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# The “Boutique-ing” of Joe’s Alligator Farm: Addison Mizner and the Origins of Palm Beach Style

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In the early decades of the twentieth century a boom in Florida tourism followed the automobile down dusty roads. Local entrepreneurs soon found that the exotic native animals could be sold to the swarms of passing tourists as pets or entertainment, so alligator farms and parrot jungles became a primary roadside business in many parts of the state. Not only did the customers prowl about the edges of fenced-in ditches, gawking at alligators slithering over each other in muddy water, but they could take home living souvenirs, the tiny baby alligators sold in small jars or cups of water. Joe’s Alligator Farm was virtually the only entertainment for cold northerners staying in several large but unprepossessing hotels thrown up in the center of the barren island newly named Palm Beach. In the space of a few brief years the alligator farm was transformed into the epitome of haute resort life by a charming adventurer who gave the name Palm Beach an elite cachet it has retained to this day.

The middle-aged unemployed Addison Mizner viewed this new resort island with distaste but accepted the invitation to spend January there with his friend Paris Singer at the end of World War I. After a decade of effort, his hopes of becoming the fashionable architect of New York and Newport society had foundered, but not before he had created mongrel “Mediterranean” style villas, witty Chinese teahouses, and an “Alaskan mining camp” for an Adirondack retreat of baronial scale for millionaires charmed by the tales

of his adventurous life. During his brief New York career, a Mizner house was as likely to owe its aesthetic parentage to Siam as Byzantine Venice. By the Christmas holidays in 1917, the insolvent bon vivant was ready to go anywhere to escape his forlorn existence on wintry Long Island but found the sparsely inhabited Palm Beach devoid of social and aesthetic attractions. To relieve his boredom while enjoying the balmy climate, Mizner undertook his first commission on the island that would soon be dominated by his architecture, a whimsical conversion of his host’s mundane bungalow into a Chinese villa.

When the Chinese villa drew attention from Joe’s Alligator Farm, Mizner became intrigued by the notion of creating the image of an entire settlement. He temporarily dropped much of his globe-trotting architectural cornucopia and settled into a “Spanish” vocabulary of tiled roofs, stucco walls, paneled ceilings, and tiled floors and courtyards, evoking his memories of Antigua, Guatemala, as much as Salamanca, Spain. He designed dozens of houses that set the “Spanish” revival style in the early years of this fashionable resort. Yet his new stylistic self-discipline did not prevent him from straying into decidedly Venetian variations of his standard tile roof and stucco theme. Casa de Leoni, the Leonard Thomas house, was set with Lake Worth lapping at the balustrade. Its St. Mark’s lion in an ogee arched doorway and trefoil windows with cast “stone” projecting balconies were overshadowed by Mizner’s

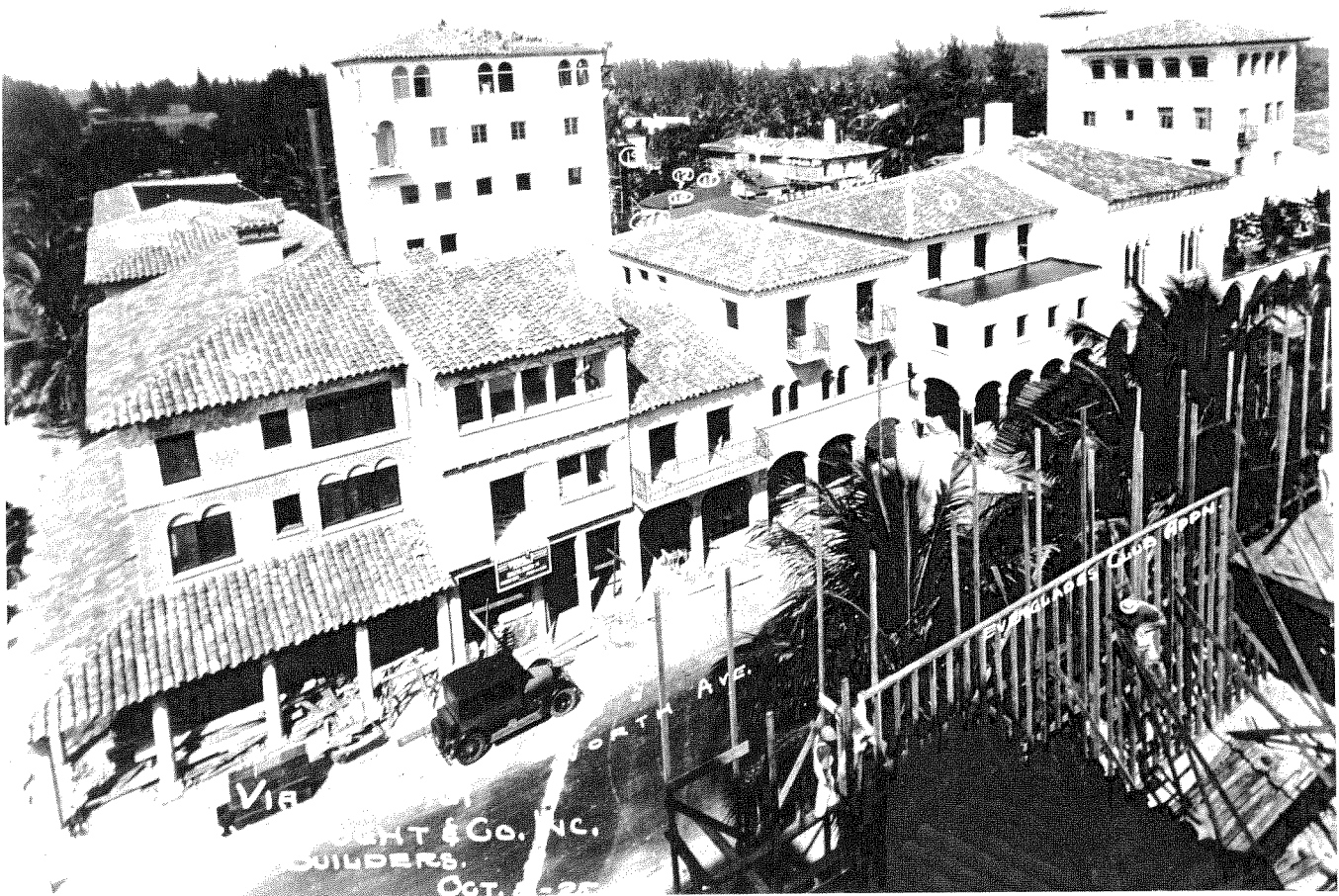
final touch, the gondola slip at the base of the house. He was casual about mixing Spanish doorways, Venetian balconies, and gondola slips with Byzantine or Norman stair towers and Pompeian murals.

It was precisely this theatrical, one could say, irreverent, quality that fired the imaginations of his clients. The unfettered exuberance of his architectural fantasies gave full expression to their wish to express newly acquired wealth in a tangible manner. The style he introduced in Palm Beach was a drastic change from the meager bungalows and barnlike hotels lightly sprinkled on the island when he arrived. Nor did his exuberant stucco and tile haciendas bear any resemblance to the architecture of other important resorts of Mizner’s era.

Shingle style architecture dominated the major Atlantic coastal resorts, such as Bar Harbor, Maine, and Newport, Rhode Island, during the flush of enthusiastic resort development beginning in the 1850s. The brilliant, iconoclastic Boston architect, William Ralph Emerson (1833–1917) filled Bar Harbor with his witty interpretations of the shingle style vocabulary. (His virtuoso visual plays on architectural theory make the twentieth-century puns of Post-Modernists almost flat-footed by comparison.) Richard Morris Hunt (1827–1895) held sway in Newport with considerably less wit and soon abandoned the shingle style for vast ponderous piles of high Gothic or heavy Italiannate embellished stone to provide the dignity his Newport clients craved.



**I Everglades Club**, with the Via Parigi and Via Mizner in the background, c. 1940. Photograph reprinted from Donald Curl's *Mizner's Florida: American Resort Architecture*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, MIT Press with the Architectural History Foundation, 1984. Courtesy of the Historical Society of Palm Beach County.



2 **Via Parigi**, Palm Beach, under construction, 1925; Via Mizner to the right. Photograph reprinted from Donald Curl's *Mizner's Florida: American Resort Architecture*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, MIT Press with the Architectural History Foundation, 1984. Courtesy of the Historical Society of Palm Beach County.

A new reigning architect, the dashing Stanford White (1853–1906), contributed to the shingle style, but by the time Mizner became a regular guest in Newport, White was designing summer palaces in stone with as much French enthusiasm as possible.

Yet Emerson, Hunt, and White all limited themselves to designing individual buildings, not streets and whole districts as Mizner did in Palm Beach or the whole city he had hoped to build in Boca Raton. Even his houses were usually designed as groups of small structures surrounding lanes and spaces reminiscent of Spanish villages or perhaps an opera set for *Carmen*. El Mirasol, Casa Bendita, and Playa Riente were all complex and extensive village concepts containing up to seventy rooms each for the tycoons who commissioned them. Perhaps because he had no formal architectural training, Mizner seemed oblivious to the intellectual currents of city planning and architecture preceding him. The City Beautiful and Garden City movements replaced European traditions of urban concentration and complexity with vast low-density developments in which land uses were intentionally segregated. Mizner gave no indication he knew of such theories.

While his predecessors and contemporaries achieved imposing hauteur through imitation of the chateaux and palaces of European aristocracy, Mizner mimicked the charming little servants' quarters, the simple farmhouses, and the old

winding streets of Spanish towns where small shopkeepers spilled their merchandise into the street. Mizner's clients were just as wealthy as those of Hunt and White, but he put his millionaires in the midst of village street life, and they loved it.

Beginning with the Everglades Club, Mizner designed a complex but playfully unintimidating village focused on Worth Avenue in the center of Palm Beach with both his offices and his home located in the midst of the new boutiques. His seemingly haphazard groupings of courtyards, archways, balconies, stairways, tile roofscapes, plazas, and gardens formed continuously picturesque vistas as well orchestrated as any Baroque sequence.

The first little lane, Via Mizner, was so successful that the next year he built another pedestrian street of artfully simple little buildings and named it Via Parigi for his friend and investor Paris Singer. Throughout the district Mizner mixed land uses with abandon, including residential apartments or small houses above or next to shops, offices, and cafes. With the addition of Phipps Plaza and Patio Marguery, an entire district had been created that quickly became known throughout the Western world as a charming resort.

These years in Palm Beach were Mizner's balmiest, but his ambition to make more than a comfortable income led him into a huge development scheme for Boca Raton, the grandest gesture of his career. Unfortunately, all he was

able to complete was the gesture. He managed to have himself appointed city planner by the city officials of a struggling agricultural community twenty-five miles south of Palm Beach. Through his Mizner Development Company, he simultaneously bought up two-thirds of the land area of the town, a flagrant conflict of interest. He laid out an enormous east-west boulevard, Camino Real, with plazas and commercial frontage. Meanwhile the scandals of unscrupulous developers in a number of other Florida communities were widely publicized and frightened away potential buyers, ending the Florida land boom as dramatically as it had started.

The Mizner Development Company had built the public infrastructure and major landmarks before offering anything for sale, and the first Boca Raton houses and lots went on the market at the worst possible time. The company went bankrupt and Mizner lost all he had invested, having built only a fraction of his new city. He returned to architectural commissions, designing houses in Miami, Bryn Mawr, the California coast, and the Cloisters resort on Georgia's Sea Island. Still oriented to creating integrated compositions of structures and spaces rather than individual buildings, he turned every architectural job into an urban design opportunity. For a large house in Pebble Beach, overlooking the Carmel Bay, he spilled a dozen informally connected Spanish structures along the top of a hill, incorporating courtyards, terraced gardens, and

even a village well. Further down the coast in Montecito, a grander composition of little buildings formed a 20,000-square-foot house. With his health failing and enthusiasm for Florida development further dampened by the crash of the stock market, Mizner devoted himself to writing his fascinating memoirs. He died in Palm Beach in 1933, once more insolvent and heavily in debt.

While people in many cities complain about the “boutique-ing” of their neighborhoods that deprives them of practical necessities, Palm Beach regulars are addicted to their daily fix at Gucci’s or Cartier’s and wouldn’t want a hardware store instead. (Across the bridge on the mainland, West Palm Beach was built to accommodate the mundane necessities of life.) For Addison Mizner, a pioneer of this trend, life without wealthy friends, elegant shops, and exclusive parties was not worth contemplating. He created the shops and townscape for his own ideal social life and spent his remaining years in the midst of his design. He even buried his long-time companion and pet, the monkey Johnny Brown, on Via Mizner, where the tombstone can still be seen among the carefully coiffured shoppers.

One can readily criticize Mizner’s architectural work as contrived, overly charming and picturesque. It has an undeniably phony aspect, and certainly the notion of cute little tile and stucco Spanish neighborhoods all over the country is distasteful. Yet defiantly ugly new developments in depressing waste-

lands of Florida, perversely attaching Palm Beach to their names, have sometimes achieved momentary financial success for their developers merely by evoking the potent image Mizner created for the once barren island. Contemporary “upscale” developments and boutique malls so earnestly replicated in cities and suburbs across the country suffer from the lack of social and economic diversity that has always been the weakness of Palm Beach. Nevertheless, they might seem less deadly with some of the imaginative design of spaces, sequences, and scale that were the most admirable feature of Mizner’s invented villages.

Mizner’s memoirs are out of print, but two recent books document his architecture and life: William Olendorf and Robert Tolf’s *Addison Mizner: Architect to the Affluent* (Fort Lauderdale, Florida: Gale Graphics, 1983, 181 pages) and Donald Curl’s *Mizner’s Florida: American Resort Architecture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press with the Architectural History Foundation, 1984, 256 pages).