

*The Architecture of
Old City Hall
(1890-1900)*

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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. Buralle 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

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

It was not then the "Spanish style" that marks Mizner's place in the architectural history of America, but what he did with that style.

Mizner may not have been formally trained as an engineer, but he was trained in design--if self-trained. As a child his family had moved to Guatamala where his father was the American minister. Here he fell in love with the Spanish colonial architecture and spent his days sketching building after building. This self-training continued when his parents sent him to the University in Salamanca in Spain and in his travels throughout Europe. It was in this period that he also began his collection of art and architectural books which are now in the library of the Society of the Four Arts in Palm Beach.

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

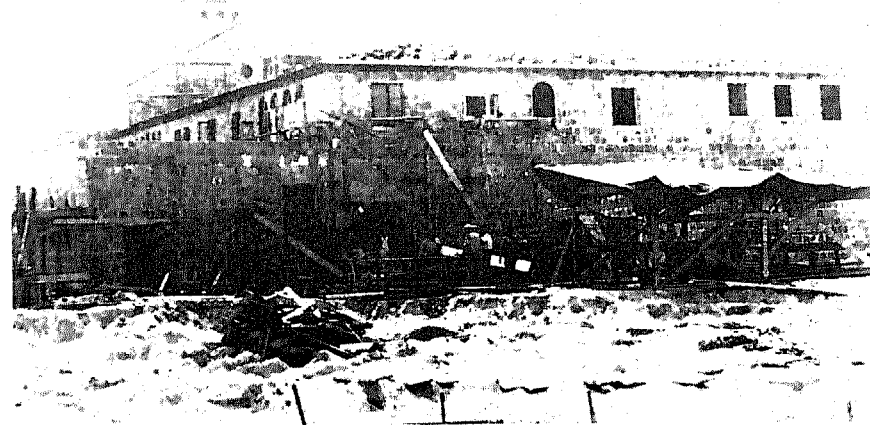


Addison Mizner

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

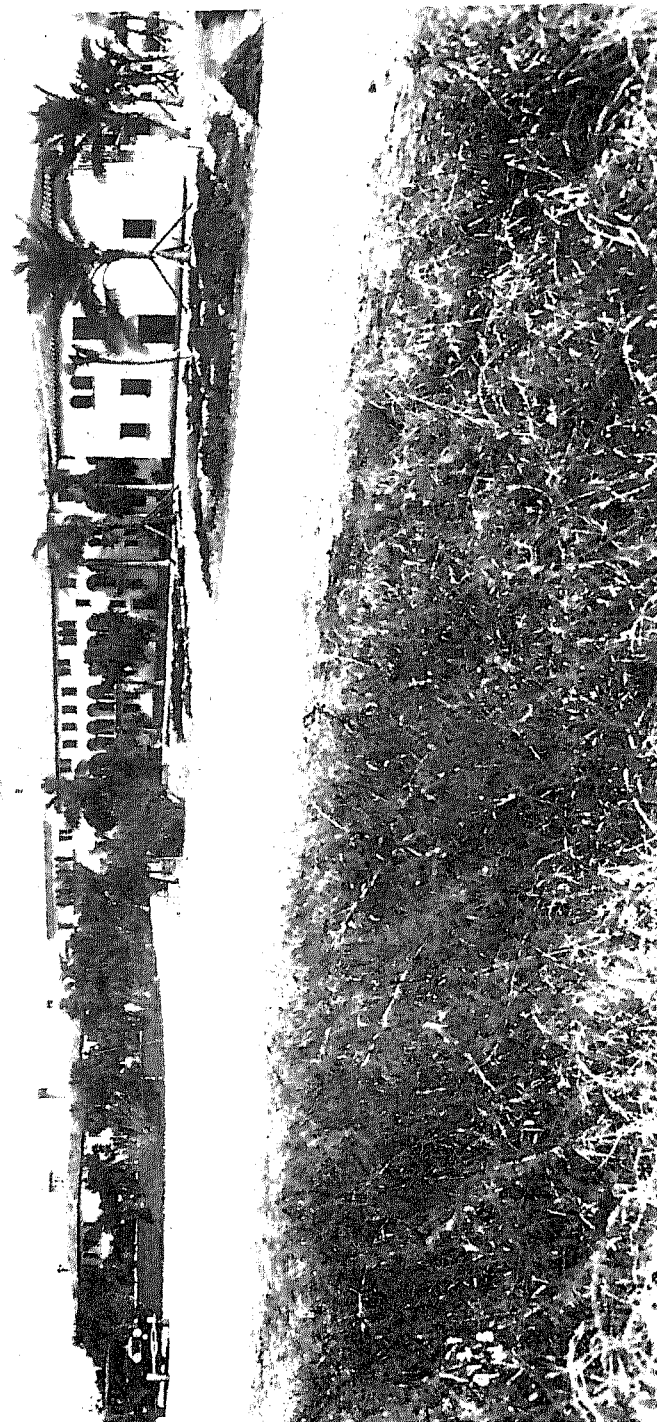
The success of the Everglades Club also brought Mizner his first great commission for a private home. Mrs. Edward T. Stotesbury, the wife of the Morgan partner, had planned a new house before she saw the Everglades. After she did, she scrapped her "Northern style cottage" and Mizner designed "El Mirasol" which was completed in 1919. The unquestioned beauty of his first "cottage" combined with Mrs. Stotesbury's unquestioned social leadership, assured Mizner's future as fashionable Palm Beach's premier architect.

Wilson Mizner, often referred to as one of America's great con men, joined his brother Addison in Palm Beach in 1924. Wilson was often a few steps ahead of the law, and whether Addison invited him to Florida to save him, or he came down uninvited to cash in on Addison's success is unknown. The Florida land boom had started, and Addison had dreams 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 unrealistic. Without question Wilson thought of profit. Dream city or not, Boca Raton, twenty miles down the coast from Palm Beach, was also to be the making of the Mizner fortune. Six thousand acres extending from the ocean to the Everglades was to be utilized to make up a community so perfect that Coral Gables would look like a shanty town.

Miles of mansion lined streets and canals were laid out, as was the great main canal and street "El Camino Real." A gondola was even imported to lend further atmosphere. Three golf courses, a small, exclusive inn, and the largest hotel on the Atlantic shore (a Ritz Carlton) were to be features of the city as well as Mizner's own house, a castle built on an island in Lake Boca Raton.

"All the charms of the Riviera, Biarritz, Menton, Nice, Torrento, the Lido and Egypt are to be found in Boca Raton. Mere existence here is a joy. International society that sets fashions and sanctions customs demands Boca Raton, the premier of cosmopolitan resorts." As a result of such advertisements fourteen million dollars worth of lots sold on the first day (some lots going for \$40,000 apiece), in the following six months twenty-six million dollars worth of land had been sold. Contracts had been let to start the small hotel, a few houses Mizner had designed in Floresta for his executives, and to grade and pave roads and dig the twenty miles of Venice-like canals.

But then, in the words of Theodore Pratt, "The Big Bubble Burst." While the ship blocking Miami harbor, the shortage of building materials, and all the other factors for ending the boom must be taken into consideration, certainly Boca Raton itself becomes a major factor. Booms are based on confidence. Confidence that what I buy today will be worth more tomorrow--that more and more people will come to Florida and want land. Boca Raton came late, perhaps many people were having second thoughts even before the duchesses and princesses on the Mizner Land Development corporation payroll began to screen future residents to see if their blood was blue enough to own property (the supreme arbiter was Wilson, and the major factor considered was if the prospect had



The Cloister Inn, 1925.

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

The Mizners lost everything. The Cloister Inn was finished, but lost to Charles Dawes, Vice-President of the United States and Chicago banker. The Cloister Inn was the foundation for the Boca Raton Hotel and Club. The Administration building for Boca became an apartment building and the twenty-nine houses in Floresta were repossessed by the former owners of the land. What Mizner visioned for Boca Raton did come true, but only thirty years later.

The following article, which deals specifically with Mizner's architecture, was done as an art history project at the University of Miami. Before coming to Boca Raton ten years ago, Mrs. Suberman was with the North Carolina Museum of Art in Raleigh.

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.

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

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

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

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

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

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

It was perhaps his first vision of what could be done in Florida.

Mizner went to Palm Beach in 1918, very broke (the result of an exceedingly expensive society life in New York) and sick from a boyhood leg injury that was acting up. He was ready, as Johnston says, to have a career. With sewing machine heir and building enthusiast Paris Singer providing the sustenance, Mizner opted, from his many interests, for architecture; and the two set out to change the architectural scene in the South Florida society watering spot. What they had found there had dismayed them: immense wooden piles looking like great bathhouses and small gingerbread cottages of the "jigsaw" school of architecture, often with friendly surrounding palms uprooted to make way for "proper" Northern maples.

Mizner now embarked on what was to be his chief occupation for the rest of his life: providing settings for the very rich, in this case the "robber barons," heirs of Comstock Lode, and fur-trading fortunes. It was a choice that suited him. He loved settings. 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

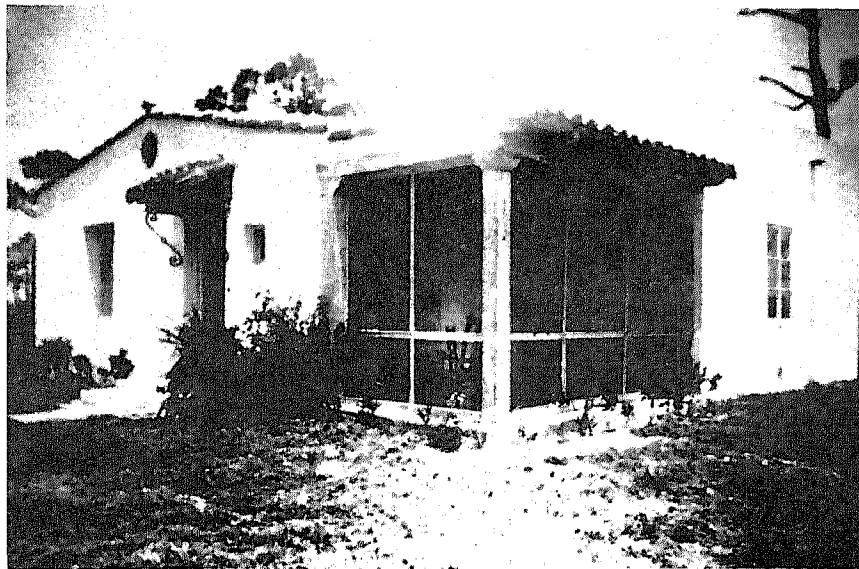
Above all, he was interested in Spanish scenery. This fascination may have derived from his early years in California, where he was born in 1872 and where he must have known various Spanish-influenced structures; or from the years he spent in Guatemala, where his father was American ambassador; from 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

architect Morris Lapidus, whose clientele matches Mizner's in being enormously rich and of uncertain taste and who also confesses to building "settings."¹²

Mizner began by designing a hospital for wounded veterans, this being the only kind of construction a wartime government would permit. With his passion for detail, however, the job was delayed until the hospital could be safely transformed into a private club. This was the famous Everglades Club, a fantasy of Mediterranean marvels and tightly-controlled membership lists.



875 Azalia Street, Old Floresta, as it appeared in the 1920s.

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

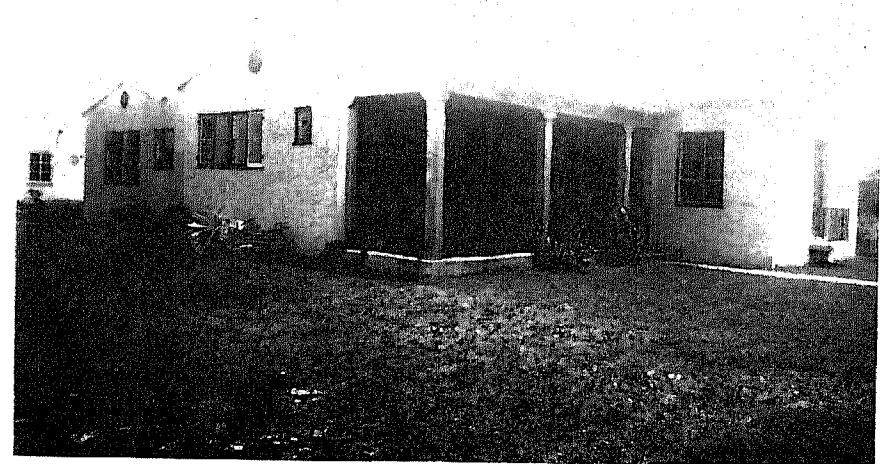
The low opinion in which these 1920s Mizner efforts are now held is expressed in this comment by Fitch:

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.

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

all forms of imitation limestone, granite, even marbles in color were produced and the finest grade of casting resulted.²⁰

With such methods, possibilities for reproduction were limitless.

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

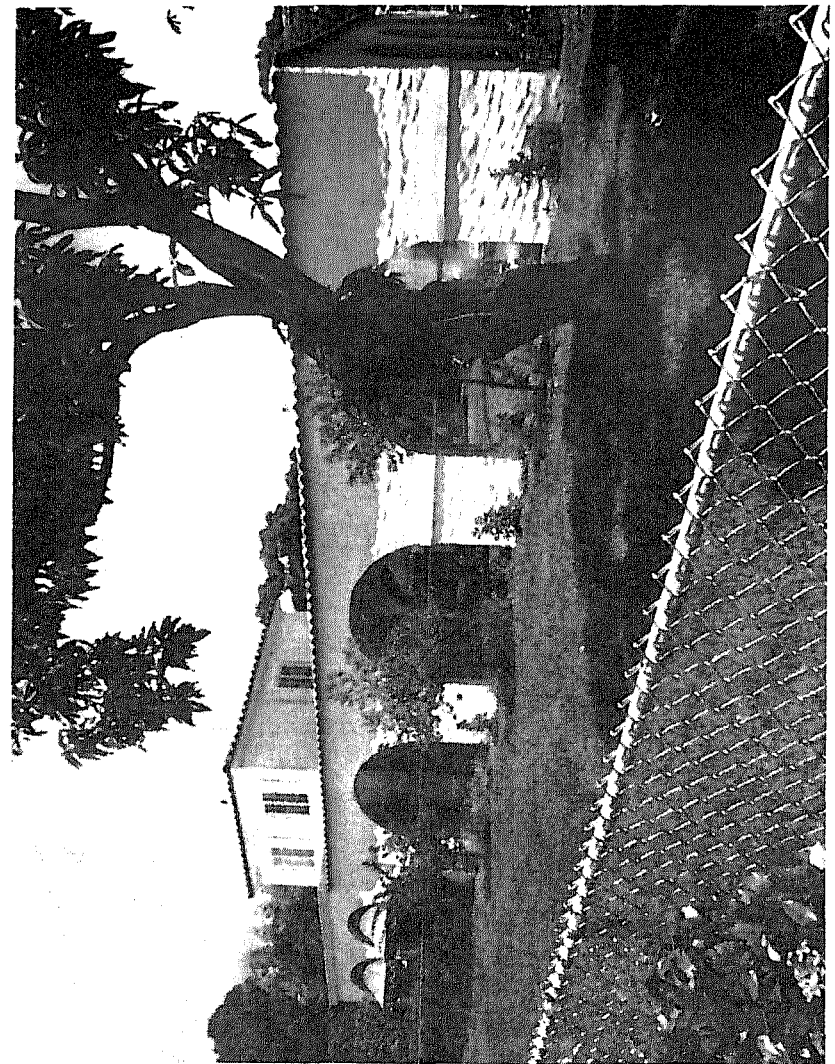
In a curious way, however, Mizner was a descendant of Downing and a disciple of Wright. He too believed in the fusing of house and landscape and in every case found a way to bring the outside in. His patios were filled with Florida flora, even occasionally with small orange groves. Tile-floored loggias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

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

Like Wright, Mizner was determined to do his interiors himself. And 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: Las Manos. Here he even made roof tiles by molding them in the old way over men's thighs.

He finally, and belatedly, was caught up in Florida's "Boom." He went to Boca Raton in 1925 to build a dream city of castles, canals, and drawbridges. A book published in 1926 said he had "200 Spanish-type homes...nearly or entirely constructed."²¹ Actually, however, before the boom collapsed that same year, all that were near completion were the core of the present hotel, then called The Cloister Inn, an administration building, and 29 houses in which Mizner planned to put the executives of the development company.

The clutch of houses for staff is extant, chiefly in a western section of the town known as Floresta. These are examples of the Boca Raton House. Modest and unassuming, the House approaches the mission style, featuring arches and tiled roofs. The two-story example shows the typical uneven roofline of mission houses, with low-pitched, hipped roofs alternating with flat ones. The one-story example, also uneven in roofline, combines flat roofs with low-pitched, gable 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 bungalow styles, was at least 18' x 20'.



Mizner Garden seat, now destroyed.



Original pecky cypress ceiling and beam decoration.

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

Doors, ceilings, and exterior wood were pecky cypress. A few doors showed "dungeon" windows. Again as in Palm Beach, floors were Florida hard pine, and light fixtures were made at Las Manos. Smooth plaster walls were often arched in hallways.

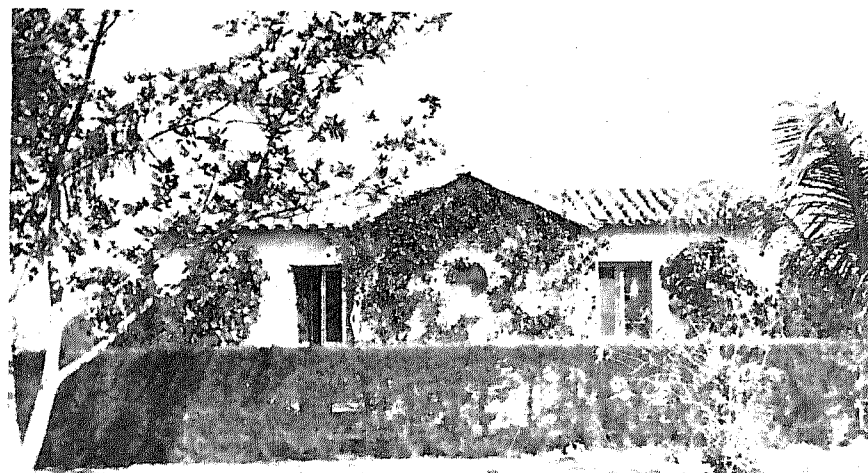
Only the bathrooms were minimum. These were unadorned, unlike the one in Palm Beach which sported a wicker chair over the toilet to enable the occupant to look dignified at all times.

But 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.

Footnotes

- 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: Riverside Press, 2nd ed., 1966), p. 266.
- ³Johnston, op. cit., p. 24.
- ⁴Marcus Whiffen, American Architecture Since 1780 (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1969), p. 214.
- ⁵The Many Mizners (New York: Sears Publishing Co., 1932), p. 74.
- ⁶Johnston, op. cit., p. 14.
- ⁷Mizner, op. cit., p. 252.
- ⁸Johnston, op. cit., p. 19. I am depending on Johnston for this 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 Helburn, 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 America (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.

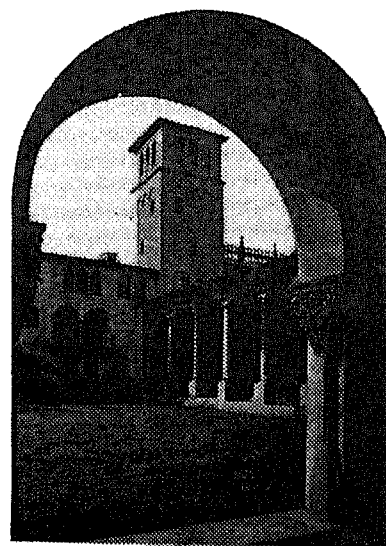
²¹This collection is housed in the Library of the Society of the Four Arts, Palm Beach. In the reading room of the Library is a portrait bust of Mizner done in bronze by Jo Davidson in 1924. The subject looks slightly amused.

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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