

SUNDAY ARTS

E | THE PLAIN DEALER | CLEVELAND.COM/ENTERTAINMENT

Fleeting grandeur

Fenn Tower's opulent start quickly faded in Depression

ELEGANT CLEVELAND | A look back at the finest elements of Cleveland's stylish history, as shown by its people, architecture, fashion and other cultural touchstones. Go to tinyurl.com/elegantcleveland to read other entries.

Evelyn Theiss

Plain Dealer Reporter

As foreclosure and blight have pockmarked Cleveland in recent years, it's worth remembering that this has happened before. ¶ And in one case in 1930, in a most spectacular fashion — a debacle that brought some of Cleveland's top businessmen to their knees and left the skyscraper they had built as a private club utterly vacant. ¶ The National Town and Country Club did get its opening celebration: a Christmas lunch in December 1930. A photo shows members dining at banquet tables and folding chairs on this auspicious day. ¶ "The time is unquestionably ripe for the establishment of this club," Alton H. Greeley, the group's executive vice president, had written in his pitch letter to the membership of 1,400 just a few months earlier. ¶ Actually, it was the *worst* time in the century. But it was too late for him to say so. The building was up. | SEE FENN ON E9

The majestic Art Deco profile of the former National Town and Country Club as photographed in 1940. By then, the building was owned by Fenn College, which became part of Cleveland State University.

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TELEVISION

Networks' prime-time puzzle: Who'll come back in the fall?

MARK DAWIDZIAK
Plain Dealer Television Critic

The pink slip or the green light? Dozens of television producers and stars will spend this week in a state of suspense, wondering how last-second network decisions will color their future.

That's because the five broadcast networks start announcing their fall lineups on Monday, May 14. Fox and NBC are scheduled to unveil plans for the 2012-13 season that day, followed by ABC on Tuesday,

CBS on Wednesday and the CW on Thursday. And, yes, in classic Hollywood fashion, many of these decisions do go down to the proverbial 11th hour.

Will CBS get rid of one or both of its "CSI" spinoffs? Is Fox impressed enough with Kiefer Sutherland's "Touch" to give it a second season? Is ABC's "GCB" D.O.A.? Is NBC going to tell "Are You There, Chelsea?" it isn't there anymore? Is the CW about to drive a stake deep into "Hart of Dixie"? Decisions, decisions.

SEE LINEUP | E8

INSIDE



BBC FOR MASTERPIECE © HARTWOOD FILMS 2012

'Sherlock' is back

The 21st-century Sherlock Holmes played by Benedict Cumberbatch returns in three new episodes of "Masterpiece Mystery!" The first, airing tonight, takes some liberties with Arthur Conan Doyle's "A Scandal in Bohemia." Mark Dawidziak's review is on E5

ART

Curator has whetted appetites for bolder flavors at museum

Paola Morsiani, the dynamic, hardworking curator of contemporary art at the Cleveland Museum of Art, deserves warm congratulations for her latest career leap.

A native of Vicenza, Italy, who has spent much of her career in the United States, Morsiani last week was named director of the Neuberger Museum of Art, part of Purchase College in Westchester County, N.Y., just outside of New York City. She starts work there July 1, with six



STEVEN LITT

curators and a total staff of 19.

Morsiani certainly merits the opportunity. She added important and sometimes edgy works to the Cleveland collection. Her East Wing galleries, where she rotated newly purchased and loaned works frequently, were the liveliest spaces in the museum, now undergoing a \$350 million expansion and renovation due for completion in late 2013.

SEE CMA | E5



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FENN

FROM E1 Fleeting Grandeur

The previous year, less than two weeks after the stock market crash on Oct. 29, 1929, construction had started on a 22-story skyscraper on Euclid Avenue. This was possible because of a previously approved construction loan from the Prudence Insurance Co. of New York for \$1.5 million, about \$20.6 million in today's dollars.

Yes, the third-tallest building in Cleveland at the time was constructed for one purpose only: to house a businessmen's club.

If the club's financing had not been in place, ground would never have been broken, explains architect Jonathan Sandvick, whose firm, Sandvick Architects Inc., worked on the restoration in the early 2000s of what is now called Fenn Tower.

Interestingly, during the same year the National Town and Country Club opened, so did the Cleveland Club, an 11-story private athletic club on Carnegie Avenue at University Circle. The Country Club was showing off its new location in Pepper Pike. The Cleveland Athletic Club had already been around for 23 years, and older, exclusive WASP bastions — the Union Club and the Tavern Club — were humming along.

Private clubs were the fashion of the time, places busy, successful men believed they needed to unwind — and it certainly made it easier for them to imbibe during Prohibition.

But the National Town and Country Club featured over-the-top luxury; it was built and furnished for what would be \$27 million today.

It took less than a year to finish and decorate the building, with Cleveland's Rorimer-Brooks design house and Rose Iron Works contributing their talents. But just then, people in Cleveland and all over the country were figuring out that the Depression was here for the long haul.

The Christmas luncheon that "debuted" the club to its members was the first event, and the last. One month later, the tower was a desolate testament to hubris.

It remained vacant for the next seven years, except for occasional benefit events. Almost no one climbed the marble stairs or rode the aluminum-embossed elevators. The glass solarium on the roof was bereft of sun seekers, and the "finest swimming pool in Cleveland" went unused.

Nearly 82 years later, there is a silver lining. This monument to the financial exuberance and splashy style of the 1920s is still with us. Saved from the brink of destruction and restored, today it serves as a Cleveland State University dormitory. Its panel-lined ballrooms can be rented for soirees.

Bold "moderne" silver letters at the front, which faces East 24th Street, proclaim that this is Fenn Tower.

Because in 1937, the long-vacant building got its second chance. It became the site of Fenn College. A newspaper headline at the time told the story succinctly, if insensitively: "Rich man's club becomes poor man's college."

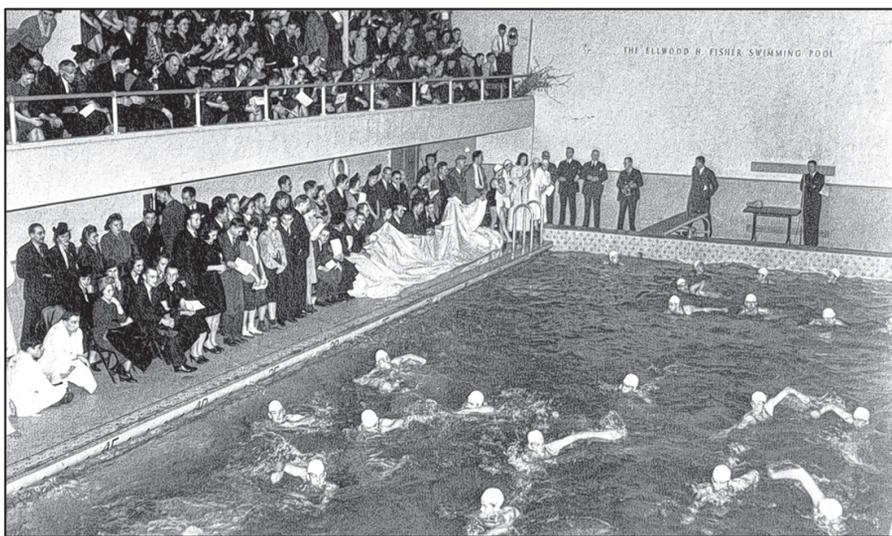
Building a club for the 'new money' set

Two of the forces behind the creation of the National Town and Country Club were its eventual president, G.G.G. Peckham, who had made his money through his Buick dealership, and its executive vice president, Greeley, who owned the General Cartage and Storage Co. of Cleveland.

Peckham founded a motor-car company in Dayton. When the company's plant and his home were destroyed by the Great Flood of 1913, he moved to Cleveland to start over. Here, he opened a Buick dealership, which by the



Post-restoration, the third-floor Panel Room ballroom of Fenn Tower retains the original ornate ceiling.



The swimming pool built for the National Town and Country Club was rededicated as the Ellwood H. Fisher Swimming Pool at Fenn College in 1941. Here, swimming demonstrations are held as the college dedicates the pool on Feb. 19, 1941. By the 1980s, the pool was closed.

1920s was one of the largest in the region.

Greeley, who lived in Lakewood, was the cousin of the famed publisher Horace Greeley, noted for his advice, "Go west, young man." Alton Greeley had a divorce scandal, which in his circles, was social suicide.

Peckham and Greeley seemed to share a "go-getter" state of mind. But there was something that they, and many of the men who prospered greatly during the 1920s economic boom, could not achieve. They didn't have entree into old-money downtown clubs, such as the Union Club and the Tavern Club.

One can imagine Greeley and Peckham saying, "Ha! We'll build our own club, and it will be bigger and more beautiful than yours. So there!"

They found some 1,400 other like-minded souls and decided to build themselves a skyscraper.

Looking at the list of names today, one does not find such "old Cleveland" monikers as Mather, Ireland or Bolton. Rather, these are names of doctors, lawyers, dentists, car dealers and retail merchants — professional men of "new money."

But what an edifice that new

money would build.

Extravagance meant to attract members

First, the club's leaders chose a site on Euclid Avenue. Not that this was the Millionaires' Row heyday anymore, but Samuel Mather's mansion was among those that remained nearby, so it was a nice symbolic touch.

Second, they hired an important architectural firm: George B. Post and Sons, which was headquartered in New York but also had offices in Cleveland. The Post firm designed such buildings here as the Hotel Statler and the Cleveland Trust Co. rotunda.

Amazingly, the new club and its members were listed, alongside the Union, Rowfant and Midtown clubs, in the 1931 Blue Book. The Blue Book was, and is, Cleveland's social register, and this was one of the only ways many of these men would have gotten their names in it. (Peckham, who had a separate

listing, was one of the few exceptions.)

Some of the features of the sandstone building's interior noted in a booklet designed to attract members:

- The basement contained six bowling alleys; its ceiling was made from sound-absorbent plaster so that members could have "a jolly good time" while not disturbing those above.
- The first floor had an "old fashioned" English grill. The second floor had a Georgian dining room for ladies, plus cosmetic rooms lit by crystal "electroliers."
- The third-floor main dining room was paneled "in Maca wood, which was imported from East Africa . . ."
- The fourth floor had bridge and billiard tables; the fifth, men's dressing rooms, a Turkish bath and massage rooms. The sixth floor featured a natatorium and maple-floored gymnasium. The pool had balconies for spectators, a reflective-glass roof, un-



PLAIN DEALER FILE

Elaborate plasterwork in the Fenn Tower ballroom is typical of some of the Georgian touches inside, which were considered appropriately grand for an exclusive club.

derwater lights and solid-gold discs studding the pool bottom.

- The seventh and eighth floors had handball and squash courts. All floors above had guest rooms, for members and out-of-town guests.
- The crown on top was the terrazzo-tiled solarium on the 22nd floor, with "ultraviolet ray equipment" that could be used when the sun wasn't shining.

"Your club will be a place of rest, leisure and amusement," reads the literature, which promised that, despite three kitchens, "cooking odors will never reach the Club Rooms . . . all of the public rooms will have a complete change of air at least once a minute."

All this, for the sum of \$350 a year for a resident membership, or about \$4,800 today.

Perhaps fearing skittishness, the board assured members in the summer of 1930 that no demands would be made upon them "in the way of asking to pay any funds until such time as they would have evidence" of the value offered in the form of a mostly completed building.

By then, there were already three mortgages on the property. Before it even opened, there was talk of a merger with the Cleveland Athletic Club, but that came to nothing.

As autumn wore on, people were getting more frightened of the toll the Depression would take. Luxuries were reconsidered.

And though the economy of the 1930s would lay waste even to old and vast fortunes — the Van Sweringen brothers come to mind — men who relied on customers and clients and had no cushion of family money would have been the most fearful.

That is, if they weren't already in financial trouble. It wasn't long before Cleveland's unemployment rate was at 30 percent.

Interestingly, while the National Town and Country Club opened with a big splash and plenty of newspaper coverage, it died quietly. Newspaper archives don't even whisper about what happened to it in the months after December 1930.

Then again, the list of members included editors of The Plain Dealer and The Cleveland Press. The collapse of the club was embarrassing.

Clues eventually came out through brief articles over the next two years, as the club was sued by an engineering firm and a Michigan furniture company, both of which had never been paid. In 1932, the Prudence Co. bought back its mortgage at a sheriff's sale. There were no other bids.

When Greeley died two years later, he got a prominent obituary in The Plain Dealer that mentioned many clubs to which he belonged. There was no mention of the short-lived one he helped

create.

Society's loss is college's gain

The loss of the National Town and Country Club turned out well for the students of Fenn College in the late 1930s. The college, affiliated with the YMCA, was never wealthy, but it got the snazzy building for a song: \$250,000.

The men's dining room was easily converted into a wood-lined library; the billiard room became a student lounge. The swimming pool was the new site of college competitions. And each "dorm" room had its own bathroom — an unheard-of luxury.

Time dimmed the elegance, and by the late 1990s, Cleveland State, which had absorbed Fenn College in 1964, considered tearing down the building.

Instead, though, school officials decided to remake it into a dorm, which the campus needed. It cost more than \$20 million to create a historically accurate building — it was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2003 — that also met today's building codes for student housing.

Architect Sandvick always does a great deal of research on the historic buildings his firm works on, but it was hard to find out much about the National Town and Country Club, he says. He considers its original construction a small miracle.

"At that time, in 1929, the downturn in construction was immediate and radical, so it's incredible that this was even built," he says. "This accomplishment came at a perfect moment in time."

Except that then, it wasn't. "It descended into despair so quickly," he says. "And its story has faded with time."

And because the building faces East 24th Street rather than Euclid Avenue, it's easy to pass by and not notice. Since it's a dorm now, visitors can't easily walk in and check out the mostly intact original lobby.

But if you look closely, even around the outside, you see the details in exterior ornaments on the window spandrels and at the top of each rank of windows. Mayan, American Indian and Cubist influences are found here — frequent motifs in Art Deco architecture.

The building's detailing whispers of a glorious era, before the fall, when luxury was a dream that seemed to be in reach of more people than ever.

Until it evaporated, faster than anyone could have imagined.

News researcher JoEllen Corrigan contributed to this report.

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