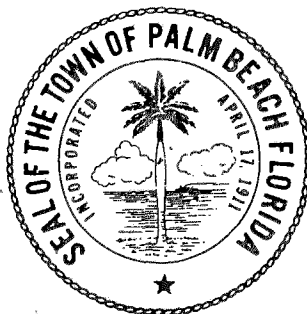


LA TORRE BIANCA
235 BANYAN ROAD



DESIGNATION REPORT



LANDMARKS PRESERVATION COMMISSION

DECEMBER 12, 1984

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Report prepared by: Stephen J. Tool, Jr., Coordinator
Landmarks Preservation Commission

I. GENERAL INFORMATION

HISTORIC NAME(S):

La Torre Bianca/Casa Ave Maria

CURRENT NAME:

La Torre Bianca (The White Tower)

LOCATION:

235 Banyan Road
Palm Beach, Florida

DATE OF CONSTRUCTION:

1925

ARCHITECT(S):

Howard Major, Palm Beach, Florida

PRESENT OWNER:

Richard A. Wright, M.D.
235 Banyan Road
Palm Beach, Florida 33480

I. GENERAL INFORMATION (Continued)

PRESENT USE:

Private Residence

PRESENT ZONING:

R-A Estate Residential

LEGAL DESCRIPTION:

26-43-43, W 177.50 ft of E 375.34 ft of S 26 ft of N
778.50 ft 7 W 197.50 ft of E 395.34 ft of S 149 ft of
N 927.5 ft of S 1/2 of GOV LOT 2 W of County Rd.

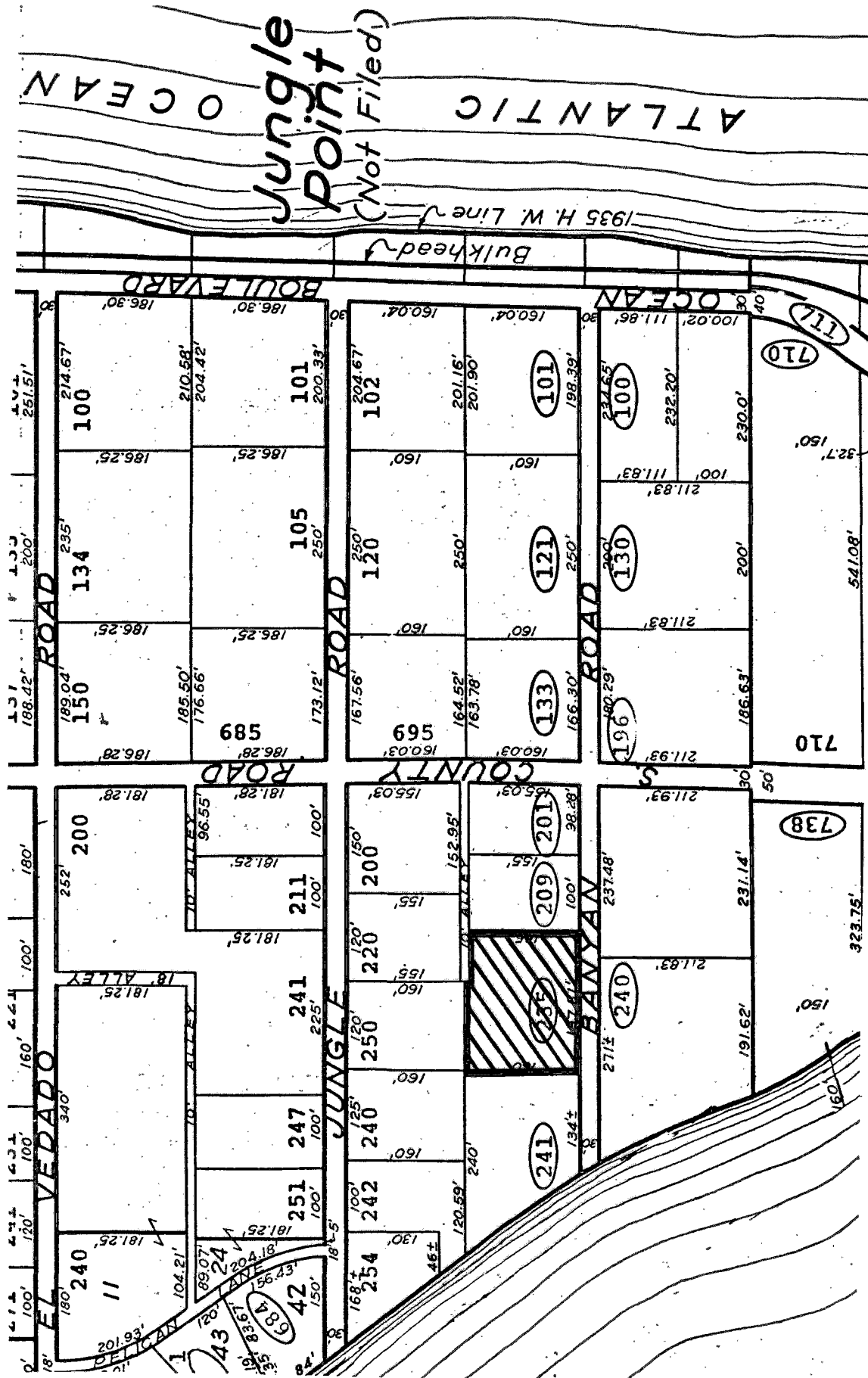
PALM BEACH COUNTY TAX FOLIO NUMBER:

504343-26-00-0020-400

CLASSIFICATION IN THE "HISTORIC BUILDING SURVEY OF PALM BEACH":

Grade B: A structure which is of statewide or local architectural or historical significance, but is not necessarily eligible for the National Register of Historic Places. It may be representative of a certain stylistic development in Palm Beach at its finest, or a document of an important era or trend in the Town's history.

II. LOCATION MAP (235 Banyan Road)



III. ARCHITECTURAL & HISTORICAL INFORMATION

La Torre Bianca, 235 Banyan Road, was constructed in 1925 as a seasonal retreat for the Nelson Odman family from plans prepared by Palm Beach architect Howard Major. The April 28, 1925, building permit estimated the cost of its construction at \$40,000.

Typical of Palm Beach during the 1920's this house is representative of the Mediterranean Revival style of architecture, a most popular style at the height of the Florida Land Boom. Also typical of the era is the use of hollow core clay tile covered with texturized stucco as the exterior building material. A barrel tile roof continues the Mediterranean Revival theme.

The layout of La Torre Bianca is basically U-shaped, encircling the ubiquitous Palm Beach patio. In a forward to a 1929 publication Palm Beach Villas architect Howard Major states that the patio is "the most distinctive feature of the Palm Beach home." He further states that to the Palm Beacher "it (the patio) is of more importance than either his living room or his dining room, for he can live, eat, or receive his friends comfortably in this beautiful environment." (See Appendix 1).

Notable architectural features of this house include its three-story entrance tower, recessed entry highlighted by a rusticated cast stone Florentine arch and decorative iron entry gate and window grilles.

It is especailly interesting to note that La Torre Bianca was planned by Howard Major, a Palm Beach architect well known for his design ability. Major (1883-1974), although his Spanish/Mediterranean style houses were exceptionally well designed, was the earliest critic of the style, condemning it as inappropriate for Florida's climate and not expressive of America's

III. ARCHITECTURAL & HISTORICAL INFORMATION (Continued)

"national character." He firmly believed that Greek Revival architecture fulfilled all of Florida's architectural needs. (See Appendix 2).

IV. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE &
CRITERIA FOR DESIGNATION

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

La Torre Bianca, located at 235 Banyan Road, is an exceptionally good example of the Mediterranean Revival style of architecture which served as the hallmark of the 1920's Florida Land Boom. This style is widely recognized as an integral part of the unique ambiance of Palm Beach. It is the design of a noted Palm Beach architect, Howard Major, an interesting fact since Major was very critical of the style and deemed it inappropriate for Florida.

CRITERIA FOR DESIGNATION

Section 16-38 of the Code of Ordinances for the Town of Palm Beach, Florida, outlines the criteria for designation of a landmark or landmark site and suggests that at least one of the criteria be met to justify the designation. Listed below is the designation criteria and justification for designation:

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

La Torre Bianca typifies the style of architecture utilized during the massive building efforts associated with Florida's Boom of the 1920's. The construction of seasonal residences, such as La Torre Bianca, during this era generally marks the birth of the Palm Beach resort community as it is known today. Palm Beach's stature as a winter resort for America's decision makers has long been recognized.

- b) "Is identified with historic personages or with important events in national, state or local history."

Not applicable.

IV. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE &
CRITERIA FOR DESIGNATION (Continued)

- c) "Embodies distinguishing characteristics of one or more architectural types, or contains specimens inherently valuable for the study of a period, style or methods of construction or use of indigenous materials or craftsmanship."

This residence is a very fine example of the Mediterranean Revival style of architecture and, as such, typifies the prevailing stylistic preference of Florida during its infamous Boom of the 1920's. Palm Beach was at the forefront of the Revival movement as witnessed by the early works of Major, Addison Mizner, Marion Sims Wyeth, and others.

- d) "Is representative of the notable works of one or more master builders, designers or architects whose individual ability has been recognized to have influenced their age."

The design for La Torre Bianca was the work of Howard Major, a Palm Beach architect who has been recognized for his impact on Palm Beach. This residence is an especially important example of Major's work as it is representative of a style of architecture that Major felt was inappropriate for this area and is one of very few of his commissions executed in the Mediterranean Revival style.

V. SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

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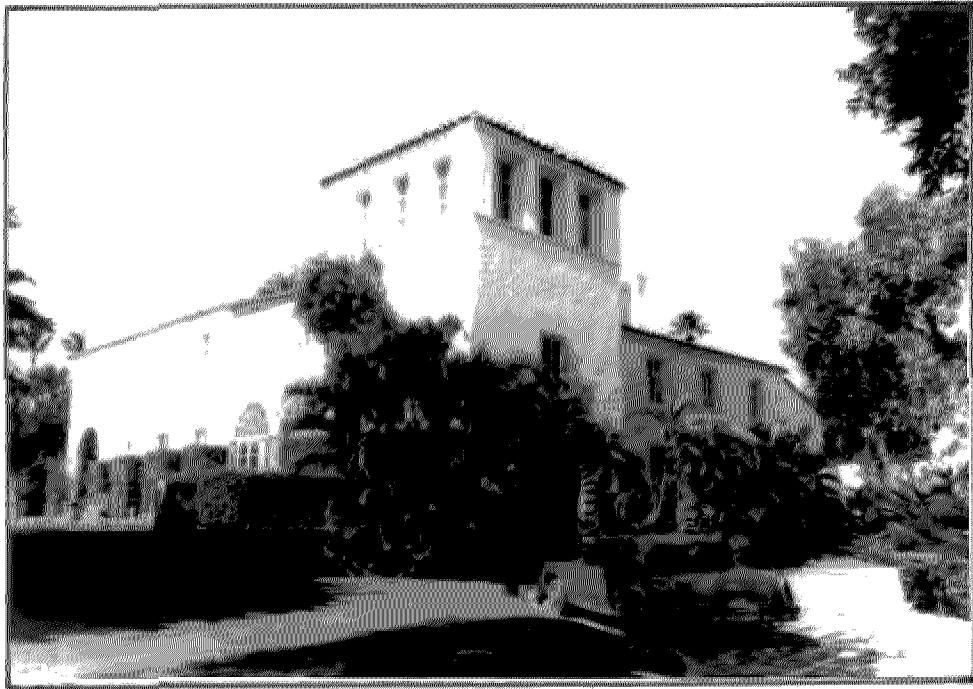
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Special Acknowledgments

Historical Society of Palm Beach County for access to various files and publications in its collection.

Town of Palm Beach Building Department for building permit information.

VI. PHOTOGRAPHY





VII. APPENDICES

Palm Beach Architecture

By HOWARD MAJOR, A. I. A.

ONE may say the architecture of Palm Beach began when Henry Flagler built the Royal Poinciana in 1894 and the Palm Beach Inn in 1895, the latter upon the present site of the Breakers. The social life of the colony in those days revolved about these two hotels during the short period of four weeks in February. As time went on, a few inexpensive cottages appeared along the Lake Trail which were built by northern visitors, who preferred home life. This slow, almost imperceptible growth continued until 1918 when an upheaval took place which changed Palm Beach from a strictly Hotel Resort to a Winter Colony.

The Royal Poinciana was designed in the Colonial style, with clapboarded walls and shingle roofs. It was a dignified structure, with balance and repose and was excellent architecture considering that it sprang from the "gay nineties." Frame construction remained in vogue until 1918. The first era of Palm Beach architecture might well be termed the "Clapboard and Shingle Period." There is not much to be said about the few houses built during this time.

In 1918, through the activity of Mr. Paris Singer, the transition began which was to make Palm Beach the most famous resort center of the world. Mr. Singer, a man of artistic ability, retained Mr. Addison Mizner to build the Everglades Club. Mr. Mizner broke away entirely from current tradition and built the Club in stucco and tile in the Spanish manner. The successful result immediately awakened interest in the architecture of Spain, for it was a revelation with its bewitching loggias opening upon patios of glazed tile, with fountains, flowers, terraces and luncheon tables set between stately palms and orange trees. For the first time Palm Beach awoke to the possibilities of an outdoor life on every occasion. Dining and dancing under tropical skies gave the colony a new impetus. Over night some of the hotel habitues began to dream of a home with just such a patio.

Palm Beach now had not only its hotels but the Everglades Club, with golf course, a splendid restaurant and a most delightful outdoor dancing floor under palm trees, with the waters of Lake Worth at its edge.

The style of "Stucco and Tile" now had its inception. Palm Beach had reverted to the first architecture of the United States and the first architecture of Florida. The oldest city in the New World, Santo Domingo, was established in the last years of the fifteenth century by the Spaniards. In 1565 the Spaniards, under Pedro de Menendez, founded St. Augustine, the oldest city in the United States. The Spaniards built there as they built in Castile, built with the same material, the white limestone which they found in the new world as well as in the old. Their architecture featured colonnades and towers, balconies and grills, churches and monasteries. Fortunately some of the old Castilian architecture still remains in the narrow streets of St. Augustine.

By 1920, it was apparent that Palm Beach had undergone a decided change. Large Spanish estates had sprung up on every hand. The resident colony had taken on a new importance and was fast becoming the social center of the resort. By 1926, the season was extended to one of four or five months and Palm Beach had come into its own.

The rapid increase in the number of sumptuous homes attracted the best architectural talent. The homes began to assume an importance and excellence equal to the show places on the Riviera. Likewise this wealthy colony attracted the most exclusive shops from the north. Marcus, Bendel's, Brooks, Bonwit Teller, Best, Saks and other Fifth Avenue shops had found their way to Palm Beach. More hotels, restaurants, theatres and clubs followed, so that today Palm Beach is more complete than the famous resorts of Europe.

After the Everglades Club was built, the Spanish type of architecture immediately became universal. With the history of the Caribbean and with the sub-tropical setting this style had its *raison d'être*. It is, however, not a simple matter for the

Anglo-Saxon to assimilate this foreign architecture. In Spain facades are austere, with few windows and a noticeable lack of ornamentation. In the patios, however, Spanish architecture blossoms forth in all its glory, with arcades, loggias, balconies, fountains, colored tiles, plants and potted flowers. Vivid colors are paramount. At first what we are inclined to condemn as "garish" blossoms forth in its appropriateness after further study and experiences in the tropics.

The Spaniard built in the American tropics with a predominant idea firmly rooted in his mind, coolness. The methods he adopted met with unqualified success. He solved a problem in the new world which he left incomplete in the old in introducing coolness and comfort into tropical life. The story heights of their tropical homes were so lofty as to equal two of the usual size in the States. These lofty ceilings allow plenty of space in which warm air may rise, and sufficient height for door and window openings of monumental size. The windows are sparingly used but their size is enormous, from five to six feet in width and starting invariably at the floor they rise to ten or fifteen feet in height. Skill and ingenuity were employed upon blinds, which were the sole barriers against the elements. Primarily the shutters were designed to control the circulation of air, and secondly to present from within a pleasant and interesting arrangement of panels, many of them hinged upon themselves. These blinds served to control the inflow of air, regulating it from the minimum amount admitted by opening one hinged panel to the entire volume which was permitted ingress by the full opening of the blind. Window hangings are not to be found. The interesting blinds as in the case of handsome doors are most appropriate from a decorative point of view and sufficient unto themselves. From the same angle window hangings are superfluous and from the practical side quite impossible, as they are most effective in keeping out the air as well as producing a hot and stuffy atmosphere.

The doorway to the room is unusual. Like the windows, it evolved from the constant demand for circulation of air. These interior doorways are from four to five feet wide and the height of the window. In this doorway may be seen a paneled door opening into the room, and a pair of doors opening out, the width of the opening but only a trifle over six feet in height. With the large doors open and the small pair of

doors closed there are from four to six feet of free space above them, insuring a definite amount of air from the window to circulate through them.

Masonry floors appear everywhere in every variety of tile. Wood floors are unknown. These interesting tile floors dispense with the necessity for rugs or other stuffy floor covering.

The most important room in the house of the Spaniard is the patio, around which his life and his home revolve. It is here that his decorative skill is brought into full play. The exteriors are austere, the interiors purposely cold, but the patio blossoms forth to include all the comforts and decorative architecture that his sybaritic taste desires. The patio is a room without a roof; it is of dimensions proportionate to the other rooms of the house.

Inseparable from the patio are the arcades or colonnades, which are on one, two, three or on all four sides producing a lovely cloister-like effect. On the floor above are additional arcades or loggias and balconies of interesting and picturesque design. These arcades and loggias serve not only as outdoor living rooms, but as a means of access to each room in lieu of inside halls.

In the center of the patio beautifully tiled fountains are invariably found. All about are skilfully placed plants of potted shrubs and fragrant flowers. Plenty of comfortable armchairs and tables furnish the patio, and chairs, cabinets and paintings are grouped under the loggias with the sole idea of comfort so that a *tete-a-tete* may be enjoyed or the hours dreamed away in absolute privacy under the tropical sky.

The patio is the most distinctive feature of the Palm Beach home. It is a room open to the sky, yet always shaded, where the soft, balmy winter days and lovely nights may be enjoyed to their fullest extent. To the Palm Beacher it is of more importance than either his living room or his dining room, for he can live, eat, or receive his friends comfortably in this beautiful environment.

One need not be in Palm Beach long to appreciate the wisdom and good sense of this mode of architecture.

It would be hardly fitting in a resume of Palm Beach architecture not to mention the names of Marion Sims Wyeth and Addison Mizner. Both of these very capable architects have designed many of the beautiful homes in Palm Beach.

Reprinted from: Palm Beach Villas. Introduction by Howard Major.
Vol. 1. Palm Beach: R. O. Davies Publishing Co., 1929.

Howard Major (1883–1974) received his training at the Pratt Institute, and the atelier of Henry Hornbostel of the Society of Beaux-Arts Architects. After practicing in New York City, he came to Palm Beach in 1925. Although he, too, designed Spanish houses such as those for Nelson Odman and Richard Cowell in Palm Beach and Howard Whitney in Gulfstream, Major became the earliest critic of the style. In newspaper interviews, an article in *Architectural Forum*, and a book on Greek Revival architecture, Major condemned Spanish architecture as inappropriate for Florida because of climate (he pointed out that Florida's latitude was the same as Egypt's, while the climate of Spain and Washington, D.C., were similar), and because it failed to express American "national character." Although Major believed the Greek Revival, "our independent creation in architecture," fulfilled "every requisite of climate, convenience, and nationalism," he accepted British colonial, or West Indian, style architecture as also appropriate for Florida.³

All of these new architects willingly designed Spanish houses; all also encouraged clients to experiment with new styles. Before the end of the twenties Fatio designed a Norman half-timbered house for his mother-in-law, Mrs. Charles Curry Chase, on Via Del Mar, and Major built Major Alley, a complex of small houses in British colonial style. The new architects and Wyeth and Kitchell also soon had commissions for both frame and brick Georgian houses. Thus, when Mizner again turned his attention to Palm Beach, he found that he no longer held sway as before. He also found that prospective clients no longer demanded only his form of Spanish architecture.

3. *Palm Beach Daily News*, 9 December 1974; *Palm Beach Post*, 10 May 1929; Howard Major, "A Theory Relating to Spanish and Italian Houses in Florida," *Architectural Forum*, August 1926, pp. 97–104; Howard Major, *The Domestic Architecture of the Early American Republic: The Greek Revival*, p. 11. In fairness to Major, his criticism of Spanish architecture in Florida is generally limited to the small carpenter-built houses of the boom, which he called "aberrations." Although in the *Forum* article he never mentions Mizner, in his introduction to the 1929 edition of *Palm Beach Villas* he said: "It would be hardly fitting in a résumé of Palm Beach architecture not to mention the names of Marion Sims Wyeth and Addison Mizner. Both of these very capable architects have designed many of the beautiful homes in Palm Beach." Plans c. 1926 for the remodeling of the Warburton house list Mizner and Major as "associate architects," plans privately owned. For Major's earlier New York work, see *A Monograph of the Domestic Work of Howard Major, Architect* (1922). In this period, Joseph Urban (1872–1933) came to Palm Beach to design Mar-a-Lago for the E. F. Huttons. At first the Huttons asked Wyeth, who had designed Hogarcita and several speculative houses for them on Golf View Road, to plan their new villa. When they decided to engage Urban, Wyeth remained as associate architect. He later disclaimed all responsibility for the house, saying, "I don't want anyone to think I was the architect in charge." *Palm Beach Daily News*, 16 March 1931. Urban designed Palm Beach's most flamboyant and extravagant Spanish mansion for the Huttons. He also planned the Paramount Theater and the Bath and Tennis Club and remodeled the Oasis Club and the Anthony J. Drexel Biddle house. The floridness of the Urban buildings perhaps contributed to the declining popularity of Spanish architecture in Palm Beach. See Otto Teegen, "Joseph Urban," *Architecture*, May 1934, pp. 251–56.

Reprinted from: Curl, Donald W. Mizner's Florida, American Resort Architecture.
New York: Architectural History Foundation, 1984.