

## Buildings & Fantasies

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NOVEMBER 2017

### COCONUT GROVE IS MIAMI'S OLDEST NEIGHBORHOOD, AND IN SOME WAYS ITS MOST DECEPTIVE

The gravitational center of Coconut Grove, where commuter arteries converge, traffic slowing for the promenade of village life, is the airy shopping and entertainment complex named CocoWalk. A Starbucks is here, a Gap, a Victoria's Secret, a fitness club, movie theaters, vending carts selling watches and sunglasses, and an assortment of restaurants and shops shoehorned through four levels of Mediterranean Revival splendor.

CocoWalk is both outdoor mall and public gathering space. Like an Italian piazza, though more compact and without the pigeons. Chairs and tables are scattered at street level; tourists pose for selfies by its bubbling fountain.

Designed in the late 1980s by London-based Design International, CocoWalk at first glance conforms to Miami's century-long fascination with Old World architecture: barrel-tile roofs, ornate balustrades, parapets, stone window casements. And at a distance it works, neatly referencing Miami's preferred boom-era style that gave the region Villa Vizcaya, Freedom Tower, the Biltmore Hotel, as well as countless single-family homes and storefronts of more modest scale.

Another splendid example, the Coconut Grove Playhouse, which opened in 1927, rests a few blocks from here, shuttered and in disrepair. Notable examples north of downtown Miami include the Miami Women's Club (built in 1925-1926); Biscayne Boulevard's Beverly Terrace (1925) and Wolpert Apartments (1924); and farther north, the Cushman School (1926). Mediterranean Revival is not Miami's vernacular architecture, but it's the style most closely associated with our early history and thus seems at ease within our urban landscape.

Except that much of it is fake. A fraud. South Florida's Mediterranean Revival period began around 1917 and ended in the early 1930s. What we mostly see is faux Mediterranean Revival, or perhaps Mediterranean Revival Revival, a caricature of a style, a marketing gimmick selling a manufactured experience of connection to the past.

And besides that, much of it here is a visual ploy. Behind CocoWalk's stucco façade we find windows that cannot open, mock balconies applied to sheer walls, and rooftop towers constructed with no access to them. Form following dysfunction.

In Coconut Grove, like communities elsewhere valued for heritage and for a deeply rooted sense of place -- Morningside, the MiMo District; even Wynwood and Miami Shores come to mind -- authenticity matters. The details matter. The appearance of "true self" (as the writer and critic Lionel Trilling put it) attracts us to places just as it attracts us to people. Visitors and residents alike crave experiences shaped by what they perceive as genuine, including their interactions with the built environment. A formulaic replica of what a place ought to look like denies that experience.

Coconut Grove is Miami's oldest neighborhood. The area's first hotel opened



The public library (1963) is among those few buildings that make up the soul of Coconut Grove.



Mayfair will always symbolize, for many locals, Coconut Grove's loss of innocence.

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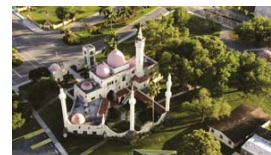
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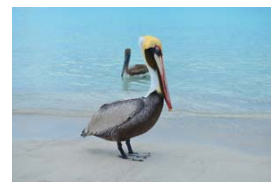
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here in 1884; its first schoolhouse in 1889; and its first public library in 1896. Adventurous white settlers, mostly from the North, carved out swampy home sites overlooking Biscayne Bay, while Bahamian immigrants, summoned here as laborers and support staff, built a thriving African-American community a few blocks inland.

Today the buildings that most deeply resonate here, to residents and visitors alike, vary in era and style. But each is an expression of its environment, the available materials, and the human interactions that inspired their construction. They include: the 1891 pioneer home of Ralph Middleton Munroe, now preserved as part of the Barnacle Historic State Park; the 1897 Stirrup House in the old Bahamian quarter; the 1921 coral rock Women's Club; and the 1933 Deco-style Miami City Hall (once the Pan American Airways terminal) and nearby seaplane hangars (since repurposed), built in the 1930s.

Newer buildings also meet the test: the 2009 classroom addition at St. Stephens Episcopal Day School; and two fine examples from Miami's brutalist period -- S. Bayshore Drive's Office in the Grove (1973); and the geometric, three-story office building at 2850 Tigertail Ave. (now a luxury condo sales center), built in 1971.

Yet sadly such examples are rare. When authenticity is a community's selling point, its branding asset, the appetite for risk is low; architectural imitation is too often the strategic imperative, the market-driven default. Even here -- the region's counterculture outpost of the 1960s, where a lingering civic independence and spirit still shape local politics -- architecture is less invention than reaffirmation. Designs are safe, predictable: mild variations on a theme that visitors and new residents may interpret naively as reflections of Coconut Grove's true nature.

"Bad faith" -- the term Sartre coined to describe one's submission to conformity and, in turn, the repression of the authentic self -- applies as much to the practice of architecture as to human behavior. As with the rest of Miami-Dade, examples here abound.

Two blocks south of CocoWalk, amid a cluster of historic structures dating to the 1920s and 1930s, is the two-story, office, and retail complex that many locals still reference by its first principal tenant, Fuddrucker's restaurant. Like so much else in South Florida, it is built in the Mediterranean Revival tradition, with twisted columns, exposed wood beams, and arched porticos running its length. (The sides and rear, oddly colored and unapologetically brutal, make no such faux pretensions.)

In another setting -- say, suburban Orlando -- the building, constructed in 1986, might attract little attention. But here the fraud is exposed by the abutting neighbor to whom the building pays homage: the historic Florentino Plaza, a 1925 Mission-style complex that itself now seems oddly out of place, cowering in the shadow of its progeny. Deference is the undoing of this newer design.

The Mediterranean Revival charade continues across the street at Cloisters on the Bay, a gated sliver of luxury townhomes designed by the Coral Gables firm Ferguson Glasgow Shuster Soto and built in 2002. The affectations are hard to miss: recessed doorways, wrought iron balusters, French doors, and a mixed palette of soft pastel exteriors, but the scheme is chiefly undone by density -- the ornate row home has scant Old World precedent. (The lowest of several recent listings here is \$2.6 million for a four-bedroom unit).

Yet the design features of Cloisters on the Bays may attract little scrutiny from either homebuyers or visitors. The Old World leitmotif in South Florida is so ubiquitous, and the tradition of themed design, in general, so deep and rich, that we are conditioned for imitation. We expect an enchanted storyline. Indeed, the grand Mediterranean Revival land developments of a century ago that rose from nearby swamps -- Addison Mizner's Boca Raton; George Merrick's Coral Gables -- were very much themed villages, invoking the grandeur of Castilian villas and Venetian canals. They sold the fantasy.

Up the road, Glenn Curtiss, another boom-era developer, pitched the magic of the exotic East with his Arabian Nights-themed Opa-locka, a town of Moorish Revival architecture with street names like Ali Baba Avenue and Aladdin Street. And the faux



Behind CocoWalk's stucco façade we find windows that cannot open, mock balconies applied to sheer walls, and rooftop towers constructed with no access to them -- form following dysfunction.



The 1891 pioneer home of Ralph Middleton Munroe, now preserved as part of the Barnacle Historic State Park.

tradition continues. Earlier this year, Jimmy Buffett's Margaritaville franchise announced plans to build a 6900-unit retirement village near Jacksonville that promises the laid-back, beach bum feel and look of a slumbering tropical island.

Coconut Grove has had its own forays into architectural fantasyland, though more recently and on a far smaller scale. Opposite the Cloisters' lushly landscaped entranceway, across a bike and pedestrian pathway and the principal thoroughfare of Main Highway, is the closest thing here to a restaurant row. Commodore Plaza, as the street is called, is barely a quarter-mile long but in many ways remains a balanced and viable microcosm of village life: a hair salon, a frame shop/art gallery, a gelato place, a bank, office space, a church-run thrift shop, a few condo units, a charter high school housed in commercial space, and seven thriving restaurants. Yet the street also includes the remains of three failed experiments in themed entertainment dining.

A few steps in, a façade of fieldstone and Lincoln Logs craft the visual narrative for Mr. Moe's, a Wild West-themed sports bar with wagon wheels and mounted animal heads adorning its walls. Restaurants and bars of various incarnations flourished for decades in the high-traffic location, but this ersatz Frontierland saloon closed in 2015 and remains shuttered.

Not far away is Carabelle's Quarter, a kitschy reproduction of a 19th-century French Quarter townhouse. The four-story building, with working sidewalk gas lamps, wrought-iron balconies, and winged figurines atop its roof, was built in 2008 at a reported cost of \$3 million. Bleeding cash, it closed in 2011 and now reopens only for the occasional special event.

And across the street are the remains of the two-story tapas bar Don Quixote, which inside ambitiously re-creates Spain's La Mancha, circa 1605, with make-believe shops, balconies, a rectory, and of course a windmill. Opened in 2006; closed in 2009 and still empty. As Ralph Waldo Emerson famously said, imitation is suicide. Architecture is no exception.



The historic Florentino Plaza, a 1925 Mission-style complex, now seems oddly out of place.

The commercial failure of these themed entertainment ventures is hardly coincidental. Each embraced a cheap simulacrum of escapism at the expense of Coconut Grove's most attractive quality, which, thankfully, is still found in abundance: authentic village life -- a place where people live and work, shop and dine, attend school, play, pray, protest, panhandle, and engage in all the day-to-day activities of a genuine place. Visitors come here to observe life, and perhaps even participate. This is not Disney.

Yet much of the architecture here, down to the bright-yellow, Caribbean-themed tourist information kiosks with their trompe l'oeil flowers, reflects the confusion and the uneasy conflict between the real and the imagined.

Indeed, the region's early fascination with revival-style designs is a product of that tension. Even some of Coconut Grove's oldest and most visually compelling revival buildings are themselves gimmick-riddled re-creations of another time and place: the 1923 Mission-style jewelry shop on Main Highway, which housed Coconut Grove's first bank; the adjacent Florentino Plaza, which is all that remains of a town plan designed in 1925; and the Coconut Grove Playhouse, once an important regional theater, and which staged the world première of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. These buildings are unmistakably charming, their age and historical importance earning them a pardon for the sins of imitation.

It's too early to say if that will be the case for the lot of ghastly structures that arose amid Coconut Grove's second land rush, in the 1980s. In different ways, designs from these two development booms, more than half a century apart, reflect the same existential struggle of buildings that favor the visitor, and the newcomer, over the people who live or work here.

In both cases, this was architecture hoping to satisfy expectations of the outsider; in the 1920s, it was the snowbird or Northern transplant; in the 1980s it was the suburban visitor or international shopper. The expression varied; a century ago designers here looked to the past for the transcendence they promised; in the latter period, they looked to the future.

Redevelopment in the commercial core of Coconut Grove in the 1980s often took the form of small, mixed-use retail projects with bright colors, rounded edges, and abundant use of glass, perhaps



On Commodore Plaza, Carabelle's Quarter is a kitschy reproduction of a 19th-century French Quarter townhouse.



loosely alluding to the Art Deco craze that, through television and clever marketing, became the region's signature look in that decade. And here, the sudden appearance of these tawdry postmodern designs, even bad ones, helped recalibrate the landscape as a modern urban commercial center catering to an increasingly well-heeled and sophisticated clientele.

Most of these garish designs remain today, such as the Persian blue retail space on Main Highway (housing a coffee shop, a hair salon, a bicycle store, and other tenants) with its oculus and glass block ornamentation; and, two blocks south, the oddly bulbous, three-story office and retail complex anchored by the popular restaurant Lulu in the Grove. Other examples abound throughout the village. The contrast of these structures to the prevailing revival and mid-century designs remains as striking and awkward as ever.



The 1927 Coconut Grove Playhouse was an important regional theater, staging the premiere of *Waiting for Godot*.

Widely regarded as the catalyst for Coconut Grove's late-century makeover -- though of far different style and substance -- is the much debated, civically derided World of Mayfair. Miami architects Kenneth Treister (best known for designing Miami Beach's Holocaust Memorial) and Antonio Cantillo razed nearly three urban blocks, including the commercial core's only grocery store, a Laundromat, and other essential constituents of village sovereignty.



Peacock Park's community center (1967) favors Grove residents over visitors, serving the day-to-day needs of locals.

In their place rose an ornate fortress of concrete, housing a high-end hotel, a multilevel parking garage, and a luxury mall catering to wealthy shoppers from Latin America and abroad. (A later expansion was backed by mall doyen Edward J. DeBartolo.)

The seductive troll the architects dangled is a kind of tropical Art Nouveau: organic structural forms, richly encrusted and decorative exterior walls, floral mosaic abstracts, Spanish tiles, and other exotic fripperies that defy category. But the Latin American bourgeoisie proved an unreliable and uncertain market base, and the locals found little cause to enter Mayfair's gilded, grotto-like interior.

After a succession of new owners and a string of failed efforts to kick-start its prospects as a retail and entertainment complex, Mayfair was rebooted as office space for the creative class. Though flourishing in that role, the World of Mayfair will always symbolize, for many locals, Coconut Grove's loss of innocence, its irrevocable pact with the devil that traded small-town living for a stake in the tourist economy.

In fairness, Coconut Grove's upscale transition in the 1980s was less a product of Mayfair's bold (yet flawed) vision than the discovery and repackaging of an inherently desirable community. This was a place of leafy neighborhoods and quiet shores, balmy weather, creative professionals and institutions, a walkable scale, and a self-sustaining business core. Redevelopment was inevitable. And the underlying idyll of subtropical livability is indeed expressed in the architecture here. Not through the themed entertainment designs of retail malls and restaurants, but perhaps fittingly through the surviving structures of the half century between the two land booms, roughly 1930 to 1980, when Coconut Grove took a break from the business of selling itself.

These simple, utilitarian designs -- modest, rarely noticeable, except for their lack of pretense or ambition -- are those that favor the resident over the visitor: the post office (1950); the former Masonic Temple (now a café and yoga studio) on McFarlane Road (1950); the public library (1963); the community center at Peacock Park (1967); the Christian Science Reading Room (1935); the veterinarian's office (1936); and a handful of other buildings that remain insulated, through tax exemption or family fortune, from the persuasions of the real estate market.

These buildings are the soul of Coconut Grove. They are simple, necessary, accessible -- the irreplaceable components of village life. If authenticity is to be found here, it is in these vital structures that serve the day-to-day needs of the community. Most everything built since is a response to their successful service.

Like elsewhere in Miami-Dade, however, the fate of many other mid-century buildings is less certain. The

next great land rush is now fully on, and investors and out-of-state buyers are driving prices in the commercial core to unimaginable heights.

A year ago a single-story retail space across from CocoWalk, built in 1925, sold for \$23 million, more than double its sale price three years earlier. A block away a simple, single-story retail building from 1950 with smooth walls, rounded corners, and brise soleil molding, has been on and off the market with an asking price upwards of \$30 million. (The present owner operates a family-run drycleaner there.) Another stylish Streamline Moderne structure from the early 1950s, the two-story Engle Building within the heart of the village, sold in 2014 for \$20 million. And four years ago, the village's only notable example of the Miami Modern style, the Weed Johnson-designed Coconut Grove Bank (1960), sold, along with an adjacent parking lot, for \$55 million. The building, enduring weeks of demolition at glacial pace, will be replaced by luxury condos selling for more than \$1200 a square foot.

And a block away, the new owners of Office in the Grove are battling with preservation groups who are seeking historic designation for what some describe as an irreplaceable example of "tropical brutalism." (In September, the city's preservation board denied a request for designation status; the building remains on Dade Heritage Trust's list of most endangered structures.) Character, charm, and historic significance may attract attention, but they have no place on a balance sheet.

For all the transactions, shovels have been slow hitting the dirt. Height restrictions in the commercial center limit new construction to five stories, and some property owners have delayed redevelopment while they angle for new zoning rules to allow taller buildings and higher densities. But with citizen groups opposing any such changes, the vigil may be nearing its end.

In April a five-story luxury boutique hotel began rising from the parking lot of the Engle Building. (The principal owner and developer is Bernardo Fort-Brescia, co-founder of the international design firm Arquitectonica and a resident of Coconut Grove.) Plans have been announced for at least three other mid-rise buildings, including one that triggered the demolition last summer of two modest but appealing structures dating to the 1930s.

Despite the money pouring in, the Grove's commercial center has an undeniably shabby feel these days. The red brick sidewalks (another faux affectation in subtropical Florida) are broken and uneven; and empty storefronts, some boarded with plywood, awaiting build-out plans for the next tenants, checker the streetscape.

Merchants say the unusual spike in vacancies is not due to weak sales or low demand, but rather the vicissitudes of the market: property owners, justifying their hefty investments and convinced in their gamble, are raising lease rates with impunity, pricing out otherwise satisfied retailers in favor of their more upscale brethren. Vacancy rates in Coconut Grove were among the highest in Miami-Dade last year, and yet retail rents still rose 15 percent compared to a countywide decline of just over one percent.

At CocoWalk some tenants are being moved out to make way for an expansion, a facelift, and conversion of much of the mall's retail component to class A office space, an evolution of purpose much like Mayfair's. Early drawings of the redesign show lots of wood and glass, a departure from the mall's Mediterranean revival pretensions. Construction began last summer and should be completed in mid-2019. The tenant mix will be decidedly more upscale.

CocoWalk, which has struggled in recent years, has changed hands five times since 1998. The three-acre property is now owned by a group led by the publicly traded, Baltimore-based Federal Realty Investment Trust, which paid \$88 million for it in 2015. At the time, the company's CFO described for the *Miami Herald* the investment appeal of Coconut Grove: "an authentic" neighborhood "in the midst of a resurgence."

Whether Coconut Grove's authenticity can survive that resurgence is the question many are pondering.



A stylish Streamline Moderne structure from the early 1950s, the Engle Building sold in 2014 for \$20 million

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