

911 North Ocean Boulevard

Playa Riente Wall and Seawall



DESIGNATION REPORT
February 20, 2019
Landmark Preservation Commission
Palm Beach, Florida

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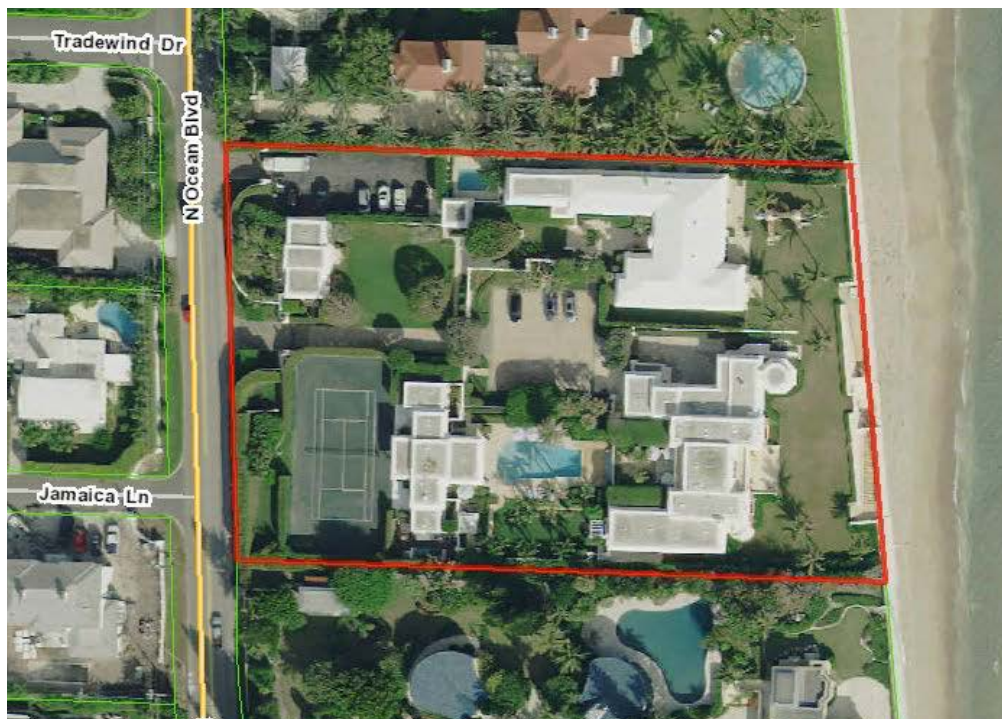
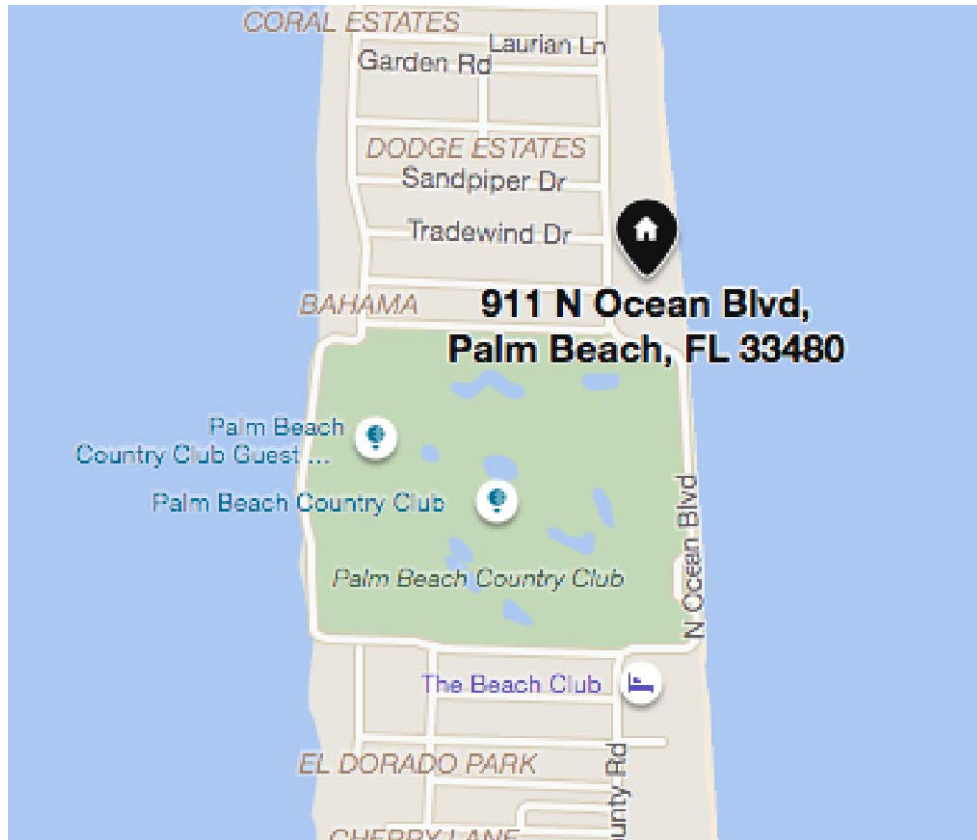
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Report produced by Murphy Stillings, LLC

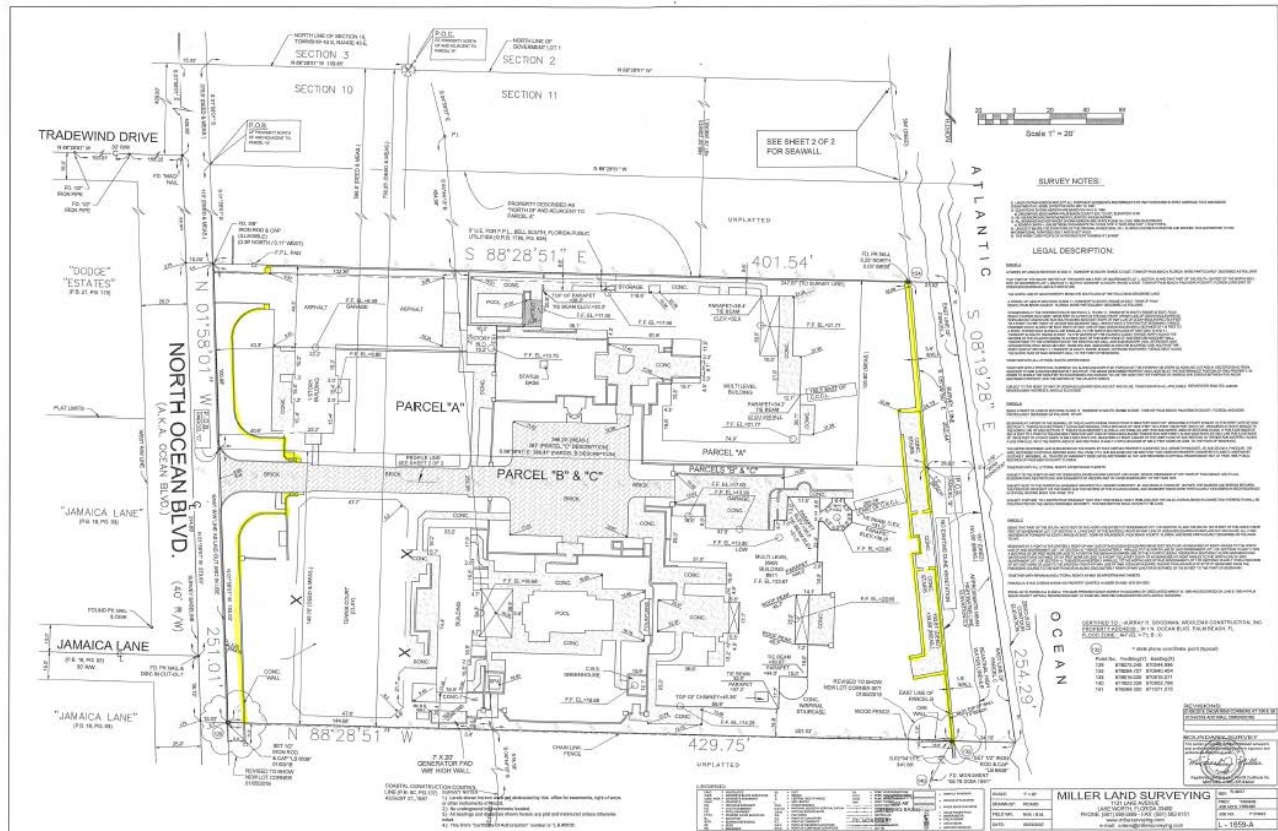
I. General Information

Location:	911 North Ocean Boulevard
Date of Construction:	Wall 1924; Seawall 1923-1924
First Owner:	Joshua S. Cosden
Historic Name:	Playa Riente
Architect:	Addison Mizner
Present Owner:	Murray and Joan Goodman
Present Use:	Wall, Seawall and Stairs
Present Zoning:	RA
Palm Beach County Tax Folio Number:	50434310000010020
Current Legal Description:	10/11-43-43, S 226.75 FTOF SUB B&N 23.25 FT OF SUB C OF GOV LT 1 SECS 10 & 11 LYG N & E OF OCEAN BLVD; *See Survey With Areas Being Designated Highlighted

II. LOCATION MAP



III. SURVEY



IV. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

The historic Playa Riente wall is an ornate structure running along the front of the property at 911 North Ocean Boulevard. This decorative wall curves gracefully at the driveway entrance to connect to a decorative metal gate and large columns. The stucco covered 9-½ foot high wall is plain at the bottom where it is concealed by a hedge. The upper 5 foot decorative portion of the wall is fronted by a projecting balustrade of slender Corinthian style balusters topped with a carved shape to create a void of a Gothic design under the cornice. This balustrade rests upon a carved stone base that is supported by large elaborately decorated corbels. A stucco panel separates the sections of the wall with an incised Gothic shaped arch. The classical design is picturesque and it remains as a significant feature of the former grand Playa Riente estate. It has also become an iconic feature along the 900-block stretch of North Ocean Boulevard.





Playa Riente was built overlooking the ocean with a large seawall embracing two elegant staircases leading down to the beach. The owners and guests used these stairs to access the beach from the large patio overlooking the ocean. At the bottom of the seawall between the staircases is a large stucco incised arch topped by a substantial projecting cornice supported by brackets. This large arch is the original terminus to the tunnel that runs underneath the house and patio to the seawall and the ocean beach. The seawall also has a series of very narrow windows providing light to the beach dressing rooms behind the seawall.



Historic Photo of Playa Riente Seawall



Over the past years, the historic Playa Riente wall along North Ocean Boulevard and the seawall and stairs have had alterations and additions, several to provide safety and security to the property owners. Changes to the wall along North Ocean Boulevard and curving into the driveway include the addition of front driveway metal gates with automatic closure equipment, a gate intercom system, an entry door in the wall and mailbox, entry piers and custom pier lights.¹ Changes to the seawall and staircase include the change of paint color of the wall and staircase, raised sides of staircases, security gates and enclosure, steel door to tunnel, wood and metal handrails, ladder to beach, exterior wall lights and electric conduit on wall, exposed drainage pipe, glass block in wall openings and stair tread replacements. Despite these changes, the walls and stairs retain their historic integrity and if security was not a factor, they could be restored to their original appearance.

¹ It is unsure if the entry piers are original but based on design relative to rest of ornate wall, they are questionable.

V. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

Renowned architect Addison Mizner designed Playa Riente for oil magnate Joshua S. Cosden in 1923-1924 during the height of Palm Beach's land and building boom.² Playa Riente was Mizner's grandest and most elaborately decorated and detailed house in Palm Beach.³ The huge, ocean-to-lake rambling estate was designed as a Spanish Moorish Villa with dramatic Gothic detailing. Cooper Lightbown, a contractor for many large estates of the era and many of Mizner's commissions, was the contractor for the house.

Playa Riente was regarded as Mizner's masterpiece. It was described in *Vogue* magazine as "the finest private residence in America in the early 1920s."⁴ And journalist Ida M. Tardell called it "one of the most perfect great houses in America."⁵

Mizner created Playa Riente on almost 25 acres stretching from the Atlantic Ocean to Lake Worth. It had an ocean frontage of 1,000 feet, included over 70 rooms of which 15 were master bedrooms. The outside was faced with cut and polished quarry blocks from the Florida Keys. According to a Palm Beach Daily News Article, "Playa Riente expressed the vast unconstrained grandeur most often associated with Palm Beach. Along with a myriad of loggias, cloisters, sun decks, patios and terraces, there was a cathedral-like living room and a music room, not only made famous by its performers and guests but by its museum-quality nine-panel mural painted by Jose Sert. Playa Riente's mammoth scale and extent rivaled European palaces."⁶

Joshua S. Cosden was a self-made man who became highly successful in the oil business, accumulating a fortune of \$75 million in Oklahoma by the mid 1910s. His wife Eleanor "Nell" travelled with Mizner to Spain and Italy to purchase valuable furnishings and artwork for Playa Riente, which blended

² The name Playa Riente was known as either "Laughing Beach" or "Smiling Sands."

³ Donald Curl. Palm Beach County: An Illustrated History. Windsor Publications, Inc., 1986. Page 67.

⁴ James R Knott. The Mansion Builders: Historical Vignettes of Palm Beach. 1990. Page 19.

⁵ Caroline Seebohn. Boca Rococo: How Addison Mizner Invented Florida's Gold Coast. New York: Clarkson Potter Publishers, 2001. Page 206. Ida M. Tarbell came to Palm Beach when Alice De Lamar commissioned her to write the introduction for a monograph on the work of her good friend Addison Mizner.

⁶ Augustus Mayhew. Unforgettable Palm Beach: Alluring Stories from Showplace to Scrap Heap." Palm Beach Daily News. 2 May 2011.

with their pieces manufactured by Mizner Industries. Frederico and Anchille Angeli were brought in from Florence to fresco a number of walls and ceilings and the famous muralist Jose Sert designed a set of nine murals that were hung in the dramatic ballroom overlooking the ocean where famous singers performed musicals. The Cosden's were known for their lavish parties and entertaining renowned guests during the season at Playa Riente.

Joseph Cosden suffered financial trouble in the stock market and was forced to place Playa Riente on the market in early 1926.⁷ A few weeks after going on the market, Mrs. Anna Horace Elgin Dodge, widow of the automaker, purchased Playa Riente for \$2,800,000. Three weeks later she married Hugh Dillman who had acted as her real estate agent in the deal. The Dillman's soon after hired Mizner to design a servant's wing and a Gothic Moorish cloistered patio for the grand estate. The Dillman's also entertained lavishly, with one of the most magnificent of Playa Riente's parties taking place in April 1941 when the Dillman's entertained 500 guests to welcome the Duke and Duchess of Windsor during their first visit to Palm Beach.

The Dillman's divorced in 1947 and Anna resumed the Dodge name. Playa Riente remained closed during much of the mid-1940s, as it was very difficult to hire staff during the War. Anna Dodge returned to the house in 1948 after workmen prepared for its' reopening. By the 1950s, the immense estate had become too expensive to maintain, and Anna Dodge put it on the market. There were no individual buyers so she tried to have the zoning changed to permit the estate to become a private club, school, apartment house or museum. The zoning board turned her down so she petitioned the Town Council with a special hardship exception stating "the cost of maintaining the property is prohibitive for single family occupancy under existing changed economic and social conditions that have evolved since the zoning code was enacted."⁸ Between the high taxes and insurance and the cost of properly maintaining and staffing the house, there were no single- family buyers but the Town would not allow for a zoning change.⁹ So after throwing a giant farewell party and auctioning off the furnishings, Anna Dodge sadly permitted the wrecking ball to demolish Playa Riente in 1957.

⁷ Donald Curl. Palm Beach County: An Illustrated History. Page 68. The Foreword to the Catalog for the sale of the Playa Riente furnishings and fixtures stated that the Cosden's sold the house to Anna Dodge in 1925 though she did not occupy it until 1926.

⁸ "Rezoning Sought for Playa Riente, The Palm Beach Post. 22 November 1952, Page 5.

⁹ Joseph P. Kennedy, who had a house to the north not far from Playa Riente, fought against any zoning change for the estate despite the fact that there were two clubs already in existence just to the south.

VI. ARCHITECT BIOGRAPHY

Addison Mizner

Addison Cairns Mizner was one of Palm Beach's most flamboyant architects from his arrival on the island in 1918 until his death in 1933. With Richard M. Hunt and Stanford White he was known as one of the "great society architects". Mizner socialized with the wealthy, and through his contacts introduced Mediterranean Revival architecture to Palm Beach, revolutionizing the shape of the Town.

Mizner was born in 1872 in Benicia, California, the son of a prominent California pioneer family. Although he never studied architecture at the university level, Mizner absorbed design concepts "in the field" while his father was ambassador in Central America. Fluent in Spanish from his time in Guatemala City, Mizner traveled to Spain where he lived in Salamanca for less than a year. Despite the fact that his time in Spain was short his travels left a lasting imprint on his life and work.

From 1893 to 1896 Mizner expanded his knowledge of Spanish style architecture by serving an apprenticeship with a leading proponent of the style, Willis Polk, in San Francisco. His apprenticeship taught him draftsmanship and construction techniques and eventually led to a partnership with Polk. From California Mizner traveled to New York City where he benefitted from a friendship with Sanford White, who helped him become established in the city.

Mizner first visited Palm Beach in 1918 while recovering from an accident. Already established as a New York architect, he stayed with Paris Singer, son of Sewing Machine mogul Isaac Singer and husband of dancer Isadora Duncan. Singer was interested in developing Palm Beach as a resort for the wealthy of New York. Mizner received a \$6,000 per year retainer from Singer to encourage his New York society clientele to build vacation homes in Palm Beach.

The Everglades Club, designed in 1918, was Mizner's first project and set the tone for the new Palm Beach. Addison Mizner moved away from the shingle cottage style town of Henry Flagler and moved toward a resort of fashion and elegance.

In the Town of Palm Beach Mizner buildings included dozens of mansions, the Via Mizner, Via Parigi, office buildings, apartments, and shops. One of Mizner's unique attributes was his ability to adapt to circumstance. When the elements of his Spanish style buildings became unavailable (iron works, tiles, etc., that help define the Mediterranean Revival style) he established Mizner Industries to produce the needed materials. Eventually he produced the new and "antique" furniture used to decorate his houses.

After the collapse of Mizner's project in Boca Raton, and the failure of the Mizner development, he continued to live in Villa Mizner but had financial trouble maintaining his life style. Mizner died of a heart attack on February 5, 1933.

VII. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE:

The ornate wall fronting the property on the west and the seawall and staircases on the east are significant features remaining from the grand Playa Riente estate. Though the mansion was demolished in 1957, these important features were spared the wrecking ball.

VIII. CRITERIA FOR DESIGNATION

Section 54-161 of the Town of Palm Beach Landmarks Preservation Ordinance outlines the criteria for designation of a landmark or landmark site and suggests that at least one criterion must be met to justify the designation. Listed below are criteria, which relate to this property and justification for designation:

(1) "Exemplifies or reflects the broad cultural, political, economic or social history of the nation, state, county or town."

Playa Riente was Mizner's largest and most elaborately decorated home in Palm Beach, built in 1923 for Oklahoma oilman Joshua Cosden and owned for over 30 years by Anna Dodge. Like many of Palm Beach's grandest estates built during the Florida Land Boom, Playa Riente was demolished because it had become too expensive to maintain and zoning laws would not allow for a change of use. Along with Playa Riente, El Mirasol, Casa Bendita, Casa Florencia, La Fontana, Heamaw, Blythedunes, Villa Marina and others that were once central to

Palm Beach society were seen as relics from the past and demolished. Fortunately, the wrecking ball missed the beautiful perimeter wall and seawall and stairs at Playa Riente.

(3) “Embodies distinguishing characteristics of an architectural type or is a specimen inherently valuable for the study of a period, style, method of construction or use of indigenous materials or craftsmanship.”

The Playa Riente wall on the west side of the estate running along North Ocean Boulevard is an ornate wall featuring a projecting balustrade of slender Corinthian style balusters topped with a carved shape to create a void of a Gothic design. This balustrade is supported by large elaborately decorated corbels and separated by sections with panels containing an incised Gothic shaped arch. The classical design is picturesque and it remains as a significant feature of the former grand Playa Riente estate as well as an iconic feature along the 900-block stretch of North Ocean Boulevard.

Playa Riente was built overlooking the ocean with a large seawall embracing two elegant staircases leading down to the beach. At the bottom of the seawall between the staircases is a large stucco incised arch topped by a substantial projecting cornice supported by brackets. Within this arch is a door leading to the tunnel connecting the seawall to the house. This picturesque seawall is the only known seawall in Palm Beach with staircases built as a part of the seawall, making it a unique feature to the Island.

Both the seawall and the wall running along North Ocean Boulevard are important architectural features remaining from the grand Playa Riente estate.

(4) “Is representative of the notable work of a master builder, designer or architect whose individual ability has been recognized or has influenced his age.”

Addison Mizner was the most influential Palm Beach architect from his arrival in Town in 1918 through the Building Boom of the 1920s. His Mediterranean Revival designs won the attention and patronage of wealthy clients and his designs helped to transform Palm Beach from a cottage colony to a world famous resort. Playa Riente was his largest and most elaborate Palm Beach commission and his design of the front perimeter wall and the seawall were contributing parts of this grand estate.

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