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Jeanne Nixon Baur, Artist

A report to the membership of
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The 32-Room Warden House in Palm Beach

THE ARCHITECTURE OF ADDISON MIZNER

Addison Mizner, without any doubt, is one of the most fascinating of American Architects. He is not one of our best known though. The subject of two novel's, -- Richard Harding Davis' Soldier of Fortune and Theodore Pratt's The Big Bubble (though Adam Payne [Eve's husband] it is carefully pointed out does not represent "any actual person living or dead."), of a magnificent picture book by Ida Tarbell, a series of New Yorker articles by Alva Johnson, later turned into a book called The Fabulous Mizners (sharing the title with brother Wilson) and now a show and catalogue by Christina Orr, he still remains a shadowy figure in the history of American architecture. Part of this is probably due to the fact that he was not professionally trained in a recognized American or European school and was never really accepted by the profession. In fact, it was not until 1930, long after his best buildings had been done, that he received a license to practice from the State of Florida. This, in fact, was a special "Senior Certificate" given without formal examination in recognition of his "happy faculty of combining the illustrated works of other countries with the draftsmanship of his associates to bring about a most pleasing and successful architectural renaissance which suited the Palm Beach taste of the period."

Architectural historians usually don't mention Mizner, or when they do, depreciate his work as either entirely derivative or dismiss him as entirely unimportant. John Burchard and Albert Bush-Brown in their "definitive" The Architecture of America: A Social and Cultural History in discussing what they call the Mediterranean Renaissance in a section on "domestic regionalism" spare one, condescending sentence, "...Addison Mizner built the J.S. Phipps house at Palm Beach in 1922, a lesser version of the greatest Florida villa, Viscaya, the estate of James Deering, which had been designed by J. Burrell Hoffman and Paul Chalfin in 1916." I don't care to debate the relative merits of Viscaya and Mizner's Palm Beach work, but a "lesser version" of Viscaya was not what Mizner was building forty miles to the north.

Mizner's defenders usually credit him with seeing, either through its historical associations or its "similar" landscapes, the affinity between Florida and Spain. This, too, does Mizner an injustice. As early as 1888 Carrère and Hastings had designed the Ponce de Leon Hotel in St. Augustine in "Spanish Renaissance Style," though Wayne Andrews says "...only a Spaniard realizing

time in his life he was Spanish could have struck of the decoration of the Ponce." Many other Florida buildings by 1918 had been done in "Spanish style."

It then the "Spanish style" that marks Mizner's place in the natural history of America, but what he did with that

did not have been formally trained as an engineer, but in design--if self-trained. As a child his family was in Matamoras where his father was the American minister. He had a love with the Spanish colonial architecture and sketching building after building. This self-taught architect was used when his parents sent him to the University in Princeton and in his travels throughout Europe. It was there that he also began his collection of art and books which are now in the library of the Society of Architects in Palm Beach.

He designed a few "Spanish" structures before he came to Florida in 1918 to "die." According to legend, after a few days of Florida sunshine he not only decided that he was but also had talked Paris Singer, the sewing machine inventor, into building a hospital for convalescing soldiers. It was at that time that Singer was bored with Palm Beach's architecture and its Victorian gingerbread architecture and decided to build a club in which he could show his cultivation and be the arbitrator of Palm Beach society. Since the war was going on, materials were rationed and he could only get what he needed by calling his building a hospital. Considered already built hospitals for soldiers in England, Singer's seems like a particularly vicious story, but it is true that no convalescing soldier was ever housed in the building unless he was a member or the guest of a member.

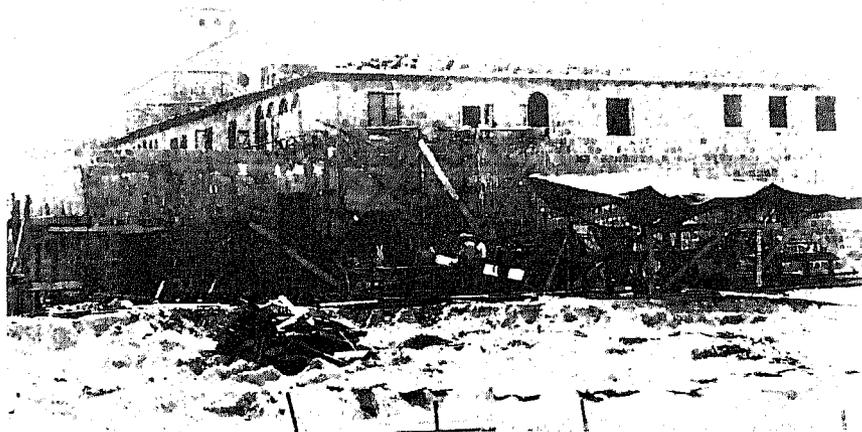


Addison Mizner

The Everglades Club was Mizner's debut in Florida and Palm Beach and a success architecturally, socially, and also, for Mizner, financially. This first of his great Palm Beach buildings was close to his ideal in architecture. He pictured a building as a living heritage--"based on Romanesque ruins [it] had been rebuilt by the triumphant Saracens, added to by a variety of conquerors bringing in new styles from the Gothic to the Baroque, and picturesquely cracked up by everything from battering-rams to artillery duels between Wellington and Napoleon's marshals." Nonetheless, it has been pointed out that he mixed up his styles with caution, "always being true to just one period in any one section of a building."

Mizner admitted that he took liberties with the Spanish style--so much so that his style has sometimes been referred to as "Bastard-Pseudo-Spanish-Mizner." A severe building was picturesque in Spain, he explained, because of its contrast with the landscape and skyline, but the flatness of Palm Beach required bolder architecture to give character to a house. He also admitted he used large, or non-Spanish, windows. The small, high, barred windows of Old Spain were dictated by conditions--they were constructed against bandits, burglars, rioters, guerrillas, and the night air. In Palm Beach the policing was good and the night air was recommended by doctors; besides, there was yet no fear of a Castro invasion, hence he went in for big windows, light, and ventilation.

From the Everglades Club, Mizner "filled-in" the West end of Worth Avenue with his own house and office over an arcade of stores. The Arcade, reminiscent of an ancient European town, was known as the Via Mizner.



Construction of the Cloister Inn

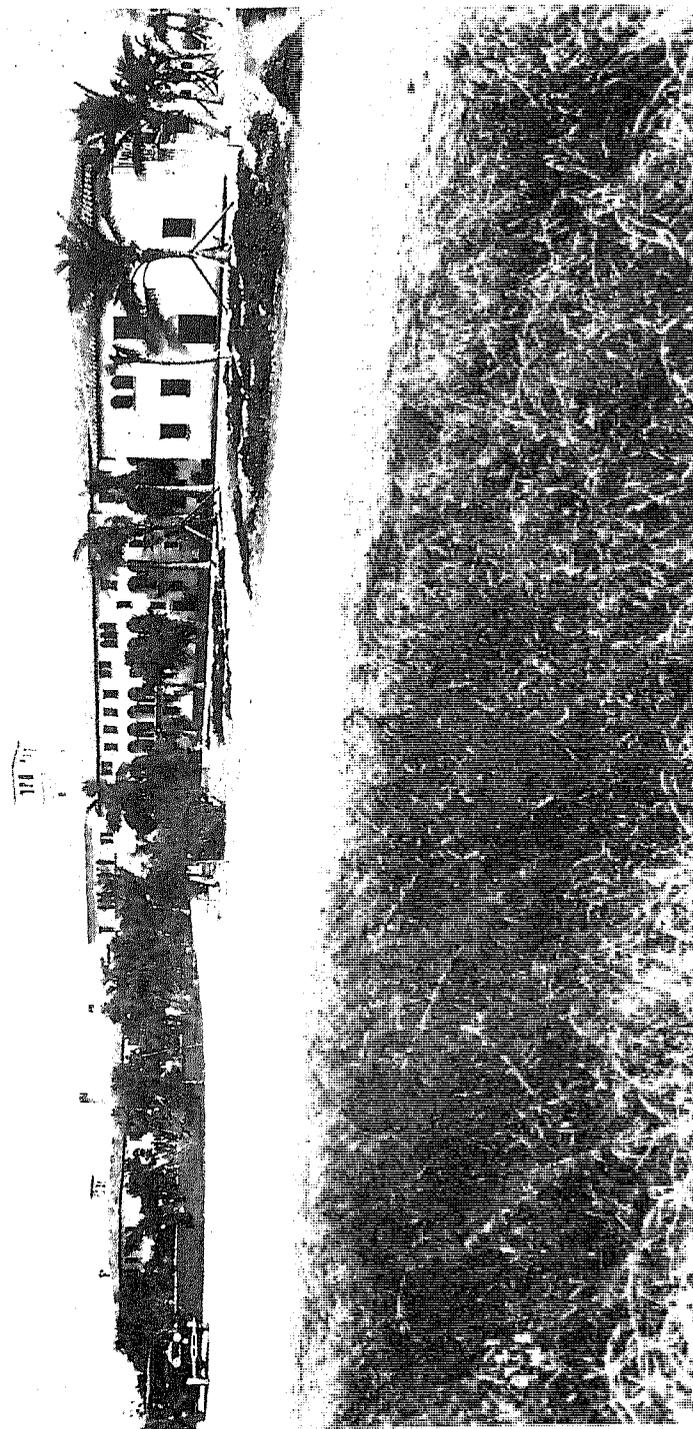
ness of the Everglades Club also brought Mizner his commission for a private home. Mrs. Edward T. Wilson, the wife of the Morgan partner, had planned a new home when she saw the Everglades. After she did, she designed a "Northern style cottage" and Mizner designed the first "cottage" which was completed in 1919. The unquestioned social leadership, assured Mizner's future as Palm Beach's premier architect.

Mizner, often referred to as one of America's great architects, led his brother Addison in Palm Beach in 1924. Wilson went several steps ahead of the law, and whether Addison invited him to save him, or he came down uninvited to cash in on the boom, is unknown. The Florida land boom had started, and Addison dreamed of a great vacation city that would put Palm Beach to shame. While it might be possible to say that Addison, the artist, did not think of profit, it would be highly doubtful without question. Wilson thought of profit. Dreaming of Boca Raton, twenty miles down the coast from Palm Beach, so to be the making of the Mizner fortune. Six miles extending from the ocean to the Everglades was to be made up a community so perfect that Coral Gables would be a shanty town.

The main canal and street "El Camino Real." A gondola was added to lend further atmosphere. Three golf courses, a seaside inn, and the largest hotel on the Atlantic coast (the Carlton) were to be features of the city as well as a castle built on an island in Lake Boca Raton.

The charms of the Riviera, Biarritz, Menton, Nice, Capri, Lido and Egypt are to be found in Boca Raton. Mere pleasure is a joy. International society that sets fashions and customs demands Boca Raton, the premier of cosmopolitan cities." As a result of such advertisements fourteen acres worth of lots sold on the first day (some lots \$10,000 apiece), in the following six months twenty-six acres worth of land had been sold. Contracts had been made for the small hotel, a few houses Mizner had designed in his executive homes, and to grade and pave roads and dig miles of Venice-like canals.

But, in the words of Theodore Pratt, "The Big Bubble burst because of the ship blocking Miami harbor, the shortage of materials, and all the other factors for ending the boom were taken into consideration, certainly Boca Raton itself was not a factor. Booms are based on confidence. Confidence today will be worth more tomorrow--that more and more will come to Florida and want land. Boca Raton came to an end because many people were having second thoughts even before the princesses on the Mizner Land Development corporation began to screen future residents to see if they were rich enough to own property (the supreme arbiter was the bank). The major factor considered was if the prospect had



The Cloister Inn, 1925.

payment). Unfortunately for the Mizners many soon to be ds could not meet the second payments on their luxurious Wilson, never known as bashful or shy, decided that all ers claimed in the ads were guaranteed and that the ads attached to the property bill of sale and become a part document. When T. Coleman DuPont, a financial backer, figurehead in the corporation, learned of this, he the exaggerated claims be dropped. Fighting to sell s to keep construction going, the Mizner's refused to ir now outrageous claims. DuPont, becoming seriously took out an ad in the New York Times disassociating from the Mizner Development Corporation. This ended the ce in Boca Raton and to a large extent the entire ce in Florida real estate.

Mizners lost everything. The Cloister Inn was finished, to Charles Dawes, Vice-President of the United States go banker. The Cloister Inn was the foundation for the on Hotel and Club. The Administration building for Boca r apartment building and the twenty-nine houses in were repossessed by the former owners of the land. What isioned for Boca Raton did come true, but only thirty ter.

following article, which deals specifically with architecture, was done as an art history project at the ty of Miami. Before coming to Boca Raton ten years ago, rman was with the North Carolina Museum of Art in

Donald W. Curl, Editor

ADDISON MIZNER AND THE BOCA RATON HOUSE

By Stella Suberman

In 1923 Frank Lloyd Wright was building the Millard House in Pasadena, California; at roughly the same time Addison Mizner was building his "Bastard-Spanish-Moorish-Romanesque-Gothic-Renaissance-Bull Market-Damn the Expense" houses in Palm Beach, Florida, on which his reputation rests.¹

Though the Wright house is now called an example of the best architectural thinking of the period and Mizner's houses are now often spoken of as "fun houses," it was not always so. It should be noted that:

...their dominance [that of Wright and other forward-looking architects] in residential design was not won without a long and bitter struggle. Expensive residence work had long been considered the preserve of a whole group of highly skilled eclectics: the famous firms of Mellow, Meigs and Howe; Addison Mizner....²

Furthermore, in the view of many, Mizner's intelligence, energy, and flamboyant style enabled him to make an interesting and personal statement with his backward-looking pastiches. Even the usually ungenerous Wright praised Mizner's work.³

"Highly skilled eclectic," but less than professional, is appropriately descriptive. Mizner was never an architect in the technical sense, though he did study at the University of Salamanca in Spain and briefly practiced in the 1890s with San Francisco architect Willis Polk, who later became known, in the neatest of paradoxes, as both a leader in skyscraper architecture (with his glass curtain Hallidie Building of 1915) and as the father of the California mission style (having published a mission style design in 1887).

At twenty-one Mizner was taken on by Polk, and in his witty and candid autobiography writes:

I was working hard and took architecture very seriously. Willis had a good, though small, library, and wherein I had not been a worker at school, I became an absorbed student...Strange to say, I liked good things, and mentally had plenty of "whys" and "whens?" When was the chimney place invented, or what did the barber pole represent; all intrigued me immensely. Today [1932] there are not a half dozen architects who know anything about history, or why everyone in the Middle Ages hadn't sore eyes from sitting over smoking braziers, or creeping about under the flicker of pitch torches.⁵

Following his stint with Polk, Mizner began working on his image as an adventurer, highlighted by a Klondike expedition and an enterprise in which he sold made-on-the spot "ancient" temple objects to rich Hawaiians.

arrived in New York in 1904, and immediately "his wit, and Klondike and South Seas background gave him a vogue."⁶ His lack of a license, he had many para-architectural jobs, at first in landscape design, though at an early point he had a Greek theater merely to enable his intricate plan of vistas to converge on something.

His first important New York job was the residence of a society woman and he reports:

"At least it gave me something to show, for you couldn't brag with pride to a few old brown stone fronts you had converted into apartments, or a brick front warehouse."⁷

He left New York Mizner also had among his credits a Spanish style Chinese teahouse, and had published in a current magazine, *Decorative Art*, printed engravings of a Japanese house and an English style house which he described as an exact reproduction of an inn in which the Conqueror slept.⁸

It was also in New York that he saw the Yerkes house, a sight which led to move him to write:

"The view was astonishing. A huge court rose two stories, supported by huge red marble columns supporting a glass dome. Directly opposite was a cascade of water, dropping down two stories from a beautiful garden of orange trees and palms that seemed infinite as it reflected its white marble columns in huge mirrors. On the right was a magnificent marble staircase; and beyond, a huge marble two-story room a hundred feet long, hung with priceless tapestries. At the end of this room a twenty-foot staircase led to the garden."⁹

Perhaps his first vision of what could be done in Florida.

He then went to Palm Beach in 1918, very broke (the result of the expensively expensive society life in New York) and sick from a leg injury that was acting up. He was ready, as Johnston had said, to have a career. With sewing machine heir and building contractor, the Paris Singer providing the sustenance, Mizner opted, for many interests, for architecture; and the two set out to change the architectural scene in the South Florida society spot. What they had found there had dismayed them: wooden piles looking like great bathhouses and small ready cottages of the "jigsaw" school of architecture, often surrounded by palm trees uprooted to make way for "proper" maples.

He then embarked on what was to be his chief occupation for the rest of his life: providing settings for the very rich, in the "robber barons," heirs of Comstock Lode, and fortunes. It was a choice that suited him. He loved Florida. He tells of an early play put on by his family when he

stacked three or four bales of hay for the tower. Three boards nailed together and whitewashed, with windows painted on it, stood on the floor and leaned against the bales, standing even higher to form a battlement for me to lean on. Even then I was building scenery.¹⁰



800 Hibiscus Street, Old Floresta, 1974

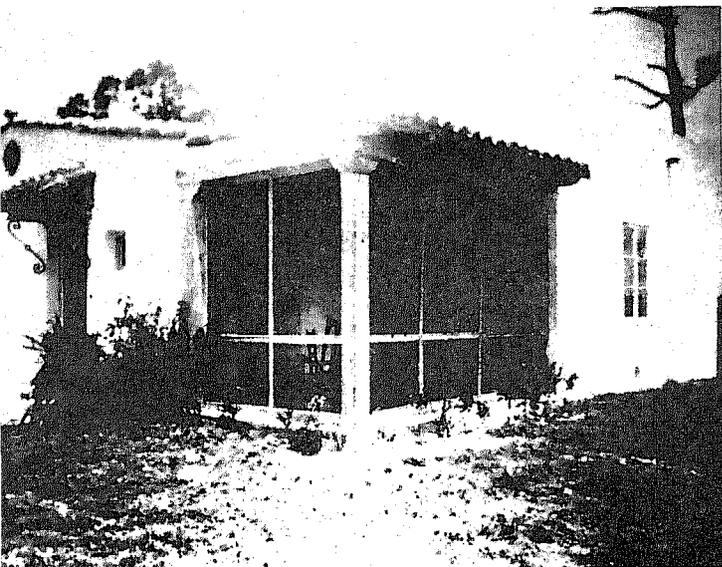
Above all, he was interested in Spanish scenery. This fascination may have derived from his early years in California, where he was born in 1872 and where he must have known various Spanish-influenced structures; or from the years he spent in Guatemala, where his father was American ambassador; from his familiarity with Spain; or from other more meretricious reasons, for example the fact that he was the possessor of much treasure from Guatemala and Spain which he hoped to place. Ida Tarbell, who knew him, quotes him first-hand:

"It would be a hard thing for me to pick out even a short list of the really fine things that I have brought to America, for I have looted cathedrals, churches and palaces, and brought a shipload or two of everything from stone doorways to fine laces from both Central America and Europe. It was early that I recognized that the top note of art in each century was the Madonna and the crucifix, so I began collecting these for myself."¹¹

As a clincher, Mizner arrived at the reasonable conclusion that Florida related to the Spanish - through de Leon, de Soto, and palm trees. So Spanish it was to be, fitted out with detailing of Romanesque towers, Moorish portals, Islamic ogee arches, among others, plus a few details distinctly Mizner's own. A logical heir to Mizner's free-wheeling adaptations is the eclectic Miami Beach

Morris Lapidus, whose clientele matches Mizner's in
mously rich and of uncertain taste and who also confesses
g "settings."¹²

r began by designing a hospital for wounded veterans,
the only kind of construction a wartime government would
with his passion for detail, however, the job was delayed
hospital could be safely transformed into a private club.
he famous Everglades Club, a fantasy of Mediterranean
d tightly-controlled membership lists.



775 Oleander Street, Old Floresta, as it appeared in the 1920s.

owing this success, Mizner received a commission to do a
the reigning social queen, Mrs. E.T. Stotesbury. And
came the deluge of commissions for "drop dead from envy"
variously called Spanish Colonial Revival houses¹³ or
near Renaissance.¹⁴

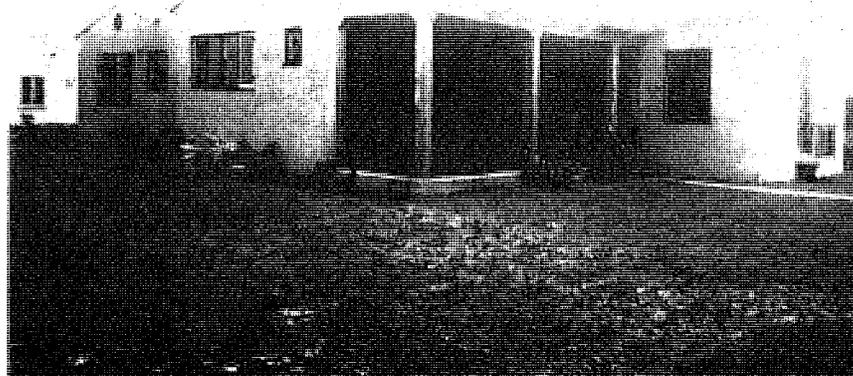
low opinion in which these 1920s Mizner efforts are now
expressed in this comment by Fitch:

But for one authentic poet like Wright, the romantic
current of American architecture had always dozens of
storytelling hacks. The eclectics of the late nineteenth
and early twentieth centuries had erred, not in wanting
to introduce poetry and romance into modern life but in
relying upon literary means (and secondhand means, at
that) to accomplish it. Thus every French villa in Newport
or Spanish palace in Palm Beach, every Roman courthouse or
Renaissance banking room, was a literary anecdote not an
artistic invention. And no amount of Beaux Arts training,
no amount of virtuosity could long conceal the fact.¹⁵

The attitudes prevailing in Mizner's own years, however, were
far different. In a book of 1927, for example, is found:

...the contention for an American style is the pursuit of
the will-o'-the-wisp. The fallacy lies in the definition.
What is or should be "the American style"? Surely, the
style of architecture that best reflects the culture and
genius of America. But what is the culture and genius of
America?...It is European.¹⁶

The author then goes on to attack Sullivan and Wright, calling the
former's cause "a lost one,"¹⁷ and stating that their styles "failed
to produce any transcendently beautiful or very important piece
of work."¹⁸ His praise, however, for the architects who showed in
Chicago's World's Columbia Exposition of 1893 knew no bounds, and
in 1927 he was still saying that the Exposition's "loveliness
increases. It will never pass into nothingness."¹⁹



775 Oleander Street, Old Floresta, as it appeared in the 1920s.

er's construction methods were ingenious, if unorthodox. The native stone was available, he very early set up a works in which:

forms of imitation limestone, granite, even marbles of color were produced and the finest grade of casting plaster used.²⁰

methods, possibilities for reproduction were limitless.

building library contained mostly picture books.²¹ Of hundreds of volumes, only four were technical. The rest were books of homes, churches, and palaces the world over. There were two large scrapbooks of magazine cutouts, much like the sketches of a young wife planning her dream house. Considering the size of the library, it is not hard to believe with Johnstone that Mizner worked from rough blueprints, he most often used a picture model and used trial-and-error methods.

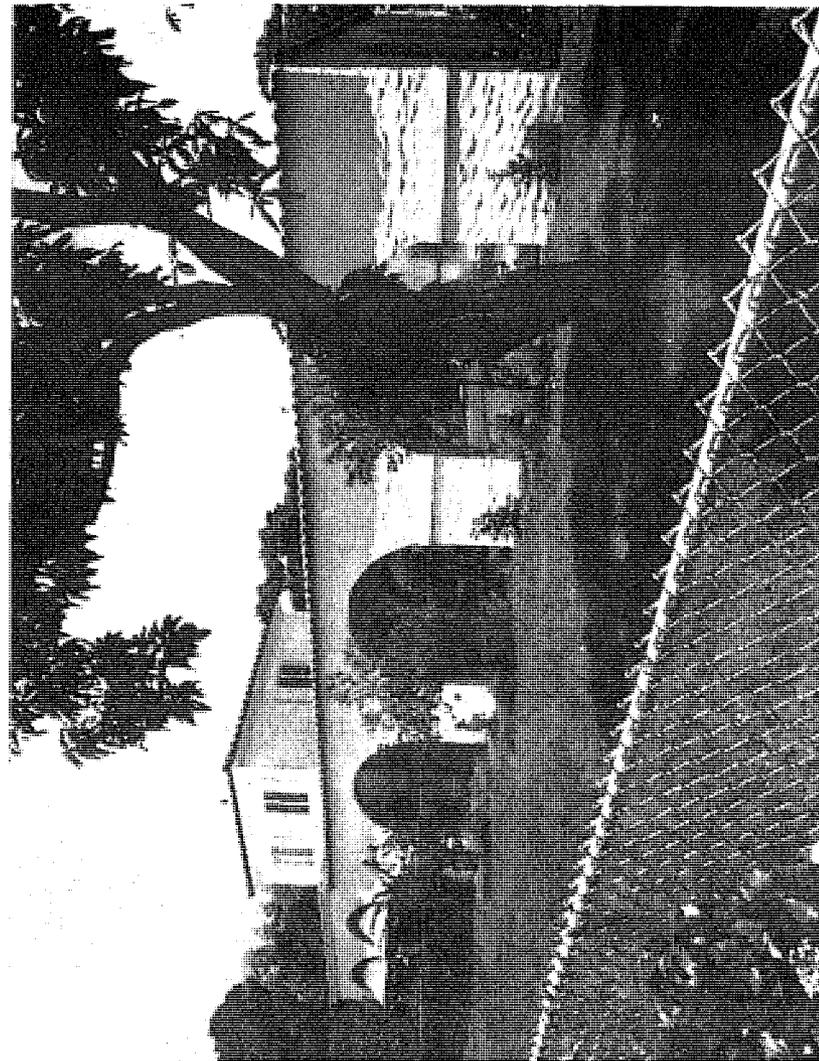
In a curious way, however, Mizner was a descendant of Downing and the principle of Wright. He too believed in the fusing of house and landscape and in every case found a way to bring the outside in. The houses were filled with Florida flora, even occasionally with orange groves. Tile-floored loggias provided shady walkways. The houses were windswept and gave access to views of the Atlantic coast and Lake Worth on the west.

Mizner also made a fetish of using local materials. His pecky floors, ceilings, and outdoor posts were pure Florida, as were the hard Dade County pine floors. Florida failed him in clay bricks, so this was brought in from Georgia.

Wright, Mizner was determined to do his interiors himself. If he did not have what he wanted in his swag, he made pieces of furniture or accessories in his own crafts factory in West Palm Beach, called Manos. Here he even made roof tiles by molding them over men's thighs.

Finally, and belatedly, was caught up in Florida's "Boom." Mizner came to Boca Raton in 1925 to build a dream city of castles, mansions, and drawbridges. A book published in 1926 said he had built "fish-type homes...nearly or entirely constructed."²¹ However, before the boom collapsed that same year, all the houses near completion were the core of the present hotel, then called the Cloister Inn, an administration building, and 29 houses. Mizner planned to put the executives of the development

in a clutch of houses for staff is extant, chiefly in a western part of the town known as Floresta. These are examples of the "Mission House." Modest and unassuming, the House approaches the style of the tile, featuring arches and tiled roofs. The two-story houses show the typical uneven roofline of mission houses, with gabled, hipped roofs alternating with flat ones. The one-story houses also uneven in roofline, combines flat roofs with low-gabled ones.



895 Hibiscus Street, Old Floresta, showing modern pool addition.

Exterior construction began with diagonal boards attached to vertical studs, with paperback wire mesh attached to the diagonals. Blown gunite stucco completed the job.²³

Though Mizner may have tried on these low-cost houses to come up with something minimum, he didn't quite succeed. Many, for example, had fireplaces studded with imported tiles. Wrought-iron balconies protruded from long casement windows, though there was no exterior sculptural ornamentation. Loggias and patios were plentiful, and Spanish-type tiles, which look warm and feel cool, were on loggia floors, as in Palm Beach. Even in the small examples, the living room, in that period of cozy bungaloid styles, was at least 18' x 20'.



Wooden seat, now destroyed.



Original pecky cypress ceiling and beam decoration.

...er worked diligently at ventilation for the Boca Raton... often managed four exposures in one room. Porches, toward Florida's worshipped Southeast direction, abounded. He abhorred symmetry, as Johnston points out, he deployed wherever needed for ventilation and light. For additional on, he worked into his plan crawl spaces above and below. ng water, a solar system was installed, though perhaps as in the whimsical as the practical point of view.

...s, ceilings, and exterior wood were pecky cypress. A few lowed "dungeon" windows. Again as in Palm Beach, floors rida hard pine, and light fixtures were made at Las Manos. aster walls were often arched in hallways.

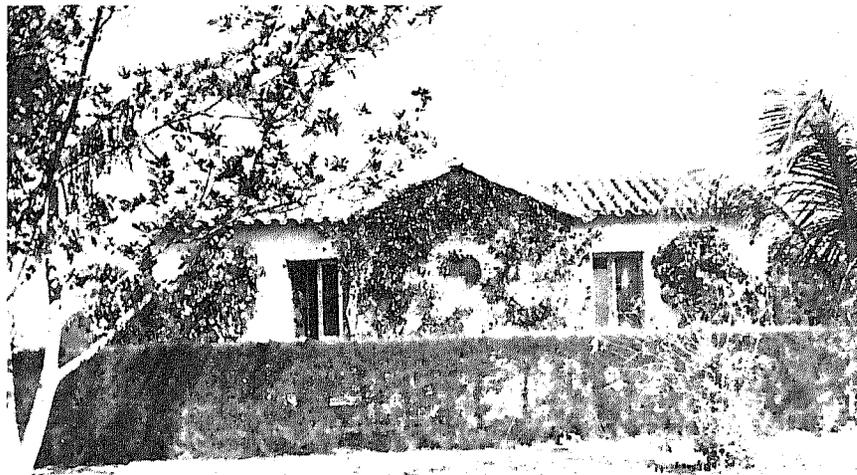
...y the bathrooms were minimum. These were unadorned, unlike in Palm Beach which sported a wicker chair over the toilet e the occupant to look dignified at all times.

...gardens were thought of and many had fountains.

It is perhaps ironic that Mizner's architect's license came only after he had finished building. In 1930 he applied for a Florida license, reciprocal in California, where he planned to continue his practice. He sent the licensing board an avalanche of documents, about which a spokesman said:

...while Mr. Mizner had no formal educational training as an architect, he had a happy faculty of combining the illustrated works of other countries with the draftsmanship of his associates to bring about a most pleasing and successful architectural renaissance which suited the Palm Beach taste of the period.²⁵

With this uncannily accurate observation, the board awarded him his license. Mizner, however, did not go to California. He died in Palm Beach, in his apartment on the Via Mizner, in 1933.



130 N W 9th [Cardinal] Street, Old Floresta.
Note round bathroom window.

notes

- ¹Alva Johnston, The Legendary Mizners (New York: Farrar, Straus and Young, 1942), p. 25. Illustrated by Reginald Marsh.
- ²James Marston Fitch, American Building I (Cambridge: River-Press, 2nd ed., 1966), p. 266.
- ³Johnston, op. cit., p. 24.
- ⁴Marcus Whiffen, American Architecture Since 1780 (Cambridge: T. Press, 1969), p. 214.
- ⁵The Many Mizners (New York: Sears Publishing Co., 1932), p. 4.
- ⁶Johnston, op. cit., p. 14.
- ⁷Mizner, op. cit., p. 252.
- ⁸Johnston, op. cit., p. 19. I am depending on Johnston for note as issues of Plain Talk are not available.
- ⁹Mizner, op. cit., p. 238.
- ¹⁰Ibid., p. 14.
- ¹¹Florida Architecture of Addison Mizner (New York: William H. Burn, Inc., 1928), Preface.
- ¹²John W. Cook and Heinrich Klotz, Conversations with Architects (New York, Washington: Praeger Publishers, 1973), p. 156.
- ¹³Whiffen, op. cit., p. 227.
- ¹⁴John Burchard and Albert Bush-Brown, The Architecture of Florida (Boston, Toronto: Little, Brown, 1961), p. 366.
- ¹⁵Op. cit., p. 264.
- ¹⁶Thomas E. Tallmadge, The Story of Architecture in America (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1927), p. 216.
- ¹⁷Ibid., p. 214.
- ¹⁸Ibid., p. 233.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 195.

²⁰Tarbell, op. cit., Preface.

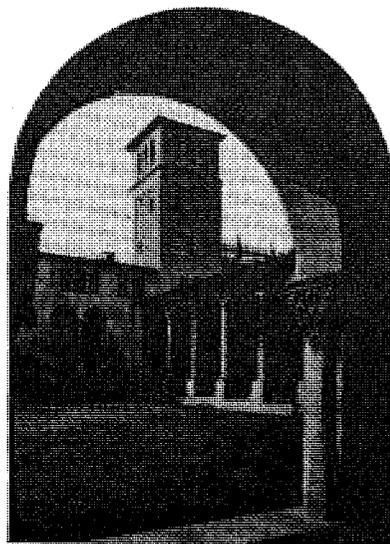
²¹This collection is housed in the Library of the Society of the Four Arts, Palm Beach. In the reading room of the Library is a portrait bust of Mizner done in bronze by Jo Davidson in 1924. The subject looks slightly amused.

²²Kenneth L. Roberts, Florida (New York: Harper and Bros., 1926) p. 102 ff.

²³This and other information about the Boca Raton houses received from Mr. E.M. Laird, owner of House "B" on Alamanda Street, who has first-hand knowledge.

²⁴Theodore Pratt, The Story of Boca Raton (St. Petersburg, Fla.: Great Outdoors, 1953), p. 17.

²⁵Johnston, op. cit., pp. 36, 37.



Ritz-Carlton Cloister
Boca Raton
Florida



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