The Rise, Fall, & Resurrection of Wildwood's Doo Wop Motels

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In the eyes of some, it is as tacky as a plastic pink flamingo on a front lawn in a trailer park. To others, it is a fun, if idealized, throwback to a better time. However you view it, there is no doubt it is one of the Garden State’s somewhat underappreciated influences on the world of architecture. Known as Doo-Wop, it found a unique expression that came of age along with a generation of New Jerseyans in the motels of Wildwoods.

The Wildwoods

You wouldn’t know it to look at it today, but New Jersey’s Wildwoods were once, indeed, a tangle of wild woods. They sit on a six mile long barrier island near the southern tip of the state at Exit 4 on the Garden State Parkway. When one says “The Wildwoods,” they refer collectively to three separate municipalities: North Wildwood, Wildwood, and Wildwood Crest. They were founded by developers between 1880 and 1905, notably including Frederick Swope and his Five Mile Beach Improvement Company, Philip Pontius Baker and his Wildwood Beach Improvement Company, and John Burk with the Holly Beach Improvement Company. All saw the island’s potential in terms of the ideal summer resort, or “Cottage Colony.”

The small fishing village of Anglesea was the first to be founded in 1880, followed by Wildwood in 1890. In 1906, Anglesea was then repackaged as the island’s first specifically resort town and renamed North Wildwood. Wildwood Crest was founded in 1905 and Wildwood merged with Holly Beach in 1912 to form the City of Wildwood.

The name “Wildwood” was given to these communities by Philip Pontius Baker in honor of the dense twisted forest growth that covered the island at the time of its founding. An early real estate brochure even lists Wildwood Beach as “a veritable forest by the sea.”

The growth of the Wildwoods was slow at first, until the introduction of reliable railroad service in 1889. These trains brought visitors from the nearby urban areas of Philadelphia, Vineland, and Frankford, but also from
areas further afield such as Connecticut and New York City. Additional development was spurred on by the competition from Atlantic City, which inspired each town to build their own boardwalks. At first, the term “boardwalk” was more literal—wood planks set directly down onto the sand to permit visitors the ability to take walks on the beach without getting sand in their shoes. One advantage of this simple approach was that the boards could be taken up ahead of threatening storms or unusually high tides, as well as at the end of the tourist season. Wildwood’s first permanent, elevated structures—as we think of boardwalks today—were built by 1900, with the added attraction of amusement pavilions.

The beaches of Wildwood are in a constant state of accretion, meaning that over time they have gotten wider as more sand accumulates—and that the ocean becomes that much farther from the boardwalk. In response, the boardwalks were moved east in 1905, 1911, and 1921, with improvements added each time. But it was worth the effort, as both the boardwalks and amusement piers contributed to the resort’s popularity and the towns continued to grow through the 1920s.

Hotels

The other side of the tourism economy equation, of course, was providing appealing accommodations for visitors, and hotels began popping up along the length of the island. By 1897 the island had over twenty-two hotels, ranging in size from a few small rooms to large luxury hotels with sixty-five units. Hotels continued to grow in number and size through the turn of the century, and between the years 1903 and 1904, the number of hotel rooms available increased by 30% in Wildwood alone.

While seaside towns like Cape May catered to a wealthier class of patron, The Wildwoods’ hotels and boarding houses were aimed more at the middle and working classes, particularly from relatively nearby Philadelphia. They were lured by affordable rates and the offer of special deals.

With the Great Depression sapping disposable income for luxuries like vacations, The Wildwoods’ hotels saw their market drying up. Throughout the 1930s, however, they gamely fought back, introducing a variety of special events to drum up business. There were fishing contests, regattas,
boat races, baby parades, and an annual pet parade. The Miss America Beauty Pageant was even held in Wildwood in 1932 after it was halted in Atlantic City for being too “immoral.”

The Second World War brought more lean times. Fuel rationing limited the number of cars, busses, and trains bringing visitors to The Wildwoods. And those that did come faced not only food shortages, but restrictions on using binoculars or even cameras on the beach.

War’s end, however, at last unleashed Americans’ pent-up consumerism, combining disposable income with the simple desire to cut loose and have a good time. Wildwood’s publicity department began an aggressive campaign to promote their resorts to the families of the ‘Baby Boom’ generation. The years between the end of the war and the end of the Eisenhower Administration would prove to be the heyday of The Wildwoods, bringing record crowds and unequaled growth to the island.

This growth would come into town on four wheels. We always had a thing for the automobile, but the postwar economic boom turned it into a full-blown love affair. The emergence of American car culture was the catalyst for a major evolution in the concept of the hotel that would reshape Wildwood along with it.

**Motel**

The hotel could be considered more of a formal component of travel. They tended to be near railroad depots, often catering to businessmen on the road. Tipping a bellhop or a waiter was a custom that could be off-putting for the less-wealthy. Hotels tended to be fancy and even somewhat stuffy. They were almost an anathema to the free-spirited auto enthusiasts’ sense of independence derived from having their own wheels.

Recognizing this new market, gas stations and restaurants—places motorists naturally needed for refueling both man and machine—started adding “auto camps.” At first, these were fairly rudimentary—a spot to park and maybe a tent. The overhead was low, bringing extra money and increasing the trade for their primary businesses. After a few good years, and the pressure of competition, there was an impetus to improve and expand. Tents gave way to permanent cabins, providing more substantial protection from the elements for year-round auto camping service.

Start-up was attractively simple and inexpensive. With a little capital,
one could easily get into the auto camp business. There were even plans in business magazines to show how to construct a cabin—indeed, most owners built their own. As these camps became more permanent structures, they became known as “motels.” While it became widespread after World War II, the term motel actually dated back to 1925, as a portmanteau of “motorist” and “hotel.” The earliest motels, however, retained names such as cottages, courts, lodges, and apartments.

Whatever one called them, however, the advantages of the motel over the hotel were numerous, especially for families: easy access, free parking, no reservations required, no clerks to deal with, no tipping, and an informal, home-like ambience. And, for those of a more illicit nature, the motel’s privacy was the principle attraction. To attract families, many motels began to allow children below a certain age to stay free, offered playgrounds and recreation areas, washing machines, and electric irons.

While the early motels were primarily a group of individual bungalows; interconnected lines of rooms were employed as early as 1929. By the 1930s individual cabins were interconnected by roofs over the parking space to protect the vehicle of each cabin’s occupant. Later many of these garage spaces were walled-in to provide additional rooms.

Over time, however, owners realized that it was less expensive to build one long structure with individual rooms. By joining the rooms together, greater economies could be realized by the utilization of single, shared mechanical, water, and electrical systems. The design of a continuous row of rooms also made the upkeep of the motel and the surrounding landscape easier. Because of its efficiency, the single story linear building became a very popular design for motels and, because of its architectural simplicity, a second story addition was an easy way to double the number of rooms.

The motel had entered the American lexicon to stay.

**Wildwood’s Golden Age**

Although attendance records for the early 1950s placed The Wildwoods in third place behind Atlantic City and Asbury Park for New Jersey’s top destinations, the number of visitors to the Wildwoods increased nearly...
every season. Convenient access by automobiles was a major reason for the popularity of the Wildwoods during the period, bolstered by improved road systems and the unveiling of the Federal Interstate Highway Program in 1956. Perhaps the greatest boost to the resort, however, was the opening of the Garden State Parkway in 1955, which reached from the New York State border down to Cape May. Upon its completion it was estimated that the Garden State Parkway would bring an additional 349,000 automobiles to the Greater Wildwoods each season.

While many beaches worked to attract families, The Wildwoods embraced a more adult clientele. Wildwood’s amusement piers became surrounded by bars, nightclubs, and supper clubs, all featuring live entertainment, attracting big-name entertainers. By October 1955 a Newark newspaper was able to report that entertainment booking agents had begun to refer to Wildwood as “Little Las Vegas.” Indeed, by the end of the 1950s, the Wildwoods ranked second only to Las Vegas in both the quantity and quality of the entertainment it offered.

In addition to some of the Big Band era’s top acts, Wildwood saw many firsts of an emerging new music dubbed “Rock ‘n Roll.” “Rock Around the Clock” was first performed on Memorial Day weekend in 1954 at the HofBrau Hotel by Bill Haley & His Comets. The song’s status as one of the first—if not the first—rock and roll hit, has given rise to the city’s heady claim as “the birthplace of rock and roll.” During the summer of 1957 Dick Clark held record hops at the Starlight Ballroom and the first national broadcast of Dick Clark’s American Bandstand was aired live on ABC-TV from there on August 5, 1957. Chubby Checker’s dance sensation, “The Twist,” was introduced at the Rainbow Supper Club in July 1960, a month before he performed it on American Bandstand, and launched a national craze.

Between such a dynamic entertainment scene and the increasingly-easier access by automobile, it was only natural that The Wildwoods would prove to be a fertile place for a new twist on the motel concept to take root.

**Wildwood’s Motels**

The first motels in The Wildwoods started to pop up in the late 1940s. They were designed like apartment units—primarily two-story, rectangular
boxes with prominent balconies, lacking the amenities that would be seen later, such as swimming pools and on-site parking. The office for the motel was often located in the center, with the linear row of rooms around the outside.

E.H. Lightfoot, an architect with the *Tourist Court Journal*, recommended that “Regardless of where a court is erected it should be built of stucco with a sand finish using modern architecture with its attractive simplicity and simples lines and be painted pure white.” The builders of most early Wildwood motels stuck very close to this rule.

But all that would change in the late 1950s and early 1960s, as competition among motels become fiercer. Between 1956 and 1964, for example, over 200 motels were constructed on the island. And, they were largely the work of one architect, A.G. Ogden, who used the same small number of contractors. Motel owners found themselves with a building largely indistinguishable from the dozens of other motels in the neighborhood—all vying for the same customers. The pressure to set their businesses apart inspired some creative solutions in architectural decoration and signage. The basic motel structure became a canvas unto which were added angular elements, space-age imagery, tropical themes, and color schemes—all with spectacular neon signage—in an effort to get families to choose their motel on streets lined on both sides with choices. If all of the decoration was stripped away from many of the Wildwood motels, however, you would find nearly identical, simple concrete block structures.

As the owners of the motels often also ran the motel they needed a place to live and their living quarters became a fanciful feature of the motels. The *Flamingo Terrace Motel* is a classic example of how a motel changes over time. Obscured behind a tree, as seen in the postcard view in the top image on this page, used to be a Victorian-era home that had been used as a boarding house in the early 1900s. As motels became popular an additional building was constructed adjacent to the house; the family remained in the home and the first floor was converted into the motel office. In the 1960s a two-story wing and pool was added.
The first motel to actually call itself a “motel” was Jay’s Motel which opened in 1952. It was constructed by Will and Lou Morey, who together built a large number of the motels on the island and really helped to shape the post-Ogden architectural style of the Wildwoods. The Morey family often vacationed in Florida and brought back the styles they saw and applied them to their motels.

The motel’s arrival in Wildwood Crest was delayed by the sordid reputation motels had—and still do to some degree. The Crest was still largely a bedroom community and residents wanted to keep it that way. Municipal zoning laws forbade motel construction as a bulwark against what they saw as a haven for “unmarried couples and wayward teenagers.” It was only under pressure from business owners that the law was changed in 1954.

As the motel became a ubiquitous feature of The Wildwoods, they came to display a specific distinctive style.

Doo Wop

Where exactly the term “doo-wop” derives from is unclear. It is most-associated with the a cappella vocal styles popularized in the 1950s, where onomatopoeia is used to mimic instruments—“bom-bom-bom” as the bass, guitar rendered as “shang-a-lang,” and “dooooo-wop-wop” standing in for the brass riffs. It first appeared in print in the Chicago Defender newspaper in 1961, which indicated the term was already in use by fans of the then-current vocal harmony resurgence. Disc jockey Gus Gossert has also been credited, though he claimed it was already in use before him, attached to music coming out of California.

Regardless of where it came from, however, “doo-wop” would become a catch-all term for the pop culture fashions and styles of the 1950s as an era. By the 1990s, it began also being applied to the architectural styles of the era as well. It describes a category of what is now generally called mid-century modern that is brassy, bold, and boastful. But the term itself, when describing motels, covers a range of further stylistic subcategories.

Let’s take a look at some examples of each . . .

The Flamingos were among the acts to popularize the Doo Wop sound in the 1950s. http://www.uncamarvy.com/Flamingos/flamingos.html
Early Doo Wop describes mid-century architecture. These motels were forerunners of the full-blown “Doo Wop” Style. If you look closely, these two motels are nearly identical. Both are two-story, “L” Shaped motels. The **Sea Cove Motel** set its self apart using glass block and cast stone, also known as garden state ashlar, on its street side façade. It also used a very modern, very 1950s color scheme at the rooms.

Although constructed two years after Jay’s motel, the **Breezy Corner** is nearly identical to Jay’s, including the brick window sills, unsupported overhanging eaves and vertical florescent lights in between the windows. This motel is unusual in that, while it is “L” shaped, the entrances for one wing are along the street instead of opening into the center courtyard. As these motels were constructed prior to the wide-spread use of air conditioners, the doors and wood screen doors were louvered which would allow a refreshing breeze to flow through the room especially at night after the sun set, while still retaining privacy.
Modern or Blast Off!

This style of motel encompasses futuristic architecture interpretations inspired by the jet and atomic age. Think “The Jetsons.” Upon its completion in 1956, the Caribbean Motel was among the most imaginative structures to be built in the Wildwoods. During that era of post-World War II optimism, everyone had one eye on the future and the other on dreams of exotic vacation destinations. Just by looking at the motel you can tell that it is impossible not to have a good time at the Caribbean. The exterior sports ultra-modern architectural elements like a futuristic “levitating” ramp to nowhere, cantilevered glass walls, and staggered recessed “spaceship” lights along the roof and balcony trim. The theme was ramped up with “exotic” landscaping when the Caribbean imported the very first plastic palm trees to be “planted” in the Wildwoods. While being interviewed for a magazine article on Wildwood during my internship surveying these motels, the author asked me “how can you tell the real trees from the fake?” My response: “The real ones are dead.” Plastic palm trees have become the official tree of the Wildwoods and are officially known as *Palmus Plasticus Wildwoodii*.

Note the futuristic, unsupported circular ramp which leads from the horseshoe shaped pool to the sundeck upstairs. The lounge, off the game room, features angled glass walls that tilt in near the middle and then angle out towards the roofline.
The **Bel Air Motel**, constructed in 1957, remains a Doo Wop gem along Ocean Avenue. This motel is a derivation of the “L”-shaped motel in that the northern wing is angled to form a “7.”

The aerial image of the motel show an interesting architectural feature—the angled theme extends through three different motels on two adjoining blocks. Instead of being a design quirk thrown in by the architect, it is actually a remnant of the old street scape, which was set on the diagonal, following the coastline before the most recent street grid was laid.

Other modernistic characteristics include large glass windows, overhanging prow roof, and the design of the railings which look like electrical currents—also known as “hairpins.”
Many of the motels constructed in the 1950s were modeled after hotels seen in Florida, especially Miami Beach, which featured “Florida Styling” including stucco walls, jalousie or louvered windows and baths finished in ceramic tiles.

Upon its completion in 1968, the Satellite Motel was advertised as the “Motel of Tomorrow.” While the basic plan is similar to many on the island—a two and three story concrete block motel with a rectangular pool at the center—it is set apart by its boomerang roof and space age imagery.

The large section at the front housed the owners’ living quarters and a lounge which opened up to the sundeck.

The angled shape of the roof was repeated in the balcony railings and the individual rooms which sported triangular windows and wood siding applied at a 45 degree angle.
Vroom

Vroom style motels are defined by forward jutting and pointed architecture, featuring angled walls and balconies. The Ebb Tide is another Morey Brothers creation and was considered their most trend-setting motel. The most remarkable feature was the leaning walls, meant to suggest the ebb and flow of the ocean tides. The two story glass cube housing the office was added in 1958 and served as a combination lounge and TV room at a time when many people didn’t have televisions at home.

The stucco walls of the first floor leaned inward at about a 65-degree angle, while the walls of the second and third floors leaned outward. Like many of the fantastical architectural features found on motels of the Wildwoods, these angles were produced by “smoke and mirrors.” While the exterior of the building looks like concrete, they were actually wood framing layered over concrete block walls. The Morey Brother’s angled wall design was copied on several other motels found on the island including the Garden Manor and the Sea Winds Motel. Both of these motels are smaller, simpler versions of the Ebb Tide catering to small families and couples.

The Rio is another example of a motel showing movement through angled walls. While the walls of the Ebb Tide angled in and out, the walls of the Rio are staggered and turned on the diagonal. In addition to being visually interesting this feature provided every room with a beach view.

Over time multiple additions were added to the Rio. The first of these still used large angled-pane glass windows. Later additions were more economical and were built to bring in cash, not make an architectural statement.
Polynesian or Tiki

Tiki inspired architecture featured thatched roofs, tiki heads and torches. One of the most unusual motels in the Wildwoods was the **Casa Bahama**, completed in 1959. Contractor Mike Branca intended the motel to evoke images of the South Seas. The most striking architectural feature was a series of A-frame false fronts clad in wood shingles, intended to look like a row of 2-story native huts.

The Casa Bahama was one of the first of several Polynesian pop or Tiki Style motels to be built in the Wildwoods. The architectural style’s origins date back to 1934 when a small tiki bar was opened in Hollywood, which was quickly followed by other restaurants such as Trader Vics. The style really took off after the end of World War II when many GIs returned home from serving in the South Pacific. In Wildwood, the Polynesian theme became very popular for drawing in tourists.

In terms of theme follow-through, the **Tahiti** was one of the best. Although the basic plan of the motel is a two-story, “L”-shaped motel constructed of concrete block; faux beams, thatched roofs, notched rafters and large projecting gables decorated to
suggest Polynesian huts were added to give the full experience. At night the motel would come alive as the tiki torches surrounding the pool were lit bathing the motel in a golden light.

Billed as “A touch of Polynesia on the Jersey Shore,” the Kona-Kai Motel, completed in 1968, was one of three tiki themed motels built by the Morey Brothers. To the usual concrete block and pre-cast concrete units, the Morey’s added a two story lava-rock wall, tiki torches, tiki-heads and a small tropical garden to push the tiki theme to the extreme.

Another Morey Brothers motel, the Waikiki featured lava rocks and thatched roofs supported by bamboo poles.

In the mid-to late 1960s, a second round of intense motel construction occurred in Wildwood Crest. By this time, the accretion of sand on the beach had gotten to the point that the city was able to plot the land to the east, adding an entire block of new beach-front property and Ocean Avenue. Unfortunately, that meant that if your lot was situated along Atlantic Avenue, which had been beach front property, you were now a block away from the shore. This forced many motel owners to either move their signage from along Atlantic Avenue or add additional, more outrageous signage along Ocean Avenue. The Waikiki is an excellent example of the late 1960s motel construction that popped up east of Ocean Avenue. These motels were often four or five stories tall and linear. While the older motels could fit two or three buildings along the block, these new motels encompassed the entire block ensuring Ocean Avenue access and direct views to the beach.
Shore Thing

This theme includes architecture that evokes tropical, exotic, or nautical themes related to the beach. To fit into this category you really could take any style of motel and add beach words and a really neat sign. But some motels still made sure that they included modern details such as the Coral Sands, which in addition to angled rooms also had an angled roof.

Although not a motel, the Captains Table, a restaurant in Wildwood Crest, took the nautical theme to the extreme. The entire building, now demolished, was shaped like a boat with its lifted prow port cochere heading out to sea. Signage—complete with a large Fiberglas shark—complemented the interior nautical theme, with fishing nets, lobster traps, and glass floats.
Phony Colonee

These motels contained Colonial-themed architecture, featuring red brick facades, cupolas or turret crowned roofs. This category also included motels with an American Patriotic theme.

With its brick veneer, colonial revival columns, stars, and stripes signage and cupolas that serve no function, you can’t get more Phony Colonee than the Carriage Stop Motel. The details extended to the rooms which exhibited bay windows, paneled wood doors with faux iron straps, and fake gas lamps lining the pool.

China Town Revival

These are motels which consist of Asian-inspired architecture. They often incorporated pagodas, pavilions, thatched roofs, and Chinese script in the signage. The Singapore motel is a classic example of Chinatown Revival and was one of Wildwood’s most unique structures. If not already evident, this is another Morey built motel. Aladdin Color Inc. of Wildwood produced post cards for a large number of the motels on the island, including this stunning image. In addition to the pagoda temple which housed the office and temple suites, the motel had curved beams, a Zen garden, Asian inspired railings, and large windows at each room angled southeast to ensure a beach view for every visitor.

Unfortunately, the current Singapore is currently stylistically confused. The top image was taken back in 2004. The original Asian inspired, wood railings stressed horizontality which is a mainstay of Asian architecture. By 2006, the building was a brightly colored mish-mash of styles. The large ocean facing windows had been replaced by French doors, the horizontal wood railings replaced by vertical white metal railings and the Zen garden had been covered in concrete.
Far Out

This is often a catch-all category for all of the strongly themed and/or brightly colored architecture on the island, and can include styles of medieval, jungle safari, Grecian, Aztec—you name it. **The Lollipop Motel**, constructed in 1959 is an example where paint and signage turn on ordinary motel extraordinary. This building is a simple three story L-shaped pre-cast, concrete block motel. But the brightly painted doors and iconic signage make The Lollipop one of the many favorites on the island, often featured on promotional materials for the town.

**The Eden Rock** is named after the Morris Lapidus designed hotel in Miami. Although it in no way resembles the Miami hotel, the name alone is enough to make you want to stay there. The couple in the car in the postcard shown here certainly thought it was great!

The Eden Rock features some elements seen on other motels including the angled wood soffits which are decorated with staggered lights. It also boasts Wildwoods only true kidney-shaped pool.
Mixed

The Cape Cod motel is an example of how a theme does not need to be followed through completely to get into a certain category. You just need an awesome sign. Wildwood Crest has about ten versions of this same motel. The office is located in a cute Cape Cod house at the west end of the motel and the sign—on which the name in neon rotates around the base of the light house—is situated at the top. But other than that, it’s pretty plain. After this sign went up, the city of Wildwood Crest decided that the rotating sign was just too much and enacted a ban on rotating signs making this one of only two rotating signs on the island.

Motels can fall into multiple categories. While the signage for this motel is Phony Colonee, there are Vroom balconies. If you look closely you’ll see that the edge of the 2nd and third floor balconies angle in and out. Unfortunately, when they added the fourth floor, they went the more economical route with a straight edge balcony.

Signage

In the Wildwoods, you can’t have a good Doo Wop motel without a neon sign. The large number of motels on the island was able to keep multiple sign companies in business including the Allied Sign Company, Ace Sign Company, ABS Signs, and LANZA signs, all located in Wildwood. ABS signs designed many of the original neon signs and is still active in restoring them.

While each municipality has their own ordinance regarding size, brightness and movement, all allow neon in some form. In a town where most of the motels are equidistant from the beach, offer the same amenities and have nearly identical room plans and layouts, flashy signage is one quick way to draw customers to your motel, day or night.
Doo Wop Beyond the Motel

Doo Wop architecture was not limited to just motels. It could be seen as retail stores, restaurants and down on the boardwalk. **The Surfside Restaurant**, for example, was opened for business on July 4, 1963. It is nearly circular, with five angled walls encompassing the eating area. The walls are primarily large sheets of glass which project up into the prowed roof which tops each wall. The fantastic roof was exposed at the interior, freely displaying the steel beams and wood rafters that supported it.

Like the Satellite Motel next door, **Schumann’s Restaurant** (later named Hudson’s) was constructed by the Morey brothers and used the same boomerang roof found on the adjacent structure.

**The Nut Hut** is one of many stores on the boardwalk that utilize neon and fantastic signage to attract customers.
A 1969 survey showed that 100% of the 1 million visitors to the Jersey Shore over that July 4th weekend identified the ocean and beach as the main reason they came to The Wildwoods. That may seem like an obvious conclusion, but it illustrated an important point. As media coverage of ocean pollution and water contamination spread in the 1970s, it threatened the very core of what drove Wildwood’s economy.

It also didn’t help that by the mid-1960s, The Wildwoods had a reputation for rising crime rates, and a general rowdy behavior by the teens that began forming the main demographic of visitors. The resorts were plagued by robberies, assaults, fights, drunk and disorderly behavior, and even murders. The Memorial Day weekend of 1971 saw 105 arrests for underage drinking and illegal drug use. A local newspaper editor quipped that “the stockyards of Chicago have more class.”

The Wildwoods came of age with the robust postwar car culture, itself abetted by the highway systems and an abundance of fuel. So, when the gas embargo of 1973 hit, it hit the resorts especially hard. With filling the tank difficult and expensive, many families opted for cheaper vacations closer to home. And competition for even that diluted business was made all the keener by the opening of Six Flags Amusement Park and other venues.

The Wildwoods may have been known in the day as “Little Las Vegas,” but that title would be stolen by Atlantic City. With the legalization of gambling in 1976 came the construction of large, showy casinos there, capable of attracting the sorts of top-name entertainment Wildwood used to be known for.

The Wildwoods, in contrast, were left with second and third rate acts, disco, and the likes of David Cassidy.

An economic downturn in the 1980s further injured the resort business and by 1990 the City of Wildwood had an unemployment rate of 19%—the highest on the South Jersey Shore—and a per capita income that left 27% of the city’s permanent residents living below the poverty level. As a summer resort, the island never developed an industrial base and was dependent on a tourist economy that only lasted from May to September. Between the 1970s and the mid-1990s business in the Wildwoods remained slow.
Yet, it was this commercial inactivity that may have actually saved the architectural uniqueness of The Wildwoods—something known in the preservation world as “preservation by neglect.”

**The Resurrection**

Everything that’s old is new again, so the old saying goes. Retro fashions tend to skip a generation, and by the late 1990s, the grandkids of those for whom mid-century modern was current were rediscovering it all over again, including Doo Wop. Once more trendy, it also attracted renewed attention from the academic world as the latest addition to architectural history. In 1997, the Society for Commercial Archaeology, which is “devoted to the buildings, artifacts, structures, signs and symbols of the 20th century commercial landscape,” held their 20th anniversary and annual conference in the Wildwoods. The island was also host to several architecture, planning, and preservation studios from the University of Pennsylvania, Kent State University, and Yale.

Recognizing the unique role of The Wildwoods’ motels in establishing the iconic 1950s culture, the Doo Wop Preservation League was established in 1997. This is a not-for-profit organization created to “foster awareness, appreciation and education of the popular culture and imagery of the 1950s in an effort to promote preservation and the unique renovations of the over 200 circa 1950s buildings located in the Wildwoods.” Several national magazines have had cover articles on the architecture of the island, including *Preservation Magazine* and *Smithsonian*. *US News and World Report* called Wildwood “Must-see Americana,” while *USA Today* called a drive down Ocean Avenue “A drive through Beach Blanket Bingo Territory.”

In the summer of 2001, the Doo Wop Preservation League began working towards a Historic District and Multiple Property Designations for the National Register of Historic Places. The first motel to make it on the National Register was the Chateau Bleu located in North Wildwood. One of the most distinguishing features of this motel is the port cochere which consists of a curved canopy supported by angular pylons. The construction of this canopy is representative of a lot of Doo Wop architecture in that it is all fake. From the street, the port cochere looks like concrete, but upon closer inspection, it’s all wood construction covered in stucco.

Academic appreciation is all well and good, of course. But in terms of active preservation, it helps if there is a commercial hook. Wildwood has staked its economic development on the success of Doo Wop. The most recent Wildwood city plan is working to extend the visiting season by promoting the island’s unique architectural
resource and using the Doo Wop theme in other design elements for the city such as pedestrian boulevards, street lights and signage, especially at the entrance to the city. **The Starlux Motel**, owned by Jack Morey, the son of Will Morey, has helped to jump start the renewed interest in the Motels. The town has even put out a book of guidelines, entitled, “How to Doo Wop,” in an effort to assist business and motel owners in redesigning their signage, structures and even furnishings to fit into the theme of the town.

**The Future?**

In an effort to draw bigger shows and conferences to their new convention center, The Wildwoods are toying with the idea of rezoning to allow high rise “motels.” Instead of motels these new structures will actually be high rise hotels, which are the antithesis of the motel concept. While the designs for these buildings are quite unique and fantastical, they are completely out of scale to the older buildings on the island. The other issue is that the island is already heavily built up and something has to give in order to make room for these large buildings—namely, the older motels.

While the high rise hotels may never come to fruition, an even greater menace has threatened the motels of the Wildwoods. One of the most desirable features to have in a historic district is a “sense of place.” With its large number of mom-n-pop motels, no chain stores, and its beachside location, The Wildwoods definitely has a distinct sense of place. Unfortunately, modern innocuous condos, clad in vinyl siding, have popped up all over the island. Developers have jumped on the renewed popularity of the island and built large numbers of year-round residences. But these new condos could be anywhere. They are not in scale to the motels they surround. Consider the **Beach Colony Motel**. This small two-story motel has been surrounded by new condos that dwarf the little structure. One can almost viscerally feel that its days are numbered.

In order to make way for the new condos, an incredibly large number of motels have been lost to the wrecking ball. Between the years 2001 and 2006 almost a hundred motels had been demolished. Unfortunately, this
wholesale demolition has stalled the acceptance of the Wildwood Historic District Nomination, as the boundaries have had to be repeatedly re-drawn as the number of contributing buildings has been reduced.

In 2012, I resturned to Wildwood for the Society for Commercial Archaeology’s 35th annual conference. Much of what I saw was quite distressing. The island was over-built with condos, many of which had remained unsold. The site of a completely empty condo on a Thursday evening showed not a single car in the lot or light on in a window. These condos were intended to be year round residences, yet that’s obviously not the case. And, many motels were knocked down and then the recent economic downturn has left them as empty lots. A sign on an empty lot in North Wildwood still boasted “Coming in summer 2007” five years later.

These days, The Wildwoods are wrestling with an identity crisis. On the one hand are the motels, which, while old and small in scale, have given the place a unique character found nowhere else and a “sense of place” that can support a tourist economy if preserved. On the other is the relentless desire and need to make money. A huge “cookie cutter” hotel or condo offers a financial allure that’s often difficult for many to ignore, even if they strip away that uniqueness.

Historic preservation is the messy art of striking just the right balance between what both old and new has to offer to our communities. By continuing to work towards acceptance of the Historic District Nomination, The Wildwoods have an opportunity to reclaim some of its rich and colorful heritage and build on it for years to come.

About the Author

Stephanie M. Hoagland spent the summer of 2001 as an intern, living in an old boarding house filled with Irish kids working at the amusement piers, and surveying 300 Wildwood motels. Upon graduating from Columbia she accepted a job a Arch located in Metuchen, NJ, in order to write the Multiple Property and Historic District Nomination forms for the National Register of Historic Places. The first motel to make it on the National Register was the Chateau Bleu located in North Wildwood. Today, she works as an architectural historian and conservator for Jablonski Building Conservation in Manhattan, working on projects throughout the United States and Canada. But Wildwood still retains a special place, and she is willing to provide free assistance to any individual motel owner who would like to work towards being listed on the National Register of Historic Places. She can be contacted through GSL: info@gardenstatelegacy.com
A Note About the Pictures

Most of the vintage pictures of Wildwood’s motels in this article came from postcards in the author’s private collection. These were reproduced by Aladdin Color, Inc. of Lumberton, New Jersey:


A wide variety of vintage prints are also available from their other website:

http://www.retrostockpix.com/

Bibliography

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