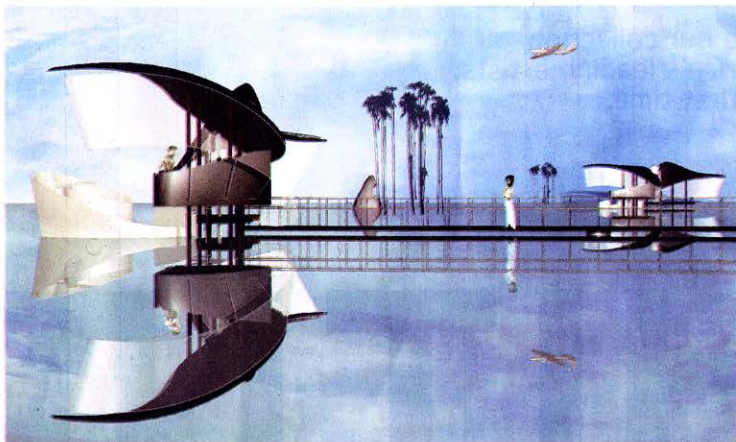
ARCHITECTURE REVIEW

Checking In To Escapism

By HERBERT MUSCHAMP

In the last decade, two types of dormitory design have embedded themselves within American middle-class taste: the neo-traditional suburban enclave and the trendy boutique hotel. The first type, intended for families, is an upscale trailer park fitted with period facades that denote social stability. The second, which has my deepest tribal sympathies, is a Y.M.C.A. with mood lighting.

This latter type is the titular subject of "New Hotels for Global Nomads," an exhibition that opened this week at the Smithsonian Institution's Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum. I regret to report that the show is a bitter disappointment. Hotel design is one of the richest topics a museum could take on right now. Alas, Cooper-



Roy/Cooper-Hewitt

A rendering of the Okavango Delta Spa, designed in 1997 for a site in Botswana by the New York architect Lindy Roy, from "New Hotels for Global Nomads" at the Cooper-Hewitt museum.

Hewitt has sprung for one of those wildly indulgent free-for-alls in which the show itself asks to be taken as a Work of Art. Groan. I may have to check myself into the Hudson just to recuperate from it.

Organized by Donald Albrecht, the museum's exhibitions curator, the show is first of all misleadingly titled. There are new hotel designs on view here, and some of them are first rate. But the serious work is upstaged by extraneous clutter. You know that something is off key the minute you walk in the door and are greeted by a film clip from "Grand Hotel." A goodie, but an oldie. Are we here to see contemporary design or a nostalgia fest?

The film clip is a preview of coming distractions. A great deal of wall space has been given over to vintage hotel postcards and other steamer trunk memorabilia. Furniture and assorted bric-a-brac from historic hostel-

Continued on Page 35

INSIDE

INSIDE ART

Four paintings originally in a Whitney family collection to be sold at Christie's.

33 ART REVIEW

'Masterpieces of European Paintings From the Toledo Museum of Art' at the Frick.

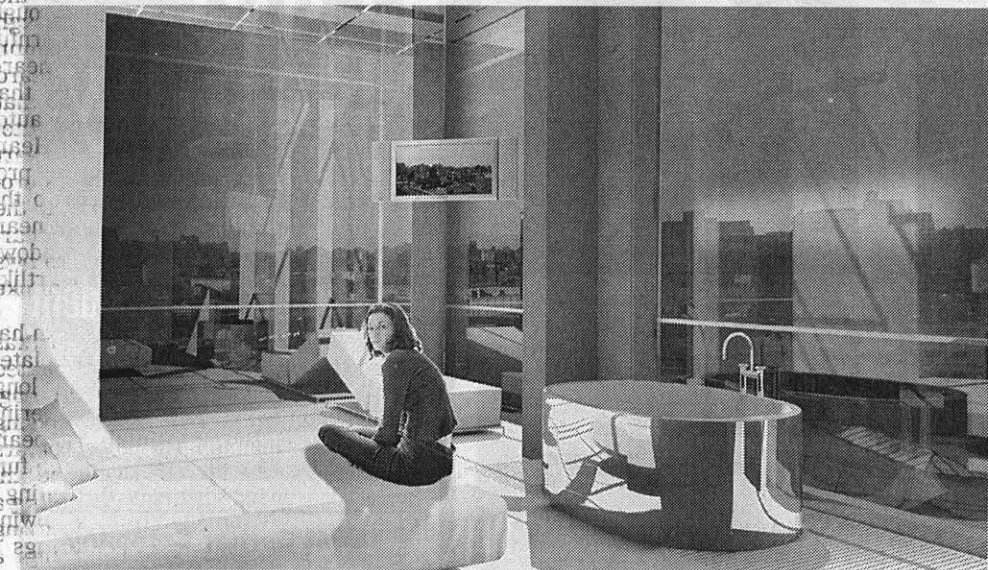
37 ART REVIEW

'Zero to Infinity: Arte Povera' at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington.

41 BOOKS OF THE TIMES

Rules, rules and more rules: 'The Case Against Lawyers' by Catherine Crier.

Checking In to Escapism With Fantasies Packed



Antonio Citterio & Partners

Continued From Weekend Page 31

ries hog the spotlights. Less floor space is devoted to architects' models than to room-size installations by artists that were commissioned for this exhibition. There are portable desk sets by Hermès and Louis Vuitton. You would never guess, from surveying this hodgepodge, that boutique hotels are among the major torchbearers for design in the contemporary city.

There is one way to save the day: pretend that Mr. Albrecht was forced to put on an architecture show in the attic of the Overlook Hotel. It's haunted up there, but this is the time of year when ghosts come out. If we brush aside the cobwebs, battered suitcases and mildewed Stephen King paperbacks, some shining projects come into view. Foremost among these are unbuilt conceptual projects, including three designs by the New York architect Lindy Roy.

In recent years Ms. Roy has established herself as a lyric poet of extreme conditions, an ideal designer for the increasingly precarious places toward which our planet is revolving. I would think twice before spending my precious downtime at a resort called Cancer Alley, despite the pleasure it would bring to send out postcards from such a place. Come on down! Nonetheless, I applaud Ms. Roy's willingness to visualize an oasis amid environmental degradation in Louisiana.

A quarter of this nation's petrochemicals are produced by refineries along 150 miles of the Mississippi River between Baton Rouge, La., and New Orleans, the exhibition catalog notes in its entry for Ms. Roy's project. This region's soil, water and air are the most polluted in the United States. Rates for cancer, asthma and other ailments are high. The industrial plants there will pull out of the area by 2035, it is estimated, when oil and natural gas reserves will be exhausted. Ms. Roy's "toxic tourism" project puts recycled river barges to various uses, including motels, outdoor theaters, playgrounds and libraries. Her sinuous, high-tech designs eroticize the apocalyptic landscape, much as advertisements romanticize cars.

Ms. Roy's Okavango Delta Spa in Botswana falls more respectably into the eco-tourism bracket. Though mellower in concept, the design might still seem extreme to those whose idea of in-room entertainment does not include surprise visits by wildebeests. For a watery region profuse with papyrus

"New Hotels for Global Nomads" remains at the Smithsonian's Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum, 2 East 91st Street, Manhattan, (212) 849-8400, through March 2.

The Hotel Broadway, above, being built in SoHo and designed by Jean Nouvel and Antonio Citterio & Partners, and "Lobby Ports," a conceptual design by Servo for lobbies that can be attached to building exteriors, at the Cooper-Hewitt.

stalks, Ms. Roy designed a small village that includes seven thatched-roof huts along with a main lodge. Each hut has a floating fiberglass tub that can be detached for delta drifting and other aquatic adventures.

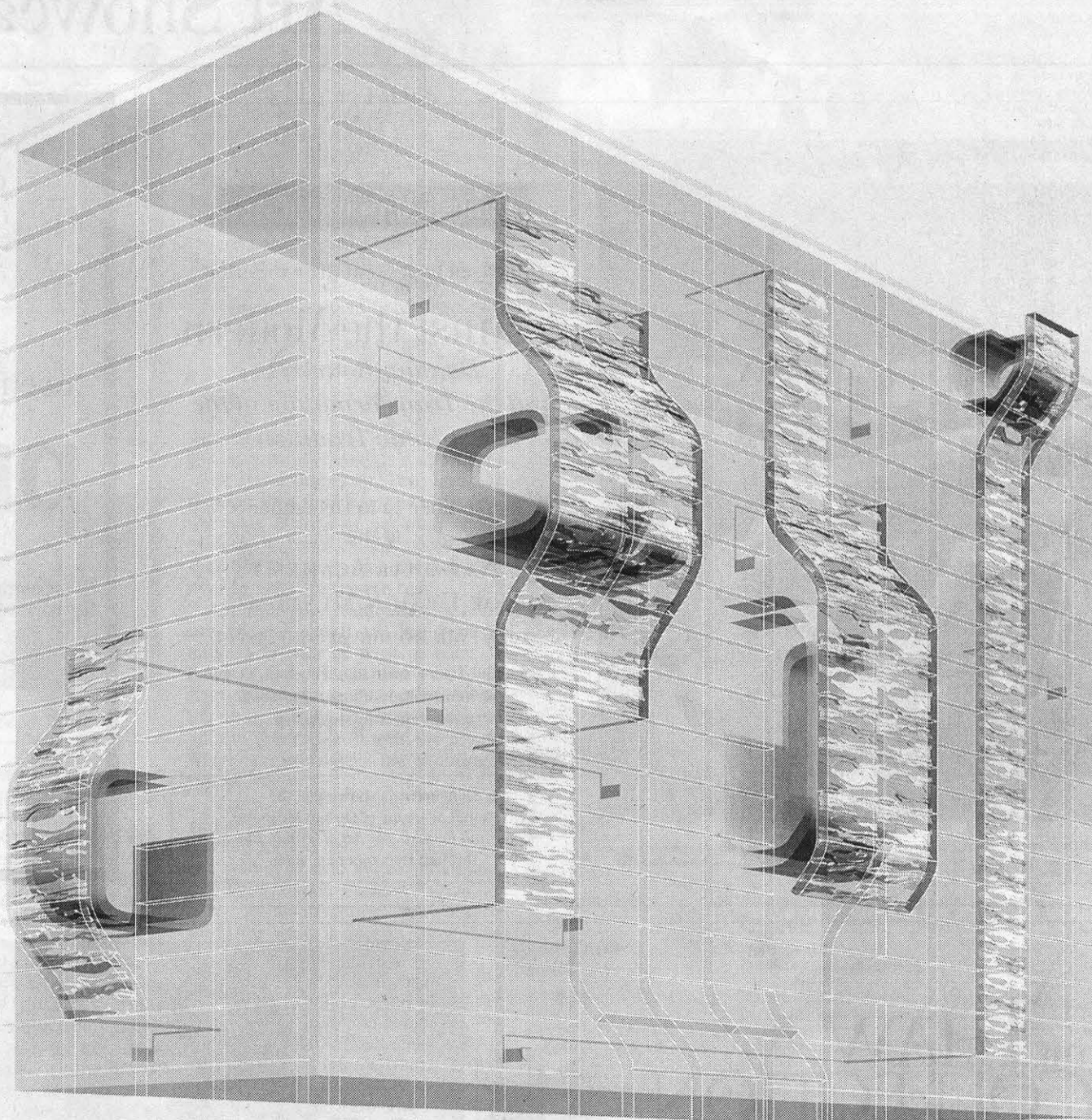
Her Wind River Lodge outside Valdez, Alaska, caters to people who pursue extreme skiing, the sport of slaloming at high altitudes. The lodge, which will be reachable only by helicopter, has sloping roofs designed to be amplified by snow. Even without snow, they look cool.

Servo, a bicoastal design office, has contributed another outstanding project. Entitled "Lobby Ports," it is for a series of parabuildings that could be attached to the exteriors of existing structures. The concept is not entirely new; it was explored several decades ago by the Haus Rucker Company, the Viennese group whose chief architects, Ortner and Ortner, subsequently designed the Museum Quarter in Vienna. I suspect that the climate is now more hospitable to this type of innovation. Its application, in any case, is hardly limited to hotel lobbies. I commend the idea to developers planning to renovate any of our third-rank postwar office towers.

Three other design groups — Lewis Tsurumaki Lewis; Carl de Smet/Uncontrollable Architectural Products; and Narchitects and Fieldoffice — have also contributed thoughtful visionary projects. But in this show, a project's design intelligence is in inverse relationship to the space it takes up. Half a large room, for example, is devoted to a full-scale mock-up of "24/7 Hotel Room," a mightily derivative conceptual project by the New York architect Joel Sanders.

This design is essentially a recycled version of those all-in-one living pods that we saw back in the 1960's, when people got carried away by the possibilities of injection-molded plastics. Mr. Sanders's version is tinted Warhol silver and engineered for maximum flexibility (bed converts to lap pool), another 60's motif. These retro ideas are goosed up with flashy digital animations that serve mainly to dramatize the yawning gulf between computer renderings and realized buildings.

In a show that fills two floors of the museum, actual "new hotels for global nomads" are given surprisingly short shrift. There are color photographs of Ian



Servo/Cooper-Hewitt

Schrager's outposts in San Francisco and London designed by Philippe Starck and Anda Andrei. André Balazs's Standard hotels in Los Angeles make the cut, as do unrealized projects by Richard Gluckman and Jean Nouvel. Mr. Nouvel's realized Hotel in Lucerne, Switzerland, is also featured, along with a few other examples of the boutique hotel genre.

This overview does not suffer from excessive ambition. The examples are mostly familiar, and barely scratch the surface of the design sphere they represent. But to what other sphere could the show's title possibly refer? Certainly the global nomad hotel is not found in Las Vegas, which is reinventing itself as a family resort and is more notable for vagrancy than nomadism. Mystifyingly, however, this desert resort's theme hotels are extensively represented in a series of prominently displayed photographs by Richard Barnes.

Nor does the concept include the Poconos honeymoon hotel, a now-defunct category represented here by a red heart-shaped bathtub. I guess we are meant to get a kick out of seeing one, as I suppose we are also meant to be tickled by the hotel fantasies of the artists Sophie Calle, Tom Sachs, Maureen Connor and Toland Grinnell. Entire galleries are devoted to these projects, and though they are not without interest, I deplore their presentation. Though evidently

intended to enrich the subject of design, they have the contrary effect of marginalizing it.

This is worth pondering, particularly while the Cooper-Hewitt is in a management transition. The issue is one of identity, for the museum and its relationship to contemporary urban society.

Who are these global nomads? They are us. They are the people Richard Florida profiles in his informative book, "The Rise of the Creative Class." A host of unflattering terms have been coined to describe this group. Yuppies. Bobos. Trendoids. Fashionistas. But as Mr. Florida documents, the future vitality of urban centers depends on them.

I don't mind declaring my kinship with this tribe (not that I've ever made a secret of it), because its support for the American city supports difference, receptivity and other important values. And it seems that architecture and design still need to be defended. They make easy targets for reactionaries, including some who profess to be on the side of cities.

Two years ago I listened in fascinated horror as the head of a leading civic advocacy group confided his opposition to the beautiful hotel that Mr. Nouvel had designed for the Brooklyn waterfront. "It'll never happen," the gentleman said. Surprise: City Hall withdrew its support for this project shortly thereafter. A year ago, Rem Kool-

haas's design for Prada's SoHo store was much abused by those eager to flaunt their moral rectitude in the wake of 9/11.

It is unclear whether artists are architecture's best friends these days. The public's increasing curiosity about design has given rise to resentment in certain artistic quarters. A golden age for museum design has not been universally welcomed in the art world. Installation art, like that presented here, and large-scale outdoor sculpture proclaim a degree of architecture-envy.

More important, contemporary architecture has gone far toward displacing fine art as the seat of subjectivity. Artists no longer hold the franchise on eroticism, surrealism or aesthetic disorientation. Hotel designers have been instrumental in introducing such themes into social space. They have also helped to renew the cosmopolitan identity in the era of globalization.

We global nomads are resourceful. We get around. If we want to see art, we know how to get to Chelsea. For us, designers like Mr. Starck and Mr. Nouvel, and their clients, are urban heroes. For years, Mr. Schrager's hotels were the only public places in New York where you could observe the historical imagination at work in the field of design. The Cooper-Hewitt show might have explored this field's expanding global and aesthetic scope. If a design museum can't recognize its historical dimension, who can?