

VINTAGE CORAL GABLES

George Merrick was Coral Gables' Version of Sarasota's Ringling Brothers

By: Karella Martinez Carbonell, President of the Historic Preservation Association of Coral Gables

Merrick was a creative genius, a master of advertising, and a visionary who was relentless when it came to creating his dream of building a beautiful city.

As a declining interest in Coral Gables real estate began to taper off by 1926, George Merrick came up with the idea of building what was then the largest home development project in history. Merrick's vision to build 14 villages from different international regions steered him away from the established Mediterranean Revival style. The project was to bring novelty and attention to prospecting buyers. "Merrick's decision to hire architects of note for these projects insured the stylistic integrity of the architecture," writes Marta Huston, longtime Chinese Village homeowner.

Although more than a dozen themed villages were planned, only seven were built.

Today, in alphabetical order, there is the Chinese Village, Dutch South African Village, French City Village, French Country Village, French Normandy Village, Italian Village, and Pioneer Village.

Had there not been a collapse of the real estate market in the late 1920s, George Merrick's vision would have also provided for a Venetian Country Village, a Mexican Hacienda Village, a Spanish Mission Village, a Persian Vil-



In designing Chinese Village, Henry Killam Murphy developed what he termed Adaptive Architecture, a harmony of traditional Chinese style with modern architectural methods, materials and building use. [Photo: Karella Martinez Carbonell]

lage, an African Bazaar Village, a Tangier Village, and a Neapolitan Baroque Village.

In this article, the unique architectural style of the Chinese Village will be discussed.

Recognition goes to Marta Huston, a former resident of the Chinese Village, who contributed a wealth of information for this article. Below is an excerpt from her research.

The Coral Gables' Chinese Village as Adaptive Architecture

Merrick called on Yale architect Henry Killam Murphy for the design of the Chinese Village. Murphy developed his New York and New Haven practice in the milieu of the City Beautiful Movement, which debuted at the Chicago World's Fair of 1893. But his first sight of the Imperial City in Beijing was the turning point of his career: "The finest group of buildings in the world." Yale-in-China commissions for educational projects took Murphy to China in 1914, where he established a thriving practice that came to include Beijing University, the University of Shanghai and the plans for Chiang Kai-shek's government center in Nanjing. During these years in China, Murphy developed what he termed Adaptive Architecture, a harmony of traditional Chinese style with modern architectural methods, materials and building use. George Merrick would draw on Murphy's China experience in the design of Coral Gables' Chinese Village.

The Chinese Village of Coral Gables was based on Murphy's Adaptive Architecture, blending the architecture of traditional Chinese courtyard homes (Siheyuans) with American life-styles and con-

temporary building methods. The homes feature an enclosing garden wall pierced by decorative grids. Courtyards and gardens are protected by guardian figures. A brightly colored tile roof turns up its corners like the wings of a bird. Inside, the rooms, amenities and floor-plan of a 1920s vintage American home are embellished with traditional Chinese grid patterns on windows, doors and balustrades. Attention to the placement of windows establishes a visual relationship between courtyards and indoor spaces.

Only eight homes were completed before the real-estate collapse and hurricanes of the 1920s ended the building boom. This cluster of homes built between 1926 and 1927 are linked to each other by a common wall suggesting a "compound" arrangement. These homes are bounded by Sansovino and Castania Avenues, Maggiore Street, Riviera Drive, and Menendez Avenue.

The Chinese Village is designated a Historic Landmark.

Historic Preservation Association of Coral Gables (HPACG) is a 501c3 nonprofit whose mission is to promote the understanding and importance of historic resources and their preservation. For additional information or to become a member, please visit www.historiccoralgables.org



Homes are embellished with traditional Chinese grid patterns on windows, doors and balustrades. [Photo: Karella Martinez Carbonell]



Only eight homes were completed before the real-estate collapse, and hurricanes of the 1920s ended the building boom. [Photo: Karella Martinez Carbonell]