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URBAN GARDNER

Of Men and Ships



The SS United States in 1952 *BETTMANN/CORBIS*

By **RALPH GARDNER JR.**

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I could lie and claim the reason I went down to Philadelphia recently to visit the SS United States is because the group trying to save the ocean liner dreams of setting it up in New York as a museum, hotel, offices, a shopping mall or all of the above. And because this is a column whose ostensible subject is New York City.

But as I said, that would be a stinking lie. The reason I boarded a train on a drizzly Friday, officially my day off, is because the ship is one of the first things I see every morning, and have for years. No, not in my hallucinations: What I'm seeing is a small

cast-iron model of the ship that I purchased years ago at an antiques shop in the Virginia countryside. It sits in our bathroom—on top of the toilet, to be precise. Why in the bathroom instead of some place of greater prestige, such as the living room? Because obviously both boats and bathrooms have vital associations with water.

I'm going to go out on a limb and contend that there's something about guys and ocean liners. I'm not sure what it is, but I suspect it sparks the neocortex in the same way as violent videogames, skyscrapers and the NFL. Yes—size does, indeed, matter. And mankind has created few objects as big and magnificent as oceangoing luxury liners.

I may have mentioned in this space not too long ago that while growing up the Empire State Building was my "Mona Lisa," my Mars Rover. And one of my favorite images of the Empire State Building came from the Compton's encyclopedia, where it was shown side by side with the Queen Mary, the ship stood on end.

The Empire State Building is longer, but not by much—approximately 1,260 feet (not including the antenna, though I typically do) versus 1,010 feet for the Queen Mary. Basically, an ocean liner is a horizontal skyscraper and no less, and perhaps more, of an architectural marvel. After all, the Empire State Building can't float.

To be honest, when a press release for the SS United States Conservancy crossed my metaphorical desk last spring, I was surprised. I didn't realize the ship still existed. I assumed it had been sold for scrap years ago, or sunk to create an artificial reef, or whatever happens to old ocean liners when nobody loves them anymore.

Susan Gibbs, granddaughter of the ship's designer *RALPH GARDNER JR./THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

Except that somebody does. It was pleasant to spend some time aboard the SS United States with people even more obsessed with ocean liners than I

am. They
included
Susan
Gibbs, the



Conservancy's executive director and a granddaughter of William Francis Gibbs, the ship's designer.

As we walked the length of the ship—through dark and empty spaces that once were ballrooms, elegant bars and first-class movie theaters where the likes of Marilyn Monroe, Elizabeth Taylor, Bud Abbott, Joan Crawford and Marlon Brando cavorted—Ms. Gibbs confided that her interest in the ship began after her father died and she was going through his papers. There, she discovered material about her grandfather, as well as her grandmother's diaries documenting the high life aboard the United States during her annual shopping trips to Paris.

"He was on the cover of Time magazine during World War II," she said. "He designed

70% of all heavy armored vessels designed in World War II."

The SS United States was his crowning glory. On its maiden voyage, the ship broke the transatlantic speed record held by the Queen Mary by traveling from the U.S. to Britain in three days, 10 hours and 40 minutes. Its maximum speed is apparently a bone of contention among ocean liner aficionados, but it was in the vicinity of 40 knots. It still holds the westbound crossing record, having lost the eastbound record in 1990 to a hovercraft, which hardly counts because it was tiny by comparison and wasn't in passenger service.

"On her maiden voyage, she blasted the paint off her hull going at such high speeds," said Thomas Basile, who handles public relations for the SS United States Conservancy and, like all good publicists, prefers the spotlight remain on his clients. I don't care. He's as fanatic about ocean liners as the rest of us. "The ship can go faster in reverse," he continued, "than the Titanic can go forward. This is the most famous ship that didn't sink."

Which isn't to suggest that it's retained all of its mojo. The exterior of the ship, whose maiden voyage was in 1952 and last sailed in 1969, is a study in melancholy. Its paint, or what's left of it, is flaking away. And the ship possesses not a single interior flourish of its former glory. "It's been stripped down to the primer," Ms. Gibbs conceded.

Yet it somehow still retains its dignity, in the same way that a rusting Rolls, or probably more aptly an old Ferrari, would. It was built for speed—the U.S. government underwrote the majority of the construction costs so that the vessel could quickly be converted to a Cold War troopship if necessary—and it has the sleek, form-following-function lines of a race car.

I know, because I foolishly decided to repaint my model of the boat several years ago—they tell you not to tamper with the original paint on antiques—and memorized its design, including its distinctive red, white and blue funnels. They're angled backward, with flared wing tips that create the impression that the boat was really intended for flight. "My grandfather would have his driver take him out to the Narrows at dawn," Ms. Gibbs remembered, "so that he would be one of the first to see the ship return from the European run."

Ocean liner lovers are mad for memorabilia, so I was curious what sorts of things Ms. Gibbs possessed. "I have some water dishes," she said. "We have a pet cockatiel and the food dish is from the SS United States. Silverware. Menus. The menu descriptions are



The SS United States at a Philadelphia pier last year. ASSOCIATED PRESS

hilarious. It's an attempt at American haute cuisine—one of the descriptions is 'Vegetables à la Hoover.'"

The Conservancy's initial goal is to raise \$25 million for a museum aboard the ship. But its even more ambitious plan is to move the ship to New York City, which would be appropriate since it was berthed at Pier 86, where the USS Intrepid now resides.

Dan McSweeney, the Conservancy Redevelopment Project's managing director, said he's in talks with developers. Given the ship's current condition, I assumed it would cost millions to restore it. "Three-hundred million," he said. "That might produce sticker shock in some people. But a building that offers the same amount of footage"—500,000 square feet—"would cost significantly more, especially in a New York City location. That's one reason we're optimistic we can make this work."

I asked Mr. McSweeney, whose father was a steward aboard the ship and met the likes of Sean Connery, what he did when he wasn't promoting the boat.

"It's a full-time job," he explained. "It's overshadowed everything else in our lives. There's no way in hell I'm ever going to give up on making this project work."

I certainly understand.

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