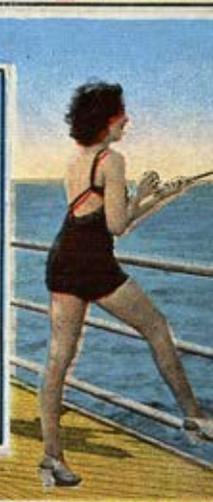




BOARDWALK PLAYGROUND

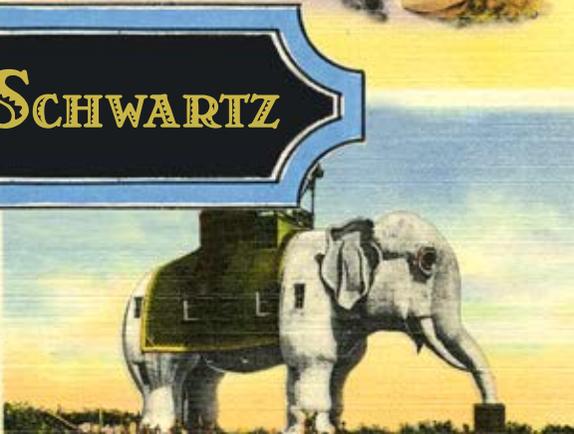
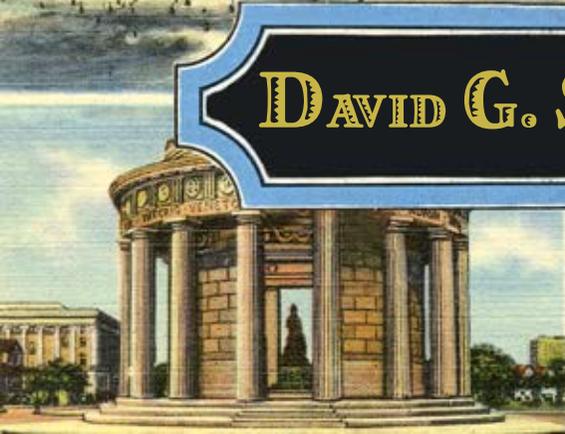
THE MAKING, UNMAKING, &
REMAKING OF ATLANTIC CITY



How the people of a New Jersey resort
built a seaside paradise, lost it, rebuilt a
casino town, mostly lost it, and kept on dreaming



DAVID G. SCHWARTZ





Boardwalk Bunny

Even before casino gaming was legalized, Playboy had its eye on a New Jersey casino. All the way back in 1972, when legalized gambling ideas were first floated, company officials expressed interest in a casino at its existing club in McAfee, Sussex County. Since the company ran four casinos in Britain, it was thought that the company would be a natural in the American gambling arena.

After the 1976 referendum allowing casinos in Atlantic City, Playboy shifted gears. In the following year, Playboy Clubs International president Victor Lownes testified at a public hearing that his company was prepared to spend \$32 million on a casino project, which seemed at the time like a great deal of money. He further urged that the “English system” be adopted—casinos would be limited to 16 hours and barred from offering players drinks at tables. Casinos would be forbidden from offering live entertainment, and credit would be tightly restricted.

Luckily, Lownes didn’t carry the day—Atlantic City’s casino laws, though stricter than those of Nevada, were decidedly more liberal than Britain’s. But his attitude foreshadowed future problems the Playboy casino would have.

The casino ran into obstacles before it was off the drawing board. The Federal Aviation Administration blocked Playboy from building a 33-story hotel tower on its Convention Hall-adjacent plot, claiming it would impede air traffic at Bader Field. In response, the building’s height was reduced to 22 stories. Las Vegas architect Martin Stern, Jr., who built the Las Vegas Hilton and MGM Grand, designed a green glass tower with a three-level casino and a Playboy Key Club, among other amenities.

As work progressed on the casino, Playboy Enterprises' fiscal health slipped. With its clubs and hotels not performing up to par, the company was counting on a tremendous boost from its Atlantic City casino. But to get the financing needed to build the now \$135 million casino, it accepted the Elsinore corporation as a partner.

The Playboy was issued a temporary permit on April 4, 1981, with the proviso that several Playboy International executives remain out of operations. At the time, Playboy's London casino was at the center of a Scotland Yard investigation.

The casino officially opened on April 14, following four days of play money gambling. Though the casino showed a profit over the summer, a cloud hung over Playboy's prospects for a permanent license. The company was forced to sell its British casinos, and Casino Control Commission officials questioned both Playboy and Elsinore's "suitability" for licensing.

In the end, the CCC issued a license to Elsinore but denied one to Playboy. Playboy then agreed to sell its share in the casino to Elsinore, who re-named the resort the Atlantis—a poor choice, when one thinks about the original fate of the Lost Continent. By the summer of 1984, Playboy Bunnies were out, the giant bunny logo on the crest of the building replaced by a seashell. The age of Atlantis had begun.

Almost from the start, the casino took on water. Among the reasons cited for the property's difficulties was its three-floor casino design; although other properties, like Caesars Atlantic City, were able to make multi-level gaming floors work, Atlantis was simply on too cramped a space to run well. Absent the Playboy mystique, there was little to set the property apart. In November 1985, it filed for bankruptcy, and continued to struggle for nearly five more years.

Atlantis finally sank when, in the spring of 1989, Donald Trump bought the casino for a mere \$63 million. As gaming regulations limited any one operator to three casinos, Trump closed the casino and operated the property as the hotel-only Trump Regency, using it to house overflow from the adjoining (on the other side of Boardwalk Hall) Trump Plaza. The two properties were connected by a walkway that passed through an upper level of Boardwalk Hall.

In May 1996, after a regulatory change allowed him to own four casinos, Trump reopened the property as Trump's World Fair at Trump Plaza, with the Plaza's management team running both properties.

But this world's fair was no cash cow; three years later, Trump closed the casino and hotel, citing its failure to turn a profit, and demolished it, promising to build a newer, more fantastic resort in its place, using both the World's Fair land and Boardwalk Hall's west hall. He would spend \$750 million to build something that would compete with the coming wave of super-properties; Steve Wynn had announced plans to build a Las Vegas-quality mega-resort in the Marina District, and this would be The Donald's response.

"A fitting tribute to the millennium," he called the planned development, and, in the end, he was right: a vacant lot replaced what had once been a working casino hotel. Already burdened with over \$1 billion in debt, Trump did not secure financing to realize his ambitions; in any event, Steve Wynn, partially because of Trump's spirited opposition to his request for the Brigantine connector project, did not return to town anyway.

Trump's plans for the site—which he eventually revealed to be a 62-story, 4,600-room hotel casino—perhaps came to naught because of the bad fortunes of his other Atlantic City casinos. When, in 2005, Trump Hotels and Casino Resorts entered bankruptcy, he agreed to auction the site to satisfy THCR creditors. Trump didn't want to let the land go, however; he paced a \$25 million bid for it.

This, however, was one deal Trump couldn't perfect. He was outbid for the site by builder Bruce Toll, who paid \$25.15 million for it. Toll, whose father had owned the Howard Johnson's that eventually became Caesars Atlantic City, initially planned to build condominiums on the site but in 2011, he paid \$5.5 million to lift a deed restriction that had barred the site from use as a casino hotel, fueling speculation that he would build a gaming property there. As of 2015, he had repositioned the property for a more modest use: a retail shopping complex that was well under construction by the summer.

Whatever the parcel's eventual use, the original casino occupant, the Playboy, is its own indelible chapter of Atlantic City history.