

## A Debate Over a Defunct Casino — and Over Macau’s Identity

Written by Administrator

Monday, 11 September 2017 16:07 -

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Some prominent architects say demolishing the hotel would be just fine because they do not see much artistic or historic value in the structure, which has been abandoned since the 1990s, and has weeds and wildflowers growing in its mildewed crevices.

Photo



Sulu Sou, vice president of the New Macau Association, a civic group fighting to save the Estoril. Credit Lam Yik Fei for The New York Times

The hotel was designed by a Macau-born Portuguese architect, Alfredo Victor Jorge Álvares. The mosaic, which overlooks Tap Seac Square and Macau’s historic center, was designed by Oseo Acconci, a builder and sculptor from Italy who moved to the city in the 1940s. Mr. Acconci’s work is emblematic of [Italian Futurism](#), an artistic movement that emphasized geometric abstraction. A local magazine [desc](#) [ribed](#) his rendering of Fortuna as “Macau’s Futurist Woman.”

The Estoril site, which included restaurants and a municipal swimming pool, marked a transition in Macau from opium-filled gambling dens to the kind of “integrated” casino resorts that are common now, said [Melody Lu](#), a sociology professor at the University of Macau who studies gambling in Asia.

Ms. Lu said some Macau residents felt an emotional connection to the Estoril because it was the “first touch of modernity” they experienced after arriving from the Chinese mainland in the years after the 1949 Communist revolution.

Some younger residents have seized on the Estoril, she added, as an expression of the Chinese experience here — a heritage they argue is obscured by the attention the government pays to Macau’s colonial past.

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But the Estoril is not universally admired. A local teachers’ union, for example, has criticized the mosaic — in which Fortuna’s midriff and pelvic area are obscured, respectively, by a red shawl and a green leaf — as lewd.

Alexis Tam, Macau’s secretary for social affairs and culture, [told reporters](#) in 2015 that, after meeting with educators and civic groups, he felt it would be “inappropriate” to retain the mosaic if the government carried out a plan to replace the hotel with a youth recreation center and performance spaces for the Macau Conservatory.

Photo



“There’s a general sentiment that Macau has changed too fast in the past 10, 15 years,” Mr. Sou said. Credit Lam Yik Fei for The New York Times

The Estoril has also been criticized by [Docomomo Macau](#) , a nonprofit organization that presses for the preservation of some of the city’s Modernist structures.

Rui Leão, an architect and the group’s chairman, called the Estoril “a huge mess,” partly because it sits awkwardly in a crowded lot and is visually unappealing.

The government initially planned to hire Álvaro Siza, a renowned Portuguese architect, to design the replacement for the Estoril. Mr. Leão, who supported that plan, said this would have raised the city’s architectural profile.

But officials appeared to suspend the project after Root Planning, a Macau organization devoted to heritage preservation, petitioned them to reconsider.

Hoi Ian Lei, 34, an urban planner and a co-founder of Root Planning, said her group did not ask the government to preserve the building per se, but merely to conduct a full heritage

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assessment of it as a matter of “procedural justice.”

“We are extremely concerned about the preservation policies for modern architecture in Macau,” she said.

Photo



Rapid development has produced striking contrasts in Macau’s urban landscape — like the Grand Lisboa hotel and casino complex looming over a row of older apartments.

Credit

Lam Yik Fei for The New York Times

People involved in the debate over the Estoril say it is now unclear whether the government will demolish or just remodel the hotel, and whether it will preserve the mosaic. A spokeswoman for Macau’s Department of Cultural Heritage declined to comment.

Last year, the president of the New Macau Association, Scott Chiang, was arrested after he draped a black banner over the mosaic that accused Mr. Tam, the city’s cultural secretary, of being a “heritage killer.”

One of the Italian sculptor’s 15 children, Giulio Acconci, said that while he did not consider the mosaic a “masterpiece,” he still would love to see it preserved as a facade for whatever new building replaces the hotel, or perhaps even as a floor for the adjacent swimming pool.

“People in Macau are sentimental — that’s our characteristic,” he said, adding that he remembered playing in Tap Seac Square as a child. “This is a sentimental thing.”

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During a recent sunset, the sidewalk beside the shuttered Estoril was empty except for some commuters who were waiting at a bus stop that sits under Fortuna's feet. Sunlight was falling squarely on the mosaic, illuminating the goddess's features even as the nearby square faded into darkness.

Alex Lei, 17, said he firmly opposed demolition, even if he considered the mosaic only "so-so."

But Mona Chu, 50, said she would like to see the Estoril replaced with a community center.

Asked about the mosaic, she grimaced slightly.

"It's not so special," she said.

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