Galveston Island has a rich architectural history, but visitors to its well-preserved Victorian district may know little of its more recent modernist achievements. One of these was the Jack Tar Motor Hotel on the Galveston seawall, which in the mid 1950s opened an addition—with a vast, kidney-shaped pool and Edenic landscaping—that lured vacationers and brought mid-century modernism to the island. This is the story of the Jack Tar, from its beginnings as a tourist court, to its star turn as an exemplar of postwar design, and finally to the all-too-familiar status as vanished landmark.

By Guy W. Carwile

Hotel and cafeteria from the seawall.

Jack Tar Court from 1941 brochure.

Matchbook, 1940.

View from Lanai Suite, 1953.

The story begins in 1939, when W. L. Moody III, chairman of Affiliated National Hotels, acquired two parcels of land overlooking the Gulf of Mexico for the purpose of building a motor court. The property was dramatically sited near the point where Sixth Street (now University) and old U.S. Highway 75 (now Broadway, a main Galveston artery) intersect with the boulevard that adjoins the island’s seawall. At the time, Affiliated owned 32 properties nationally, most of them traditional hotels. But change was coming.

Before World War II, tourist courts typically lacked air conditioning and amenities beyond recreational lawns with sporadic playground equipment. After the war, to meet families’ desire for plusher lodgings, these older courts were razed in favor of new construction or significantly remodeled.

In 1942, Affiliated built a Jack Tar Court in Hot Springs, Arkansas, as part of an apparent plan to open a regional chain of motor courts. The new court was overtly streamline moderne with white cement-plaster cladding, in stark contrast to the subdued masonry employed at the Galveston facility, but like its sibling it boasted the “sign of ship shape service” —a neon-illuminated pylon sign that dominated the horizon. Although this sign—an early example of “heroic” motel signage—predated the Holiday Inn “Great Sign” by 12 years, the creation of a chain of Jack Tar Hotels was still a decade away.

In 1949, the Jack Tar was given a hundred-thousand-dollar makeover that put air-conditioning in all rooms, renovated the grill, and added the 24-hour “Coffee Cove.” The project was designed by the architect Thomas Price, an East Coast native who moved to Galveston after the war as a naval reservist, and it forged a professional relationship—later, a life-long friendship—between Price and Leach.

In 1952, Charles Sammons, a Dallas insurance magnate and frequent visitor to the Galveston court, bought the property along with the rights...
to the name “Jack Tar.” Sammons decided to build a state-of-the art expansion, tapping Ed Leach to oversee the million-dollar project; Leach would also serve as president of Jack Tar Hotels, a subsidiary of Sammons Enterprises that eventually grew to include 14 properties, which were either company-owned or lease-managed.6

In order to convince Sammons that Price should design the expansion, Leach cited his successful collaboration with the architect in 1949. The new concept was highly ambitious: an ultramodern resort hotel, not only the first of its kind in Texas, but, in Leach’s phrase, a “Millionaires’ Paradise.” The slogans were “Prepare to be Pampered” and “The Ultimate in Fine Living.” By 1952, plans for the project, to be built on land Sammons had bought to the east of the original court, were complete, and after two years of construction, on July 31, 1954, paradise opened with great fanfare.7 According to the Galveston Daily News, the grand-opening drew such notables as Allen Shivers, then-governor of Texas, baseball great Dizzy Dean, Glen McCarthy, the oil wildcatter and owner of Houston’s grand Shamrock Hotel, and New York gossip columnist Earl Wilson, who flew to Galveston in his own helicopter.

Thomas Price had an exotic architectural pedigree for the small town of Galveston, including degrees from Virginia Polytechnic Institute and Harvard and experience with Walter Gropius, Marcel Breuer, and Hugh Stubbins. His design took full advantage of his site’s raised topography and irregular contours. An access lane, cruised by motorized luggage carts called “Jimmy Js,” divided the property into a small triangular parcel, which housed 12 rental units facing the Gulf, and a larger one, in the shape of a truncated trapezoidal, which contained 35 units oriented toward a lush courtyard and pool. These served as the expansion’s defining elements and arguably as the Jack Tar’s signature attractions. They enabled the resort to earn added revenue by operating the private Quarterdeck Club, which catered to members by offering, among other services, a “Mascot Deck” for pets. By now, pools had become a must-have amenity at motels, but the pool at the Jack Tar would have exceeded travelers’ expectations. Its curvilinear shape was still uncommon and at 4,000 square feet, it was extraordinarily large. Guests could peer down on the pool from a bridge, from elevated terraces surrounding it or from the perimeter band of motel rooms. These rooms were actually Lanai-type suites with floor-to-ceiling glazing (the opposite walls had high windows for privacy); they opened onto either decks or terraces. Here, Price showed his affinities with his former teachers and employers. Like Gropius, Price could take a complex plan configuration and unify it under a more simply shaped roof plane. Like Breuer, he exploited the dynamic between opaque and transparent elements of the architecture. And Price blurred the line of demarcation between inside and out by taking materials used on the interior and extending them outside, reinforcing the idea that terraces and decks were extensions of the interior spaces.

The terraces also offered prime pool-watching, a theatrical experience enhanced by multicolored landscape lighting. Leach in particular was intrigued by the idea of the pool as a stage set—a notion advanced by Busby Berkeley spectacles and musicals starring swimmer Esther Williams—and he proposed that the Jack Tar pool host water ballets and style shows like those at the Shamrock in Houston.8 Price himself viewed the Jack Tar pool as an idyllic Eden, emulating a South Seas lagoon. But Price’s lagoon differed from the jungle swimming holes of 1930s Hollywood movies: it was manicured and polished and comprised of many layers. There were lawns, planters sprouting dense tropical foliage, flagstone-paved terraces, a waterfall, steps cascading down to the water’s edge, a sinuous bridge, and, most important, the free-form surface of the water. The interplay between the water and surrounding hardscape was defined by a humble though important feature—the scum gutter. Price obviously understood the formal implications of this component, opting to use it instead of newer technologies.9 This narrow gutter separated the surface of the water from its context both vertically and horizontally, allowing the flagstone terrace to engage or disengage the water’s edge or to delaminate vertically to form the bridge. At the deep end of the pool Price set planters high above the surface of the water, simulating a gorge, with the diving board carved into the planter wall. Normally, a sheer masonry wall surrounding the deep end of a pool would seem unsafe, but the gutter offered a graspable continuous rung at the water’s edge.

For guests, the manicured Eden at the Jack Tar courtyard was an appealing alternative to the rough-hewn Galveston coastline, according to long-term Price employee and Houston architect Louis Frey, and compelling enough to compete with the natural beachescape in a similar way that Morris Lapidus’ Hotel Fontainebleau in Miami Beach does. So important was the pool to the overall architectural composition that was featured on most postcards that advertised the facility. A high-contrast, conceptual pictorial view of the pool/terrace...
was imprinted on motel stationery and other marketing materials. The pool and terraces became so popular that visitors flocked to the Jack Tar even if their rooms did not face the pool, as long as they had access. Sammons noted this and soon bought land north of the original 1940 section and east of the 1954 addition for another expansion. Instead of continuing with the low-density, maximum-amenity formula initiated by Price and Leach, however, Sammons directed that the new building should maximize the number of rooms per acre. The result more closely resembled an office building than a component of a mid-century resort. In 1960, continuing this approach of adding amenities without the benefit of adjacency to the pool and terrace, Sammons and Leach returned to the office of Thomas Price for an infill project in the original 1940 section of the complex. The project established an urban edge along Seawall Boulevard, but it marginalized the original portion of the property by blocking views of the Gulf of Mexico from many units. Architecturally, the Jack Tar fell victim to its own successes.

In 1968, Ed Leach retired, triggering events that would shutter the Jack Tar in Galveston. After many shifts in ownership, the hotel was sold in 1973 to First South Dakota, Inc., and the name changed to the Islander Beach. By 1981, fire and building code violations had caused a large section to be condemned; in April of 1983, then-owner Roberto Lee hired criminals to set the hotel ablaze so he could collect insurance proceeds. (Lee would later be convicted of arson, conspiracy, and mail fraud.) After final blows from Hurricane Alicia (which struck Galveston in August 1983) and two more fires, the hotel was demolished in 1988. On its site stands the just-opened Emerald Condominiums, a 15-story, mixed-use project.

From original project through multiple alterations, the Galveston Jack Tar illustrates that in no case are substantial financial backing, superb management, or sensitive environmental design enough to assure success. This occurs when the three components converge, as they did on the 1954 Jack Tar addition which, by any measure, was one of the great midcentury motels in the United States.

1. Data taken from the inside cover of a 1940 matchbook advertising Affiliated National Hotels
10. “Jack Tar Hotels-First Four Years of a Chain,” Hotel Management, June 1957, 56
11. Darst, 1A & 9A.