Walt Disney World News

Disney’s BoardWalk Architecture Recalls a Golden Era of American Styles

LAKE BUENA VISTA, Fla. — Time was, families gathered at Atlantic beach towns to stroll the boardwalks in search of entertainment. That was just about a century ago, in the golden era of amusement parks, when Ferris wheels and carousels were set out on vast piers protruding into the Atlantic Ocean. It was a giddy, innocent era, a time when lively games of chance and penny arcades lured in youngsters and adults alike.

The offerings along the boardwalk were both honky-tonk and glamorous, and for anyone who went there, the memories were indelible.

For Disney’s BoardWalk, New York architect Robert A.M. Stern chose to conjure up a host of those seaside recollections and put them together in one place. Thus, this resort seems to be an urban seaside village that grew and changed over the first decades of the 20th century, as if no single hand crafted it.

“The theory behind Disney’s BoardWalk is that the Second World War marked a decisive change in American architecture,” says Stern, an authority on American architectural styles who is also the architect of the nearby Disney’s Yacht Club Resort and Disney’s Beach Club Resort and one of the master planners of Disney’s town, Celebration. “Disney’s BoardWalk is intended to look as if it evolved over time.”

Thus, though it has a specific idea behind it — to recall the pleasures of the old Atlantic beach towns — and a general time frame, Disney’s BoardWalk is not intended to express a single idea. Rather, its architecture — which draws on a host of late 19th and early 20th century sources from the Victorian to the Vienna Secessionist movement — is really about both nostalgia and imagination.

Most Disney hotels conjure up images of another time and place, the past compressed and simulated. They are stage sets, not reproductions, and Disney’s BoardWalk is no exception. Its architecture is cinematic and episodic — like a walk through a movie and its many sequels.

Disney’s BoardWalk is a colorful complex of buildings, with types of accommodations — the more intimate Disney’s BoardWalk Inn, with 372 rooms, and Disney’s BoardWalk Villas, featuring 681 Disney Vacation Club villas. There is an ice cream parlor, a piano bar (with dueling pianos), and a big dance hall (“very 1930s in inspiration,” says Stern). The swimming pool is a gesture to the elegant Luna Parks that were built in a number of cities in the earliest decades of the century.

Also, as an ode to the earliest American amusement parks, Disney’s BoardWalk is home to a number of artifacts of the era. There is an authentic miniature carousel designed in the 1920s by premier carousel craftsman M.C. Illions as well as a vintage scale model of the Flip Flap, the world’s first loop-the-loop roller coaster.

Disney’s BoardWalk completes an ode to America’s early Atlantic beach resorts by Disney and architect Stern.

The resort sits across Crescent Lake from the paired Disney’s Yacht Club Resort and Disney’s Beach Club Resort, completed in 1990. While those hotels also were inspired by the turn-of-the-century oceanside resort, they each allude to a different style and a different place. Disney’s Yacht Club Resort — a sedate and rather natty structure that would not be out of place in New England — is after the shingle style. The more casual Disney’s Beach Club Resort is what architectural historians term the stick style, the term for the sprawling wooden buildings built between the 1880s and the 1920s.

With the arrival of Disney’s BoardWalk, more tourist history is revived and reinvented — in a three-dimensional tribute to the beginnings of the last century.

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