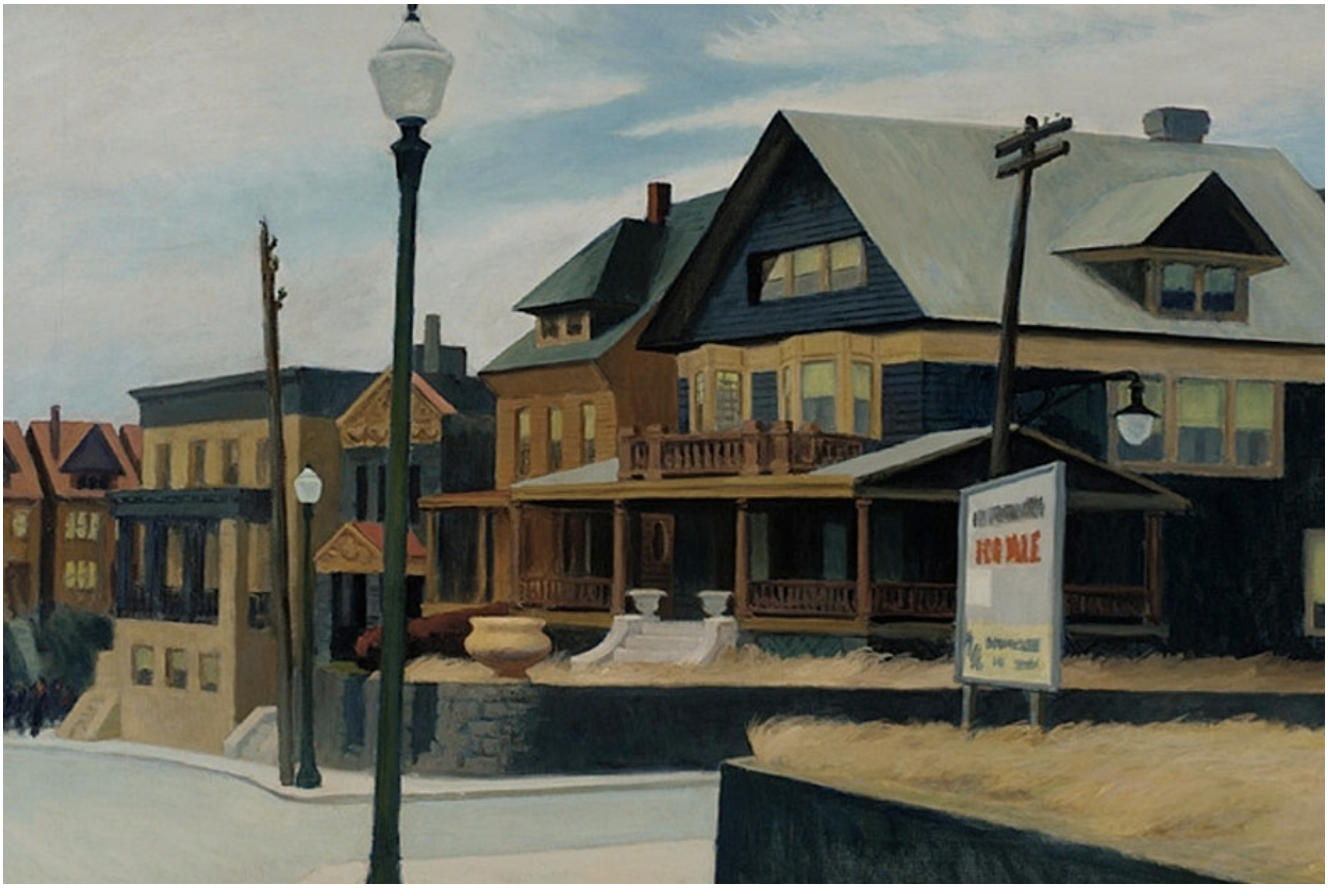
The Archaeology of Living Rooms

by Anthony Mazzone (April 2020)



East Wind Over Weehawken, Edward Hopper, 1934

In Atlantic City, anything that doesn't make a profit is left to rot. So the place is in ruins: the wind blows without stop through a strange peace that rests over the clumps of cement, the bricks from fallen chimneys that litter whole city blocks. Here and there is a surviving row house, as absurdly alone as a single tooth. Spray paint is tattooed right across doors and windows. Impinging the clear sky in the distance are

casinos: cupidity’s cheesy substitute for church steeples.

On this rancid lot, peppered with plastic bottles and lengths of wire, was the entire neighborhood of Lincoln Terrace. I remember a rooming house, eight homes, a garden and commons, yards and porches. My family lived here for over five decades. And now, as fast food wrappers blow around my ankles, I stand exactly where our living room used to be. How could a home that had sheltered so much life occupy so small a footprint? Is it even fifteen yards square? I feel as if I am an archaeologist in search of artifacts of my own past. If I were to dig straight down might I find my father’s rusty hammer? The wooden block pedals to my tricycle?

November 2, 1955, the day of All Souls. From my crib I hear my father weeping in the hallway.

> “Mommy, why is Daddy crying?”
>
> “Because Nonna died.”

My grandmother had years ago brought home a box turtle that lived on the ground floor, unrestricted in the house. On the night she died, the turtle had somehow disengaged the night light from an outlet in her room. We had not the heart to replace it.

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Every year fewer among the living remember the house that used to be here, its red brick façade and tiny porch, the walk-in closet smelling of mothballs under the stairs. And I am the only living human being who recalls the box turtle, who remembers the person who was my grandmother. All recollection of her: accent, eye color, clothing, the inclination of her head, will be wiped from earthly memory when my own consciousness is extinguished.

We are all as Manzoni, said, *gente di nessuno*, nobody's people. Our lives will not be noted except perhaps as a name next to a line on some curious descendant's genealogy table.

A few others wander with me through the ruins, sad shaken refugees of busted lives. We have no shade from the bright sun, for the climate here is relentlessly inhospitable to trees. The wind, too, is rough. Seagulls rode its currents for a thousand miles; it white-capped the sea, swifted ashore a few seconds ago and bullied the beaches, only to break upon Boardwalk Hall and lose its freshness to the sour odors of these empty lots.

This structure in front of me, four collapsing stories of clapboard and plaster, used to be Bordonaro's Rooming House. From Memorial Day to the end of the Miss America Pageant it was full of vacationing families. They always made some poor kid sit on the porch and play the accordion. Strains of "O Marie" floated up and down Mississippi Avenue.

I cross over the graves of other neighborhoods, make my way to Missouri Avenue. This shuttered taco stand, built of interior grade plywood and painted in primary colors is a cheerless thing. Few know that for decades this spot, where a taco stand is rotting into the pavement, was the cynosure of the entertainment world: Skinny D'Amato's glittering 500 Club.

I am six years old and Frankie and I find that the doors of the Club are open. We dash into the odor of smoke and stale beer to play Army Man. Diving onto the rug, jumping on bar stools, running across Skinny's stage, making machine gun noises. From behind the stage appears a curly haired midget. "Yo!" he barks. The infuriated midget chases us around an empty bar. He is scarcely taller than we are but has the strength of a man. Savagely clenching the back of our necks he opens the door to a back room. Men in tailored suits are playing cards around a table.

> "What should I do with them, boss?"
>
> "Take them to the bay and drown them," says a man with a cigar.
>
> "Beat them bloody," says a man wearing a fedora.

Grey suit says, "Nah just call the cops and have them thrown in jail."

I stop trembling immediately, knowing that this shyster would no more invite the cops into the vicinity than he would a wild

animal. The midget opens another door and shoves us roughly out into the shimmering sunlight.

I head toward the Boardwalk. I imagine that in the days of the Lenni Lenape the fresh ocean breeze had only to contend with seaweed and dead shellfish along the shore. No broken bottles, lengths of wire, fast food wrappers. Now, as Absecon Island returns to its pre-civilizational state of nature the sandy contours, the native scrubby vegetation is starting to reappear. I find it easy to imagine that for centuries along this shoreline there were smoky campfires roasting the catch of the day.

People have long migrated to the beach because the majesty of the ocean dwarfed their cares. “Ocian in view! O! joy!” Captain William Clark wrote in his diary. Xenophon’s hardened mercenaries rushed like excited boys to the top of Mount Theches shouting, “*Thaslssa, thalassa*, The Sea, the Sea!”

At the beginning of the twentieth century it was an easy train ride from the congestion of Philadelphia and Camden to the Atlantic Ocean. No work today: men got to loosen their ties and escort their women along the shallow water. This sockless recreation was sane and innocent. It soon lost place to concupiscence and the city that grew up to cater to it. Atlantic City became the Playground of the World, a concentrated arena where vice, being profitable, was aroused and, cupidity, being exploitable, was encouraged.

Boardwalk Hall remains a massive barrel-vaulted, superannuated temple to civic pride. Frankie and I easily elude the guards

and dash into the 1964 Democratic Convention. It is gross: all cigarette smoke, confused music, bad smells. Men are wearing hats and yelling. They are the same who on the Boardwalk the night before rode around in tiny cars and lunged at women. Far away on the stage beneath a red, white, and blue banner beams Lyndon Johnson. No prophet appeared to step in front of him, stop the proceedings, and proclaim "*Sic transit gloria mundi*!" The two of us grab campaign signs, cut off the cardboard and use the sticks as makeshift swords. Nobody cares enough to throw us out.

From the empty space where my living room used to be, from the empty places in my heart where loved ones used to be, I accede to Virgil's words: *Sunt lacrimae rerum*: there are "tears in the nature of things, hearts touched by human transience." No happiness on earth is lasting; ash eventually settles over all human endeavors. Life, even in its vigor and optimism, is full of thorns in the flesh and vexations to the spirit. In Atlantic City, where the song says that life is supposed to be peaches and cream, I can't ignore this reality. But if intellectual recognition were everything I would be reduced to simply enduring life as did the dreary Stoics, or to seeking balance and ease in all things, as did the drearier Epicureans. All this I viscerally reject. I walk down the empty Boardwalk, seagulls calling and wheeling about as I pass Chicken Bone Beach, to Arkansas Avenue.

I sold papers here, lined neatly in piles right on the boards. Trusty rocks kept the Baltimore News-American, the New York Post, the Montreal *Matin*, the Telegraph racing paper from blowing away. On the evening of June 22, 1969 I shout: "Judy Garland dead, Judy Garland dead," Papers folded under my left arm, I hand out one Philadelphia Evening Bulletin after another. Excited buyers put money in my hand, not waiting for

change. Right across the Boardwalk is the entrance to Million Dollar Pier. All night long, repeated alternately with my "Judy Garland Dead," is the barker's responsorial: "See a beautiful young girl turn into an ugly gorilla right before your eyes." Sure it was done with mirrors—"Judy Garland dead! Judy Garland dead!"—but I wonder why anyone would want to see such a thing, rather than its opposite. I am closing up after midnight. The Boardwalk is empty and fog is rolling in. A dark long-haired girl passes by on the way home. She is a gypsy and we always talk. She wants nothing more than to be married and escape the gorilla booth.

The only enduring attraction of this city is the consolatory ocean. "Yes, as everyone knows," writes Melville, "meditation and water are wedded forever." And so I leave the paper stand and walk down the ramp onto the bright sand, the waves, the seagulls, the wind vehement in my ears.

The stink of the city cannot penetrate this close to the sea. In July of 1974 I sit on these jumbled rocks reading, for some reason, "A Child's Christmas in Wales." As the tide hisses away it uncovers a poem painted on the basaltic surface of an upright rock. Lettered in careful Bembo Italic:

> To Lea:
>
> Once,
>
> When you to me were new
>
> The story that I told was old
>
> That tale as yet has not grown cold

Nor will it fade nor less love hold

Hence

When to yourself you're new

You may find true the tale I told

That truth itself grows hot and cold

Not of itself, but through its hold.

Let me turn away from the sea now, go back to Mississippi Avenue, and walk heavily past the ghost of Lincoln Terrace toward the bay. Ah, wasn't this Sindoni's Hotel? Yes, here it was fronted by a straight brick wall. I take some yellow chalk and draw a strike box on the wall. Frankie stands in front of it with his bat and my pitcher's mound is across the street. Two bums come and sit down on the curb. For hours they call balls and strikes. Then with the nickels in our pocket we buy two Cokes, one for us and another for the men to share.

Now a chain link fence marks the line of the wall. On the fence is a sign: "Owned by the Casino Redevelopment Authority. Good things are coming to AC!"

The neighborhood of Lincoln Terrace was solidly built, the houses made of brick and cinder block. Now there is gravel and broken stones that work their way into your shoes. Million Dollar Pier is gone; the 500 Club, Bordonaro's Rooming House, the Sindoni Hotel have all been obliterated. I know there will come a day when Boardwalk Hall is but a shapeless pile of masonry. Mariners floating offshore will gaze westward,

pointing their fingers to the place where it's said a city used to be.

Is there anything here, indeed anything on earth that will last forever? Only human souls. Every person who ever lived in these neighborhoods, each one who roomed at Bordonaro's, who drank at the 500 Club, walked on the Boardwalk, still exists and will exist for eternity.

St. Michael's *Scuola Parrochiale* is now a drug treatment center. It's the winter of 1961, in the classroom behind that second floor window, Sister Valentine asks: "Whoever answers this question gets a gold star: Where and when did the most important event in the history of man take place?"

Somehow I knew: "At Bethlehem, in Palestine, over 1900 years ago."

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- **For Tomorrow We Die**
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Atlantic City, you have always constellated yourself around gambling, prostitution, alcohol, drugs, and crime. That is to say, you have always dealt yourself a losing hand. We men, too, constantly play the angles, calculate the odds for immediate worldly profit but never learn that in the end the House always wins.

Our intellects see the forms and properties of things while their essences dance just beyond our reckoning. We guess at causes, and despite bitter experience, stay blithely unaware of consequences. That's why—as I open the door to my car— I can't draw deep meanings from this walk of mine. I offer rather simple confirmations: greed and envy can only make man unhappy. Sunshine, cleanliness, the ocean breeze are the best remedies for bitterness. Nothing earthly lasts. All human beings die because it is best that way. Souls last forever.

Now as I drive to the Expressway, passing the weedy marsh that was once the apartments of Pitney Village, one thought stays in my mind, one idea I know is true: the last thing Atlantic City needs is more economic investment, government grants, Asian card games, or improved infrastructure.

It needs, as did Goethe on his deathbed: "More light."

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