



# PRESERVING THE WILDWOODS

*Preserving the Architecture, History, and Culture of the Wildwoods*

A Newsletter of Preserving the Wildwoods: A Community Alliance

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*Karen and Mary Lou at the outreach table. Photo Courtesy Cathy Smith.*

Keep an eye out this summer for our new outreach table popping up at various events in the area. We kicked off the season at the Cape May County Zoo's Earth day festival and our next event will be June 18 at the Create in the Crest Arts Festival from 10 am to 2 pm at Centennial Park in Wildwood Crest. Stop by the table to meet some of our members, ask us questions, and grab some free swag. Follow our Facebook page to stay updated where our outreach table will be at next: <https://www.facebook.com/preservingthewildwoods>.

## Letter from the President

*Pary Tell, PTW President*

I am writing in response to the article that appeared in the May 18th issue of The Herald regarding development in Wildwood.

Wildwood has a history that is over a century old. Its story can be observed in the different styles of architecture that are still present on the island. Mid-century modern architecture, commonly referred to as Doo Wop, is only one small part of the Wildwood story, although an important part. Wildwood has, or did have, one of the largest collections of that style in the country, a legacy to be proud of.

In November, 2021, Stephanie Hoagland, an Architectural Conservator, in a program for Preservation New Jersey, stated that in 2001, the "Wildwoods were finally experiencing a resurgence of popularity. Wildwood's Doo Wop architecture had attracted academic and media attention. With a large number of "Mom and Pop" motels, no chain stores, and its beachside location, the Wildwoods

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## The Housing Dilemma in Wildwood

*Michael Hirsch, PTW Board Member*

Since 1999, my design career has centered on resort architecture and planning. Two projects: a ski resort in Breckenridge, Colorado and a golf club in Southampton, New York were planned to have employee housing. Finding affordable housing for seasonal employees is difficult, often because of limited land and increasing demands for second homes in resort towns.

My family has vacationed in Wildwood, New Jersey for thirty-five years, and has owned property for the past thirty. I became a passionate volunteer to a local community organization because of my interest in historic preservation. In 2003 I was nominated to the advisory board of the Doo Wop Preservation League.

In this role I feel compelled to advise my adopted community about planning needs because of the resort knowledge I have gained over the years. I find it interesting how different, and sometimes how similar the resort planning for Vail, Colorado a winter-only destination is to Wildwood, New Jersey a summer-only destination and the desire in both communities to extend their tourist season. Vail has done this by introducing golf.

The Morey Organization is recognized as the largest employer in town with 1500 summer employees; they import approximately 800 from overseas. The Morey Organization has taken on housing some of their own employees based on need, they house or place approximately 200. Wildwood, NJ is an island community, and increasingly the only new residential development that occurs is luxury condominiums. (Median value for a single-family owner-occupied home in 2000 was \$128,600. (U.S. Census 08260 Fact Sheet 2000) Median value for a single-family home in Wildwood in November 2005 was \$336,356 (Cape May County Herald 11/4/05), a 161% increase.)

It has become harder for this organization to house the seasonal workers and has proposed building a dormitory for 480 on an existing, underused amusement pier that they own.

I met with Denise Beckson, Director of Operations / Human Resources in October 2005. She said that the employee recruitment competes with Cedar Point in Sandusky, Ohio and Six Flags Great Adventure in Jackson, New Jersey for foreign workers. The other amusement parks have considerably lower housing costs.

What I propose is to identify the need for affordable housing for seasonal workers in Wildwood for a healthy

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## Letter from the President

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had a distinct “sense of place” and an authentic identity.” In short order, however, over 100 of the 300 mid-century modern motels that were sparking the revival were torn down to make way for condos and new motels. Many more have disappeared since then. Now we’re experiencing a new wave of development that’s reminiscent of that which negatively affected Wildwood’s rebirth in the past.

In the most recent issue of “Preservation,” published by the National Trust for Historic Preservation, a feature article highlighted the renaissance of West Chester, Pennsylvania. Thanks to efforts by the local government and business owners, the downtown is now thriving, with restaurants, eclectic retail stores and a brewery. No buildings were destroyed. No new, modern, architecture was incorporated. The main street retained its historic charm, with old buildings updated and restored. We have only to look at Cape May to see how successful embracing a town’s past can be to economic development. In the late 1970’s, Cape May had little to attract visitors. Then it embraced its Victorian heritage to become a year round resort, pumping millions into the local economy. Even more similar to Wildwood is Asbury Park. A few years ago, Asbury Park had become an impoverished town with a rising violent crime rate. Today, by embracing its musical and entertainment roots, it’s coming back and tourists are returning to enjoy restaurants, the boardwalk hall and night clubs with good music.

Wildwood needs to embrace its reputation as a resort town, with good food, a great boardwalk and beach, and a celebrated nightlife. It needs to get back to its “distinct sense of place and authentic identity,” with shops, restaurants and night clubs with entertainment that caters to locals as well as visitors. We only have to look at the success of 60’s weekends, cover band concerts in the summer and classic car shows to see that there is definitely a demand for a nostalgic link to Wildwood’s past. Mid-century modern architecture, and the music of that era, are increasingly popular with younger generations. Mayor Byron was right when he said we shouldn’t abandon the past. That means saving those buildings that have a meaningful connection to Wildwood’s history. And it means saving the culture that led to Wildwood’s popularity in the past, its sense of place and identity. Development and preservation can peacefully

coexist if developers and preservationists treat each other with respect and a willingness to compromise.

The residents of Wildwood should have the town they want, not one imposed on them by others.

## The Housing Dilemma in Wildwood

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tourist economy; how the existing rooming houses are being priced out by the second-home condominium market, and why housing workers off-island is not economically feasible. I will investigate what zoning changes would be needed to build temporary housing on the amusement pier, and research if there are any precedents and recommend two other locations in the city.

The City of Wildwood Master Plan Reexamination (2002) identified an increase of 32.6% in the number of seasonal housing units and states, “Wildwood is increasingly becoming renter-occupied...” It also recommends addressing land development patterns which often juxtapose incompatible land uses. The owner-occupied housing increased 4%, while renter-occupied housing increased 44%. This reexamination states that one measure of community stability is the ratio of homeowners to renters. (A 70%:30% owner: renter ratio is considered healthy). Wildwood’s 60:40 is trending toward instability. (Remington 2002,9).

Perhaps the growth in seasonal housing is a necessary aspect of a tourist-based seasonal economy? There is a contradiction between the needs that the Master Plan identifies, and what employers in the Wildwoods need.

*Michael Lorin Hirsch has been volunteering for the Doo Wop Preservation League since 2001. He holds a Master of Science in City Planning from Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, New York and is the author of the 2003 book “How to Doo Wop: Wildwoods-by-the-Sea Handbook of Design Guidelines”. We are featuring excerpts from his award-winning graduate thesis “Affordable Housing for Seasonal Workers in Wildwood, NJ” which he prepared in consultation with The Morey Organization. Although it was written in the early 2000s, we believe the loss of affordable housing for seasonal workers and permanent residents in the Wildwoods has only grown worse over the last few decades.*

## New Book About Wildwoods Motels

*Preserving the Wildwoods Editorial Board*

We’re excited to announce the release of a new book titled *Motels of Wildwood; Postwar to Present*. The book tells the story of the incredible concentration of mid-century modern motels of Wildwood, New Jersey, from their

origin in the Doo Wop decade of Elvis Presley to their whereabouts today. Not many people know that it was local contractors, not architects, who created this trove of asymmetrical, neon-encrusted motels with swooping rooflines and pink pylons, meant to attract vacationing fami-

lies. This book chronicles their architectural significance and preserves memories of what many of these cheerful, flamboyant buildings looked like before they were demolished by developers, depriving motel neighborhoods of the chance to become landmarked historic districts. In addition to over 200 photos, many never before published, maps pinpoint the location of the motels, some long gone and others stops on today’s architecture tours.

The book was written by Jackson Betz who is a long-time aficionado of the mid-century modern architecture of the Wildwoods, studied the Wildwoods as an architecture student at the University of Pennsylvania, and is also a member of our organization.

You can purchase the book directly from the publisher here: <https://tinyurl.com/2p8bbxm3>





## Historic Gingerbread Gets a New Home

*Preserving the Wildwoods Editorial Board*

In December of 2021 we ran a contest to raffle off historic gingerbread donated from a Wildwood home slated for renovation. We received many great submissions and in February we picked our winner. A family with an early 1900s home in North Wildwood was the recipient and they also made a generous donation to our organization. The family is planning to use the gingerbread as part of a renovation they are working on for their home and once everything is all finished, we'll update with photos of the completed work.

Reusing existing construction materials such as gingerbread rather than throwing them into the dumpster is an idea that is starting to see adoption by forward-looking cities such as San Antonio, Pittsburgh, Boise, and Portland. This alternative to demolition is called "deconstruction" and it gives the benefit of not only reducing waste, but also keeping a connection to the past even if the building can't be saved. Rather than a smashed pile of old growth wood, plaster, brick, and glass tossed in a landfill, a deconstructed building is carefully dismantled and then the materials are then sold and reused in the local new construction.



*Wildwood gingerbread all loaded up for transport to its new home. Courtesy Dennis Pierce*

## 5 Over 1 Construction

*Charles Rollins*

If you've done any traveling across the country in the last few years, you may have noticed that our once unique cities are drifting towards conformity with a new style of building called "5 over 1". 5 over 1 or a podium building is five floors of wood framed construction over a concrete base. This style of building is now the cheapest way to build apartments/condos in the US and some projects in the Wildwoods are employing a style similar to 5 over 1.

How did this style of building become so prevalent throughout the country? Some causes are tighter building codes, stricter zoning laws, loss of locally produced materials, and the replacement of skilled trades with off-the-shelf products. All of these factors combine to create a climate where developers need to rely on pre-existing templates for success rather than having the freedom to try creative and new ideas.

Gilliam McDaniel, a mechanical engineer writes on

the site n4rd.org: "Use of standard building materials and processes creates a recognizable aesthetic that is often wildly unpopular. Many describe it as bland, devoid of architectural detail, and an eyesore in cities known for ornate and historic building styles. These concerns are not unfounded - the blocky and homogenous structures can be a jarring visual contrast to the established cityscape."

There's a debate to be had around the amount of building codes property owners need to follow or how strict zoning should be (or even if zoning should exist at all!). Maybe if these new generic buildings helped provide more affordable housing then it would be worth it in the long run to go with 5 over 1 buildings? The problem is that these buildings are sold at luxury price points so even with sacrificing the beauty and uniqueness of a town, we are not even gaining affordable housing for local residents or workers. As McDaniel says, 5 over 1 construction "prioritizes profit over people while masquerading as affluence. It blends the unique appearances of US cities into an amorphous and sterilized blob."

With the Wildwoods already taking a turn towards the sterilized blob in the early 2000s from the building boom of cookie-cutter condos, the next phase of conformity coming to the island could be 5 over 1 construction. As a citizen the best thing to do is attend planning and zoning meetings, watch for the new projects presented, and if you feel they are turning the Wildwoods more into Peoria or Seattle than the unique New Jersey shore town you love, then exercise your rights and voice your opinion that you'd like to see a little more pride in the local area with designs that reflect the culture and history of the Wildwoods instead of luxury buildings that don't address a need for affordable housing and push our community further into the amorphous global collective.

*The views expressed in this piece are the author's own and do not necessarily represent those of the editorial board.*



*New 5 over 1 buildings under construction. Courtesy Dennis Pierce*

## There Are Still Many Historic Buildings on the Island

*Preserving the Wildwoods Editorial Board*

A common misconception about preservation in the Wildwoods is that there is nothing left to preserve. It's true that we've lost many historic structures to redevelopment over the years, but there are still hundreds of Victorian, Gothic, Italianate, Colonial Revival, Prairie, Neo-classical Revival, Craftsman, and Doo-Wop buildings left. Our group is working on re-surveying the island to get exact numbers, but it's easy to see our history when one looks up and pays attention to the buildings around them. The oldest houses on the island are sometimes hidden under modern renovations, but what matters is that they still stand.

To help educate children and kids at heart about the remaining historic buildings, we have created a Wildwoods Historic Houses Coloring Book that showcases the many architectural styles on the island. The coloring book will be available at our outreach table, so follow our

Facebook page to find out the next appearance of the outreach table this summer.

<https://www.facebook.com/preservingthewildwoods>

### Keep in Touch!

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### Get Involved!

It takes a team to create change. To meet our team and learn about Preserving the Wildwoods, visit

<https://www.preservingthewildwoods.com/get-involved>.



*(Left) A Queen Anne style house still standing in Wildwood. Courtesy Pary Tell. (Below) An example from the 1993 Olivieri architectural study of Wildwood.*



**Promote, Preserve, Protect**  
Preserving the Wildwoods:  
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