



“Tropical Exotic: Orientalism and the Creation of South Florida”

Robin BACHIN, Associate Professor
University of Miami, United States
rbachin@miami.edu

When developer Carl Fisher opened his first hotel, The Flamingo, in Miami Beach in 1920, one local reporter explained that Fisher’s Miami Beach “is a figment of the imagination, with all of the qualities. . . of the best escapist fiction.” This reporter captured the sense of exoticism that permeated all aspects of South Florida in the 1920s. Indeed, Fischer himself, along with other developers, landscape designers, and architects, capitalized on this feeling of fantasy to create an urban oasis amidst the sandy beaches, clear waters, and tropical breezes that made South Florida a destination for travelers in America. From the Japanese gardeners who planted Arabian jasmine, Hong Kong orchids, and Rangoon creeper on the grounds of Miami Beach hotels to the architects who used Moorish arches, spires, and domes to enhance residential and commercial buildings, the developers of South Florida utilized the design motifs of “exotic” nature and architecture to sell the promise of escape. Promoters created alluring sketches and drawings of tropical fantasylands, places with alluring names like Hialeah, Opa-Locka, and Aladdin, whose themed designs represented early models for idealized cities that would be epitomized with the advent of Disney World.

This paper will address the role of exoticism in shaping the built and natural environments of South Florida in the 1920s, and, more broadly, in defining the meanings of leisure, travel, and tourism in Jazz Age America. The expansion and promotion of leisure at the start of the twentieth century offered many Americans the opportunity to transform themselves and their sense of personal identity through travel and tourism. Those seeking renewal and self-fulfillment through travel often sought out remote and “exotic” locations to escape the apparent artificiality of bourgeois society in a consumer-oriented economy. Yet most often the experience of the exotic was predicated upon mass culture entrepreneurs creating the illusion of exoticism through the trappings of modern mass culture. This paper discusses the ways in which various manifestations of Orientalism in South Florida provided a stage set for travelers to reinvent themselves as well as confirm their own social aspirations. It also explores how developers and engineers dramatically altered the native tropical landscape in order to spur railroad development, agricultural production, land speculation, and the promotion of tourism. In place of tidal marshes, mangrove swamps, and saw grass, developers introduced manicured beaches, man-made islands, citrus plantations, and coconut groves, as well as “Oriental” plant species, Ceylonese peacocks, and Bahamian flamingoes. These efforts to commodify and exoticize the landscape helped sell the image of paradise to travelers and land buyers alike by directly linking the historic lure of the East with the carefree lifestyle of tropical Florida. In the process, the “Oriental” and the tropical were conflated, making South Florida into a new, modern example of what constituted the exotic.

KEY WORDS: Architecture, exoticism, Orientalism, landscape, tourism.