Blenheim Hotel
Ohio Avenue and Boardwalk
Atlantic City
Atlantic County
New Jersey

HABS No. NJ-864

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

THE BLENHEIM HOTEL

Four years after the Marlborough was completed, the Children's Seashore Home property across Ohio Avenue came up for sale. Popular tales recount that the owners offered the land to Josiah White and, when he was not interested, suggested that an amusement company would be glad to take the property. At that point, of course, White reappraised the situation and bought the property. In fact, the Marlborough Annex Company acquired the land, and in the summer, William Price, working as Price and McLanahan, Architects, was asked to make the plans for a new building.

In the four years since the completion of the Marlborough, a number of significant events had occurred that shaped the new building. First,

was the success of the Marlborough, demonstrating that the public's appetite for luxury was not diminished, and forcing White to demand a mode of construction that would have minimum impact on his clientele. Second, in 1902, a portion of Atlantic City was destroyed by a fire that wrecked White's own Luray Hotel and many others east of Kentucky Avenue. The danger of fire had been a serious concern of the resort industry for half a century, with three memorable fires in nearby Cape May to serve as reminder to the public. It could be anticipated that the new hotel would be of fireproof construction. The choice between steel and the new technology of reinforced concrete was resolved for the Blenheim by the danger of a steel strike in the Fall of 1905, and by Price's experience with reinforced concrete in the Jacob Reed's Sons' store of 1903-04 in Philadelphia. There, Price had demonstrated the material's appropriateness for public buildings--instead of restricting it to industrial design--and had found it to be a relatively quiet mode of construction, certainly less noisy than the riveted steel of contemporary practice.

Finally, just as all important post-fire hotels were built of fireproof materials, so too all important post-Marlborough hotels took the course towards luxury, with larger guest chambers and private baths. Moreover, the obvious virtues and monumentality of a single building were also appreciated in a variety of new hotels, including the new Chalfonte Hotel of 1903 by Philadelphian Addison Hutton and the 1901 block of the Shelbourne Hotel by Rogers and MacFarlane of Detroit.

The first announcement of the Blenheim listed an eight story annex, to be built of "brick, stone, steel and terra cotta, and will be fireproof." It was noted that the length would roughly correspond to that of the Marlborough, and would contain more than 300 rooms. Concrete was later adopted. Presumably, too, it was that change to the concrete that caused Price to develop the extraordinary massing and detail that set this hotel off from all the other hotels of the Boardwalk, and made it one of the original creations of the early twentieth century American architecture.

Whether Price would have arrived at the enormously complex final form had the hotel been built of steel is questionable. Certainly the idea of an L- or T-shaped hotel with an enlarged head had its origin in the Marlborough, while the arms of the solarium and sundeck extending towards the boardwalk have roots in the neighboring Brighton Casino. On the other hand, the curving volume, parapeted upper walls and dome, and the extraordinary plasticity of the building suggest that the architect conceived of the nature of the concrete in a manner not unlike that of the contemporary critic C. Norberg Schultz who argues that the amorphous quality of the material creates a potential for a plastic architecture.

In two major articles, one in The Brickbuilder, the other in the American Architect, Price used the Blenheim as the basis for a discussion of the aesthetic potential of concrete and the means of its development. In both pieces, he took an essentially Ruskinian view, arguing from the nature of the material towards a perception of potential form, as well as decoration, The material, Price argued, was plastic, potentially sculptural, pourable and moldable and, above all, continuous. It was not laid up of numerous small peices, like a masonry wall, nor necessarily formed into long beams like steel. Instead, in the years before the importance of expansion joints was realized, it formed a monolith, one which Price thought important to express in a variety of ways. First, because columns were continuous with beams, the joint was expressed as a curve. Second, because the piers were continuous from level to level, Price argued that they should be articulated like a bony skeleton and be covered by a continuous skin. It was a farsighted approach, one that anticipated the aesthetic of much later concrete work.

Decoration was equally affected by the nature of the material. Price took his cues from the fact that concrete was trowel finished and required protection along its weathering edges. Those qualities led him to suggest that similarly formed and made materials like tile might be pressed into the concrete while it was still wet. Decorative patterns, especially geometric designs that reinforced the lines of construction,

were most successful. Similar principles guided Price's treatment of the exterior surfaces, which apart from their sculptural qualities, were handled in an unconventional, non-classical manner. In the front, relatively narrow expanses of wall are divided vertically by the expressed structural frame. Along the broad expanses of the side, bays in regular ranks give plasticity to the wall. Because Price believed that concrete was new and different enough to warrant a new solution, the usual massive projecting cornice of the turn of the century public buildings was replaced by tile capped parapets along the upper reaches of the front block. Countering the vertical bay groups, the side is given horizontal unity by a massive set of balconies, supported on brackets which mark the underlying concrete frame and reiterate the theme of structural representation.

By expressing the frame and using decorative patterns of tile to emphasize the panels and surfaces of the hotel, Price was able to develop a handsome and adaptable means of handling the new material. The hotel was of course more than merely a constructional question; it had to attract an enlarged clientele. This Price accomplished by stretching his Ruskinian interpretation to its limits. Delight was clearly as important as stability and usefulness, which Price suggested in terra cotta decoration as well as in the form of the hotel itself.

The celebration of the ocean that Price intended was initially represented by a group of terra cotta sculptures, the work of Philadelphian John Maene who regularly worked with the architect. Sea foam, sea weed, lobsters, shellfish and seahorses were imaginatively combined into large decorative panels embellishing the pylon-like chimney stacks that served the guest rooms at the front of the hotel. Dolphins, with heads down and criss-crossed tails wagging above, lean against terra cotta pier caps, and clusters of seahorses peer out from the upper reaches of the building. Together with the panels of Mercer tile, they created a polychromy reminiscent of the masters of the high Victorian design in England.

The form of the building was equally original, perhaps the most unusual facade of the entire Atlantic City Boardwalk. It is obvious that Price's point of departure was the L-shape of the earlier Marlborough. As in that design, the architect sought to enlarge the ocean end, but here, instead of making a short crossing bar, he developed an extraordinary architectural form. The long bar splits at the ocean end into two wings that spread out at 45° angles to the original axis. Crowning the intersection of the two short wings is a great concrete dome, supported on giant concrete ribs (unlike the later shell construction of the Traymore domes of 1914), while the flaring wings open onto roof terraces, wach terminated by a domically roffed tholos. The composition of circles generated from squares recalls the Marlborough fireplace and dining room.

In front of the spectacularly elaborated front block of the Blenheim, Price added a new element, whose impact on later Atlantic City hotels was as significant as that of the facade--the gracious solarium above boardwalk level shops. From its deck, the hotel guest could view the beach and the passing boardwalk scene, not as a participant, but as an exalted observer.

The solarium is worthy of note as well, for it is analogous in its form to the shape of the front block. Like the spreading wings of the hotel, it has curving arms that extend toward the Boardwalk. And it too had its own domed element, a copper-roofed ballroom nestled into the front of the hotel. The consistency of elements within the building from one phase to the next helps explain the impact of the hotel.

If contemporary critics were at a loss to explain the building, the architect was sure enough. This was a building that responded to the commercial forces then existing in the United States; it was a hymn to mercantilism, written with the verve and force of an advertising agent. In a 1909 issue of the publication of Price's Rose Valley Arts and Crafts colony journal, The Artsman, the architect commented:

> I built a hotel last year, and I know it hurts a little. I know there are architects that it hurts, and yet, they cannot help but admit, many of them at least, that it is an expression of the purpose for which it was built: that it is an expression of the gay and sumptuous life, as it was meant to be, of the people who go to Atlantic City.

And, he went on, its style is meant to be suggestive not of the past, but of Atlantic City in 1906. This was contemporary architecture, not art nouveau, but a direct representational and expressive design that was as imaginative as it was realistic, and proof that imagination need not be excluded by modern technics. It was that quality that attracted a contemporary writer, Jules Huneker, to comment:

> They have a hyphenated hotel on the beach. The architecture of one section is so extraordinary that I gasped when I saw it. I haven't the remotest notion of the architect's name, nor did I go into the hotel, fearing the usual perfection of modern appliances and all the rest of the useful things that are driving romance away from our age. It was the exterior that glued my feet to the Boardwalk. If Coleridge, in Kubla Khan, or Poe, in The Domain of Arnheim, had described such a fantastic structure we should have understood, for they were men of imagination. But in the chilly, aesthetic air of our country, where utility leads beauty by the nose, to see a man giving rein to his fancy as has the man who conceived this exotic pile, is delightfully refreshing. William Beckford, the author of Vathek, would have wished for nothing richer. The architecture might be Byzantine. It suggest St. Marco's at Venice, St. Sophia at Constantinople, or a Hindu palace, with its crouching dome, its operatic facade, and its two dominating monoliths with blunt tops. Built of concrete, the exterior decoration is a luxurious exfoliation in hues, turquoise and fawn. I did not venture near the building for fear some Atlantic City Flip would cry out: 'Wake up! You are at Winslow Junction!" If ever I go to the place again it will be to see this dream architecture, with its strange evocations of Asiatic color and music.

The aesthetic of the exterior is more fulfilled within. Exoticism of detail merges with originally conceived and structured spaces to create a memorable interior, which is revealed not directly and publicly, but rather indirectly and privately, as if to reserve splendors for the guests. Two secondary entrances approach the building on the ground floor level,

one from the Boardwalk, another from the side yard. Both proceeded to an octagonal stair whose volume breaks through the exterior massing to express itself. In turn, it ascended to the "sun gallery," and opened into the side of the great lobby.

The ground floor entrance threaded its way under the sun deck and ballroom, flanked by shops that opened onto the Boardwalk or onto the central entrance way. It led into a lower lobby, whose reinforced concrete columns and low ceiling are Egyptoid in their ability to focus and direct activity, either along the main axis of the hotel toward a cafe, or toward the lighted side, that led to the stair ascending to the lobby.

The other spaces of the ground floor were primarily utilitarian, an office, men's toilet and barber shop on the left and mechanical and staff facilities beyond. Only the cafe, which looked out toward the lawns between the two hotels, was intended to be used by the public. Its low spaces were given sculptural accents by decorative capitals, whose character is probably based on Chinese ornament.

Above, the entire exchange floor level is extraordinary. It begins at the ocean end with a broad plaza, on the shop roof, framed by the curving arms of the solarium which made the hotel's charm available year round. These spaces opened into a circular ballroom, roofed over by a flattened dome supported on a low drum pierced by small circular stained glass windows. In the two rear corners are pairs of brilliantly toned tile-covered fireplaces that recall the English Arts and Crafts Movement that interested Price.

Beyond, approached from the lower lobby by the octagonal stair, or from the central corridor of the hotel, is the main exchange lobby. Its form acknowledges the Y split of the head with the internal structural frame reflecting the arrangement of corridors and guest rooms above. The intersection of the three arms is treated as a square of columns which, like the Marlborough, is accented by a circle. Here the seafoam exterior decoration is cast up on the ceiling in a rich profusion which was origi-

nally embellished by a bulbous concrete protruberance lighted by tiny electric lights. In the rays of the centerpiece, which recalls Louis Sullivan's organically generated ornament, additional electric lights were interspersed in the foliage, glimmering like the natural phosphorescence of an autumn beach. On either side, in the arms of the Y are intimate living spaces centered on great fireplaces, above which are paintings of Norse Sea Gods. By dividing the space into central hall and side living rooms, comfortably furnished with Jacobean Revival arm chairs and sofas, Price was able to emphasize the intimate comforts of the hotel.

The exchange lobby is of further interest, for here as in the lower lobby, Price achieved the direct expression of the reinforced concrete frame instead of having it iced over with decorative plasterwork. The result is probably the first significant public space in the United States in which the reinforced concrete beams are clearly visible. Decoration, instead of concealing the structure is used to accent it, with flat, painted patterns ornamenting the bases of the columns, while just short of the top a halo of sea foam and sea weed recalls the traditional position of the capital; here it merely sets the stage for the junction of column and beam. As on the exterior, a short curved segment emphasizes the continuity of the structural elements.

Beyond the lobbies were additional public spaces that opened onto the central corridor. On either side are small parlors that served as reading and game rooms, as well as a library. The last was particularly engaging, for across its paneled surfaces were strewn seashells and other bits of the building's decorative theme, while frescoed panels emphasized its artistic character. The corridor was similarly embellished with plaster moldings framing rococo revival paintings that give the corridor the quality of a French mid-18th century court building. With the spectacular plaza, ballroom, lobby, and side parlors, the Blenheim rivaled the riches of the grand hotels of the cities -- while retaining the scale of a mansion. It is an extraordinary achievement, unequalled in its time.

At the rear, the T wing of the hotel contains dining facilities; a banquet hall on the left and the European plan dining room on the right. American plan dining and office spaces, which might seem to be noticeably lacking, are of course to be found in the Marlborough which was connected to the new hotel by two bridges, one in front for the use of guests, the other connecting the kitchen facilities in the rear. The public bridge is a continuation of the public spaces of the Blenheim Hotel, beginning as a sun gallery and gradually broadening in a gentle curve before joining the Marlborough. In that curved connection, Price repeated the curving arms of the solarium, producing another of the interelationships that unify the complex. A different column form, here square and more slender, denotes the use of steel, a material suggested also by the additive plaster brackets and flaring indirect light fixtures. Of note are the strongly stylized plaster flowers that served as pilaster caps; reminiscent again of Victorian design and suggestive of Price's view of commercial design in the context of the exuberant architecture of the post Civil War era.

The history of the bridge is worth noting for it is the only bridge to cross one of Atlantic City's stub end streets near the Boardwalk. This was accomplished by a bit of legislative legerdemain that saw a bill passed permitting bridges across the streets of the City and was then rescinded after structural girders had been placed across the street. No later hotels were able to take advantage of the law, and the Marlborough-Blenheim remained unique.

Above the exchange floor, the guest rooms rise as a relatively simple slab, with a Y-shaped head and, at the rear, a T wing. Here for the first time in Atlantic City every room except for a few on the inland side of the rear wing was given a bath, in the bedroom-bath-bath-bedroom rhythm that lines baths back to back and permits a simple plumbing system. This was Atlantic City's first completely modern hotel, fireproof and luxurious in every respect.

The treatment of the guest chambers is generally spartan, although gradually increasing size and generous bays assured that each room would be

comfortable. As in the lobbies, Price placed the columns and beams of the frame where they were logically needed, with the consequence that beams often cross room ceilings without apparent regard for the specific space. At other points, notably the ocean end of the corridor, the framing forms a square bay that parallels the shape of the space.

Apart from the general arrangement of the rooms and the interaction of frame and space, the suites of rooms on the front are noteworthy, both for their positioning, at the angle of the facade commanding two views of the ocean, as well as for the handsome fireplaces, served by the great pylon-like chimneys of the front.

One last space witin the hotel deserves to be mentioned, if only because it is so disappointing. The dome room is in fact only a mechanical access space that was never intended to be seen by the public. Perhaps this should be evident from the small windows and the absence of balconies. However, it seems a lost opportunity; one that the Traymore addition of 1906 took advantage of when its domed crown was used as a public reading room, opening through giant Serlian windows to balconies. Even more spectacular were the domed rooms of the 1914 addition to the Traymore where N. C. Wyeth painted the walls with scenes from Treasure Island for a never-to-be-forgotten children's playroom. Perhaps it was the result of the inelegant structural piers supporting the ribs that forced the architect to forgo the obvious pleasures of the room.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE BLENHEIM

The Blenheim has a significance in the evolution of the seashore hotel, in the application of reinforced concrete from both aesthetic and structural viewpoints, and in the development of the career of Philadelphia architect, William L. Price. The importance of that long-forgotten architect has only recently been re-established, but enough testimonials

exist from the pioneers of modern architecture to indicate his role. Three, from different positions, should suffice. It was Charles Whitaker, pupil of Louis Sullivan, and executive director of the American Institute of Architects, who argued that Price's buildings were directly in line with the progressive directions established by Sullivan Earlier, the English poineer of modern design, C.R. Ashbee, wrote in 1908:

> Rose Valley Price -- the architect -- is really fine; there is something prophetic about him. He has, like most of us who have studied the Arts and Crafts movement and feel the humanity underlying the movement, the conviction that if the movement is to find itself, it must speak in a voice of its own and not in the language of back numbers, the beaux arts, the "old colonial." He often reminds me of Lloyd Wright.

Finally, George Howe, architect of the PSFS Tower, an acknowledged masterpiece, wrote of Price with Wright and Sullivan as prophets without honor in their own land, whose work was better known in Europe than in America. Such endorsements faded, of course, in the harsh light of the International Style vision, but, as architects have moved away from this minimalist vision, Price's work is agian coming to be viewed with interest.

Initially, his work was studied in the context of structural innovation, which was free of the connotative interpretation of critical rhetoric. For Carl Condit, the Atlantic City hotels were significant for their size, height, speed of erection, and the length of spans in the Blenheim and the later Traymore. Peter Collins was equally impressed with the structurally rational scheme of design of the Blenheim:

> It was not the first reinforced concrete hotel ever to be constructed, since Hennebique had designed the Imperial Palace Hotel, Nice, in 1900, but in its time it was the largest reinforced concrete building in the world, being 560 feet long and 125 feet wide, and rising in one part to a height of 15 stories. Unlike so many of the California buildings in which mass concrete was used because it was the cheapest way of imitating intricate historical ornament,

> the Blenheim hotel was designed primarily as a reinforced concrete form on the Kahn system, and the decision to use a concrete facade was prompted by a desire to avoid what the architects termed 'sham coverings.'

The discussion of the concrete structure is elaborated by J. Fletcher Street, originally of Price's office, whose article, "The Hotel Blenheim, A New Type of Construction" (Brickbuilder, XVIV, 4 April 1906, pp 78-84) treats the subject at length. Particularly noteworthy is the emphasis on speed, made possible by using terra cotta block in conjunction with regularly spaced concrete girders and joists.

That last comment suggests another area of interest, for the Blenheim was the earliest important building in the United States to use a concrete skin over a concrete frame. The theoretical origins were in the Ruskinian base of Price's theory. The consequences are evident in the new aesthetic principles laid down by the architect in two articles; one entitled "The Possibilities of Concrete Construction from the Standpoint of Utility and Art" (American Architect and Building News, LXXXIX, 1579, 31 March 1906, pp 195-200), the other "The Decorative Treatment of Plaster Walls" (Brickbuilder, XX, 9 September 1911, pp 181-184). Both argue for realism and decorative use of analogous materials as a flexible system of using concrete. Price's achievement was reflected in the work of numerous imitators who applied his system as a regional architectural style of considerable force.

Finally, the building stands at the head of the line of grand seashore hotels at Atlantic City. Its position has been discussed above, but it should also be seen in the urban context, surrounded by other great buildings that are its descendents, in the use of the site, in the luxuries and facilities provided. With Price's later Traymore, the Blenheim made Park Place the center of the skyline and formed the most important early twentieth century architectural ensemble in New Jersey.

Boardwalk Facade

The most significant alterations have occurred as a result of moisture penetration of the original concrete skin and the failure of the design to include expansion joints, which caused cracking at various points along the facade. In recent years, the building has been coated with white sealants that considerably alter the original earthy tones of the exterior. In addition, the sealant has covered significant portions of the Mercer tile decoration, some of which may well be earlier layers of concrete repair. The covering of so much of the decoration has significantly altered the original polychromy that made the building such an impressive event on the Boardwalk, and in some instances the color scheme has been altered. The dome of the Blenheim was tiled in a zigzag pattern, which seems in early photogravure views to have been yellow and green. They have been coated with light blue green sealant, as have the small tholoi, again to the detriment of the original color scheme.

A NOTE ON HISTORY

As often happens when an architect is forgotten but his work has importance, others are given credit for major design elements. Thus, Stanford White (died 1906) was given credit for Price's Traymore Hotel of 1914, and Thomas A. Edison is credited with the origination of the reinforced concrete form. In fact, there is no evidence that Edison was involved with the building at all. Edward Gilbert, contractor, directly supervised the concrete construction, while the remainder of the job and the kitchens were handled by Thompson and Stiles. The design of the concrete was by an engineering firm, as was customary. In the case of the Jacob Reed's Sons' store, that work was designed by the Hennibique Construction Company; for the Blenheim, Albert Kahn's Trussed Concrete Steel Company (later Truscon) was in charge of the structural design, with Frank E. Hahn, later of Sauer and Hahn, handling

the Philadelphia office. However, the principal design decisions remained in Price's province, and the aesthetic dimensions were his. It was Price who gave the lecture to the American Concrete Institute and who developed the aesthetic approach that bore such wonderful fruit in the architecture of the 1920's.

Price's buildings continued to be published and exhibited throughout the next generation. Some, but by no means all of the references to the Blenheim are mentioned on the following page. A more complete bibliography is included in George E. Thomas, William L. Price: Builder of Men and of Buildings.

SOURCES

William L. Price archives, in collection of George E. Thomas, 3920 Pine Street, Philadelphia.

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For additional information see HABS No. NJ-863 MARLBOROUGH HOTEL.

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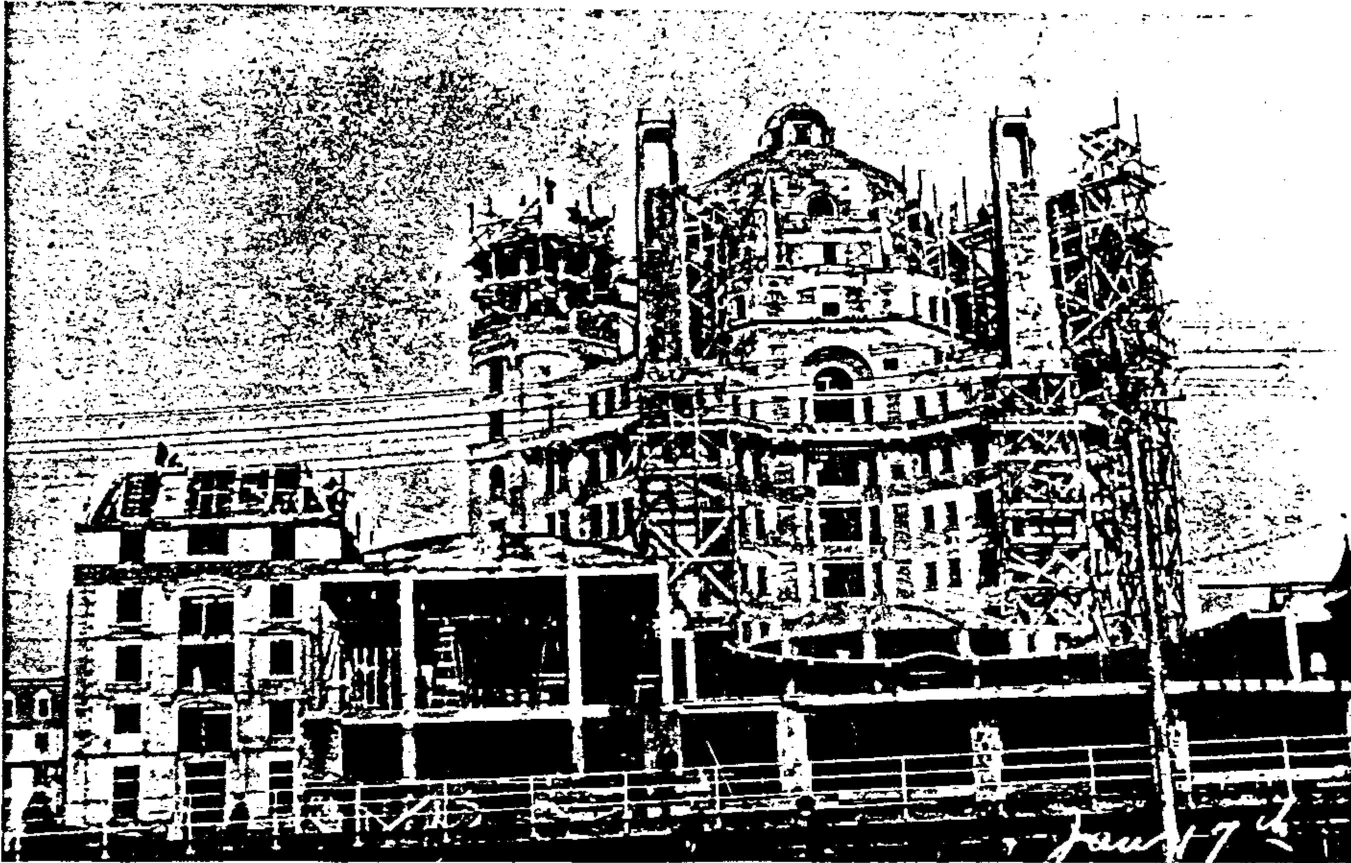
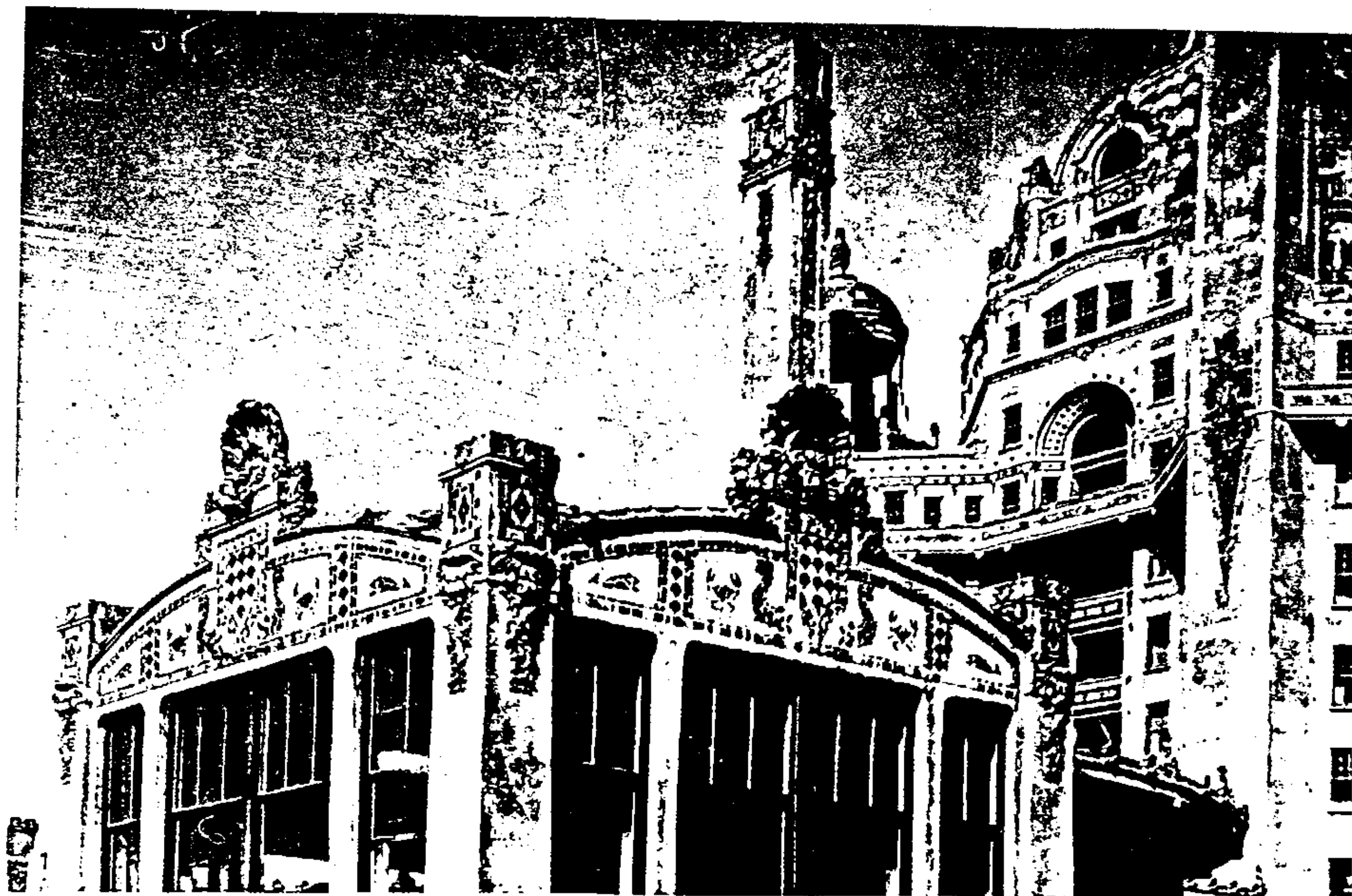
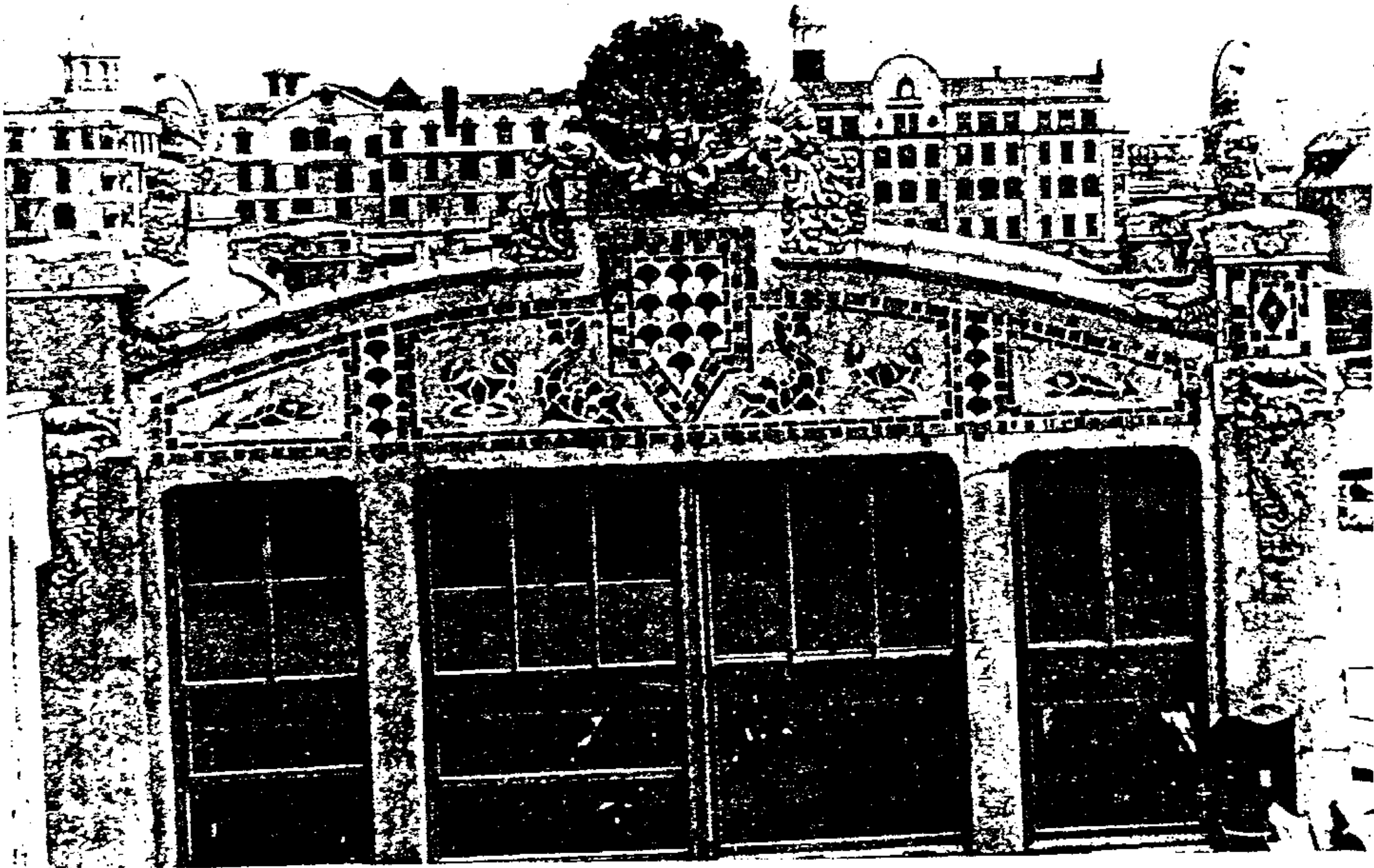


Hotel Blenheim, Atlantic City, (Construction photograph, Price archive, collection George E. Thomas: view of Blenheim and Dennis during construction, 17 January 1906).

Hotel Blenheim, Atlantic City. (Price archive, collection George E. Thomas: hotel at completion, 1906).



Hotel Blenheim, Atlantic City. (Price archive, collection George E. Thomas: view of facade showing tile and terra cotta decoration).



Hotel Blenheim, Atlantic City. (Price archive, collection George E. Thomas: solarium decoration).

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