ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

The Maverick Who Created Palm Beach

PALM BEACH

Americans tend to want morality in architecture—a rational justification of building in terms of social intent and effect. The merely beautiful or artful is dismissed as beyond serious consideration.

It is hard to write that script for Palm Beach. Palm Beach set out some 50 years ago to be quite arbitrarily and artificially beautiful, frankly luxurious and discriminatory, and it has no redeeming social value in any broader sense. It has ended up, a half century later, as a fascinating chapter in American architectural history, with lessons in planning and environmental amenity that are as genuine as its style is unreal.

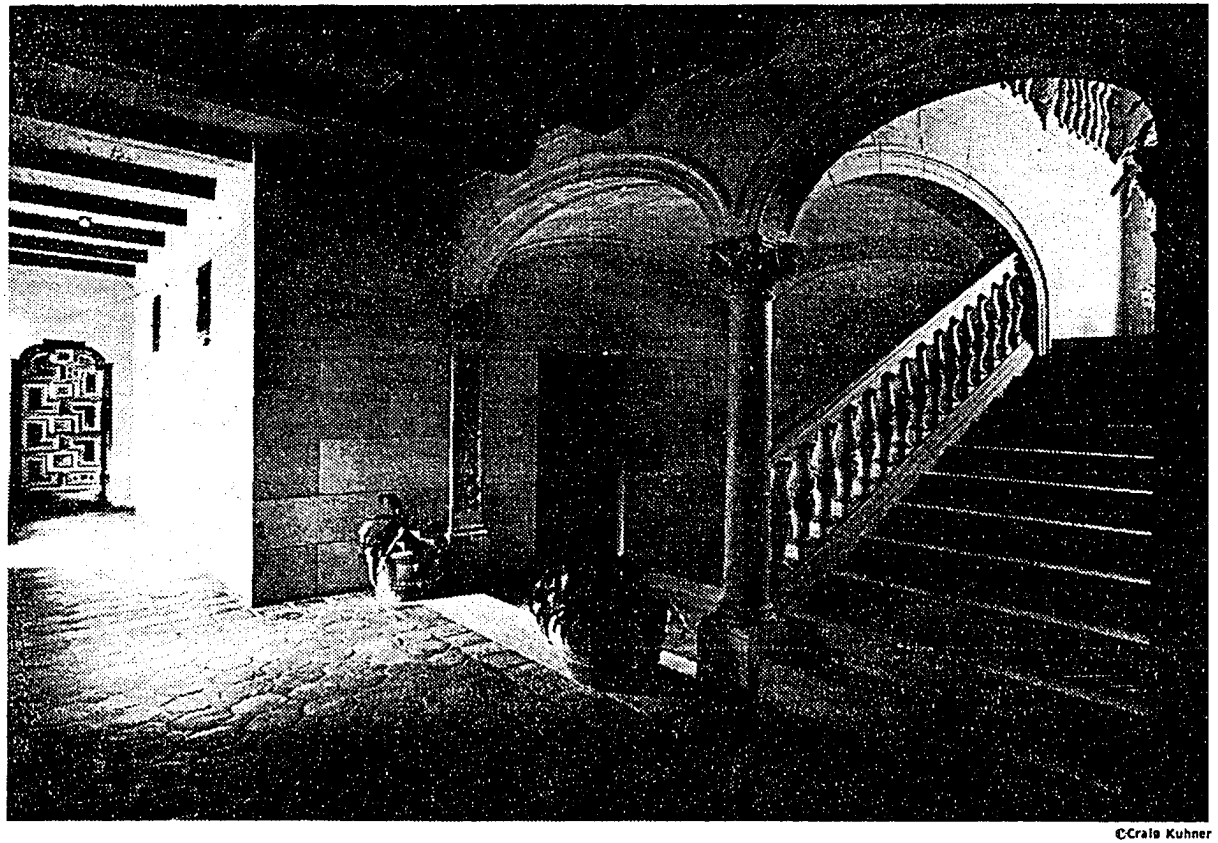
Palm Beach achieved those amenities through two things: rigidly restrictive policies and an exemplary understanding of the relationships of building to site, climate and vegetation. And even its style has something to teach us about history's talent for graceful adaptability and the survival of excellence.

The Palm Beach ambience is largely the work of one maverick architect, Addison Mizner (1872-1933), who created a community and a legend in the affluent years during and just after the First World War—when the local hardship was the closing of the French Riviera—and in the boom years of the 1920's. Palm Beach was a kind of ersatz Hispano-Moresque cloud-cuckoo-land for American millionaires. Anecdotes about Mizner, an eccentric, virtually self-trained architect and expert in translating the conservative cultural aspirations of the very rich into extravagant living in a stageset environment, have been more appreciated than his architecture.

That attitude is probably about to change. Architectural revisionism has hit Palm Beach. A four-part exhibition, "Addison Mizner: Architect of Dreams and Realities," is currently on view in Palm Beach at the Norton Gallery of Art, the Society of the Four Arts, the Henry Morrison Flagler Museum and the Historical Society of Palm Beach County. Funding is from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Fine Arts Council of Florida.

The exhibition has been organized and the catalogue written by Christina Orr, who has spent a number of years researching Mizner's work for a doctoral dissertation at Yale (that hotbed of architectural revisionism) and is currently curator of the Norton Gallery. In at least one case, the Society of the Four Arts, the show is in a Mizner building, and it is just a short step away to the rest of his Palm Beach work.

The exhibition continues through April 17, and with luck, the buildings will continue thereafter, but don't take that luck for granted. Palm Beach has already destroyed numerous Mizner landmarks, including three of his finest, largest houses—El Mirasol, built for Edward T. Stotesbury, Joshua Cosden's Playa Riente, and John S. Phipp's Casa Bendita. The magnificent house built for William Warden in 1922 has just been sentenced, unpardonably, to demolition, in a zoning verdict by the Town Council for a new condominium.



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Addison Mizner's Warden House in Palm Beach—"sentenced to demolition"

I can attest, from a tour of Mizner buildings and of the Warden House in particular, that this is not expendable architecture. The Warden House is a typical Mizner product, typical in the beauty of its concept, spaces and execution. The formal progression of rooms around a garden court, with a light-filled loggia room and cloister corridor of continuous, arched windows, is as characteristic of the architect as the tiled floors and wood-beamed ceilings.

These are expert plans, in spite of all the popular tales about Mizner putting in 40-car garages and forgetting stairs and kitchen, and their spaces work superbly as architecture; even empty, their functional and decorative logic gives extreme visual and sensuous pleasure. The brilliant aquamarine of "Mizner blue" tile and the original designs of the Warden House cypress ceiling, in soft celadon and moss green, umber and sienna, are as fresh

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The Maverick Of Palm Beach

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and exhilarating as when the house was constructed. It is incredible that anyone would deliberately destroy this workmanship today.

It was Mizner's sensitivity to his surroundings that distinguished his product, more than his antiquarian leanings. "Northern architecture didn't register," he wrote when he arrived in a sparsely populated Palm Beach in 1918, noting that a New England Colonial house with coconut trees hanging over the door "looked absurd."

Mizner's answer—a variation on the Spanish style as he knew it from early years in Guatemala when his father served as ambassador, and from his later studies in Spain—looked calculatedly picturesque but never absurd. "He recognized the pleasure the wealthy took in nostalgic, romantic images of Europe," according to Mrs. Orr. And he shared their conservative taste.

"I adapted Spanish architecture to Florida," he explained, "with color, lots of color. There is a very strong light down there, reflected from the sands, and the ocean glistens like an opal, with pinks, greens and blues. I used all sorts of pastel colors on my houses to kill the glare. Florida is as flat as a pancake. You must build with a strong skyline . . . the landscape gives no help. You must make your own."

He made his landscape with palms, oleanders and orange trees. And he built flat facades for the strong light with ornate doors and unconventionally placed windows, stairs and towers. He established Mizner Industries in West Palm Beach, where craftsmen were trained to produce tiles, pottery, wrought iron and stained glass. Among his "innovations" were "woodite," a substance that could be worked like wood, and a cast stone, which made it possible to provide enough baronial "Spanish" dining rooms and "medieval" cloisters to meet demand. The rooms were filled with "antiqued" furniture. Iron and crushed velvet spread across the land, conquistadors of the domestic scene.

If some of this was ludicrous, other Mizner effects were prescient—notably his commercial and residential mix in the design of Worth Avenue and the Via Mizner and Via Parigi, completed in 1926. "At each turn," Mrs. Orr tells us, "there was a new discovery—a garden spot with a restaurant, an overhanging balcony laden with bougainvillea, a tiled stairway surprisingly tucked beneath a bridge, and always little shops to tantalize." This is today's approved planning blend of boutiques, apartments and pedestrian pleasures.

Mrs. Orr correctly points out that Mizner was not alone in the development of Palm Beach. Marion Sims Wyeth, Maurice Fatio, Joseph Urban and John Volk "also designed fine buildings in their own Mediterranean styles." From Urban's theatrical exuberance to Fatio's delicate refinement, Palm Beach was a total, luxurious fantasy. It was, and is, a dream world for the few. The dream is about to be recognized as history and art.