

Phineas Paist and the Architecture of Coral Gables, Florida

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Overview

Coral Gables is lauded as one of America's finest early twentieth century planned developments, or as one early traveler called it, the "Queen of Suburbs," in comparison to the "Magic City" of Miami.¹ The vision of George Merrick, the city's founder and master builder, was to create a completely planned development, the "Riviera of the Tropics," with a "Spanish type of architecture" later redefined as Mediterranean.² His company, the Coral Gables Corporation, began development in 1921. Merrick, to realize his dream city that had the highest standard of aesthetic quality, assembled a development team consisting of architects, a landscape planner, an artistic adviser, a real estate officer, and engineers. In 1923, he added Phineas Paist to the development team as supervisor of color. By 1925, growth was rapid enough that the city was incorporated



Phineas Paist, an architect who played a major role in realizing Merrick's dream for Coral Gables, at work in his office. Courtesy of Arva Parks.

by a charter received on April 29 from the secretary of state for Florida. To maintain the high level of quality in the architecture of the city, Merrick selected Paist as the corporation's supervising architect to approve all buildings constructed in Coral Gables, a position he held until his death in 1937. Paist also designed many buildings in the city, several in association with different architects.

Phineas Paist played a major role in realizing Merrick's dream for Coral Gables as "colorist," "supervisor," and "designer." As colorist, his ideas about natural colors, color application, use zone coloring, and the "Spanish effect" were most influential. As supervising architect for the Corporation he reviewed and approved building plans most likely using criteria that included appearance, exterior decoration, and the relationship of the proposed building to the group that surrounds it. His contribution to the architecture of the city was significant also as co-designer of over a dozen buildings and structures in Coral Gables.

To better understand Paist's ideas and his architecture, it is necessary to examine his education and experiences prior to his arrival in Coral Gables. Although the record on these prior activities is incomplete, the original documents researched provide some insight into Paist's approach to design.

Formative Years

Phineas E. Paist was born in Franklin, Pennsylvania, on August 28, 1875, the son of George W. and Margarette (Dempsey) Paist.³ From 1887 until 1890, according to his official biography, he worked for S. Gifford Slocum, a New York architect who maintained an office in Philadelphia with Charles Schweinfurth.⁴ Paist must have worked in this office as a boy from the age of twelve until fifteen. In all probability, his family was not well off as his tuition to study the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (PAFA) "was arranged," and that he worked and studied at night.⁵

Paist entered the Academy of the Fine Arts at age seventeen and, according to his student record, he attended the Academy over a twelve year period between 1892 and 1904.⁶ The PAFA obtained a charter in 1806, but its origins date back to 1791, making it the oldest art museum and school in the nation.⁷ The aim of the academy with its schools of painting, sculpture, and architecture was to educate the artist in a classical manner. The association of these schools with the art museum meant

that students had exposure to the academy's distinguished collection of works by leading American artists. The Academy occupied a Gothic revival building by the Philadelphia firm of Frank Furness and George Hewitt that they designed in 1875. The building has been designated a National Landmark and placed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Paist's curriculum at the Academy consisted of three courses for which he did not receive a degree as, strange as it seems today, "PAFA does not award degrees as the only courses offered are in the fine arts." Paist's student record shows that he completed cast drawing in the years 1892-93, life drawing both in 1894-95 and 1898-1901, and architectural design in 1902-04. According to the academy's bulletin ("Circular of Committee on Instruction") admission to the course in architectural design required applicants to pass examinations in freehand drawing, history of architecture, and architectural design and rendering. It is assumed Paist passed these examinations. Also, according to the bulletin, students in architectural design were to receive weekly or semi-weekly criticisms of their work from faculty. The bulletin listed the classes in the "Course in Architectural Design" as drawing from cast, drawing from figure, modeling, and problems in design. Paist undertook supplementary courses at the Drexel Institute (life classes), Darby School of Painting, and watercolor at the Collen, Camfell and Corfer *atelier*.⁹

In the Philadelphia city directories from 1888-1891, Paist was listed as a draftsman and then from 1893 until 1900, he was listed as an architect. It is speculated that this may account for the reason why Paist's student record for 1896-97 is blank. Most probably he did not attend class as he may have been working full-time. Certainly by 1900 he worked in the office of the architects G. W. and W. D. Hewitt where he did "damn detailing," as he depicted the work.¹⁰ He possibly also worked part-time before and after 1896-97 as in a letter to the academy he wrote that he did "(n)ight work at the office..."¹¹ This does not seem to tie in with the published "Schedule of Classes" that lists courses in architectural design as being held from 5 to 10 p.m. A reason for the discrepancy is not clear. In school correspondence with Paist, he was reminded of the academy's policy that students were not to do work at home but at school for not more than twelve hours during any one week.¹² Further indication that he worked part-time in an office was the rule in the academy's bulletin under "Course in Architectural

Design” that stated that it “will be open only to applicants over twenty years of age who have spent three or more years in the study of Architecture in an office, or school, or both.”¹³ Paist was twenty-seven years old when he began his course in architectural design.

Paist’s student record indicates that he was awarded a two-year Cresson Traveling Scholarship for postgraduate studies in Europe in May 1904 but only traveled there in 1905. He was then thirty years old. Scholarship awards came from the endowment left to the academy in 1902 by Emlen and Priscilla P. Cresson in memory of their son William. Several letters survive from the trip that Paist wrote to Academy faculty members Harrison Morris and J. D. Frank between July and September 1905.¹⁴ The letters were written by Paist in Rome, Florence, Orvieto, and Venice on his way back to Paris via “Triesti-Vienna-Munich-Lucerne-Strasburg.”¹⁵ He wrote enthusiastically about the “Italian Gothic Cathedral” in Orvieto and depicted it as “a diamond in a mud bank.” In his letter from Venice, he described his “trip through the towns of Verona-Vicenza-Padua (as) very interesting architecturally—Palladio’s work of course was the double starred attraction in most of the time.” He went on to write that “Venice has been full of artists the last few days—attending a convention of some sort at the exhibition. You can see them around the city everywhere—even crowding the pigeons at places.” Paist remarked in the same letter on the impact of the colors he saw at the exhibition. He also mentioned that he had with him drawings from Rome and sketches that he would have to draw to scale when he returned to Paris. During his stay in Rome he visited the American Academy of Arts in Rome. Paist’s scholarship was extended another year and he spent much of this time in Paris, where he attended the Paris *ateliers* of Duquesne and Chiffrot.¹⁶ His travel while on the Cresson scholarship covered “England-France-Germany-Italy-Greece-Holland.”¹⁷

In 1906, Paist returned from Europe and again joined the Hewitts in Philadelphia. When G. W. Hewitt retired three years later, Paist succeeded to a partnership. The firm was then known as Hewitt and Paist until 1911 when Alfred Hoyt Granger joined the firm and the name changed to Hewitt Granger & Paist. Two major buildings Paist was associated with at this time were the Bellevue-Stratford hotel and the Lehigh Avenue Branch of the Carnegie Library in Philadelphia. The firm was also responsible for the Philadelphia bourse and many churches,

residences, and commercial hotel buildings in the city, as well the St. Charles Hotel in Atlantic City, the New Willard Hotel in Washington, D.C., and the five-million-dollar George E. Boldt residence on the Thousand Islands. In 1915, Paist struck out on his own and maintained an office in Philadelphia until 1918, when he is last found in the Philadelphia city directories. He was a member of both the Philadelphia Chapter of the American Institute of Architects and the T-Square Club and a Fellow of the Philadelphia Academy of Fine Arts.¹⁸ At some point he worked briefly in New York City, where he caught the attention of Paul Chalfin.¹⁹ When James Deering chose Chalfin to be the artistic supervisor of his Miami mansion, Vizcaya, Paist went to Miami in 1916 as Chalfin's personal representative and associate architect to supervise the work on the James Deering estate. The architect of Villa Vizcaya was F. Burrall Hofmann. In 1924, Paist relocated full-time to Miami and was associated in some way with Walter De Garmo, the dean of Miami architects. De Garmo had arrived in Miami in 1904 and had soon established a successful architectural practice.²⁰

From this brief review of Paist's schooling and experiences, he can be described as an artist-architect with a special interest in color. While he completed some courses in architecture at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, he gained professional knowledge and skills in architecture, prior to his arrival in Miami, primarily from sojourns in Italy and Paris and practice in Philadelphia.

Colorist

Paist did not write very much about his ideas and his approach to architecture. One of his few writings was an article on color which was published in October 1924.²¹ It is not known when he actually wrote this article, but Merrick, it is surmised, must have been aware of the views on color held by Paist. Otherwise, how else to explain Merrick's appointment of Paist as the supervisor of color for the Coral Gables Corporation in 1923.²²

In his article, Paist referred to Merrick's vision to build a designed town that was architecturally harmonious. Merrick intended to achieve this by controlling all architectural and landscape schemes, as well as all of the "local color of the town," as he put it.²³ Paist's own view similarly was that color was of the utmost importance in architecture. He observed that the same principle of color that applied in an Oriental

rug or a costume painting could also pertain to buildings in Coral Gables. Just as the general color effect in an Oriental rug is affected by a small motif, or a bit of garment in the complete ensemble of a painting, so Paist believed the color of any building should influence a whole development scheme.

The colors Paist favored were “deep rich tawny red,” “yellowish brown,” and “purpleish grey.” Furthermore, he considered that colors should be natural, inspired by the coloring of tree bark and varied shells. In appearance, color, he felt, should have a flat quality as that of whitewash. Colored stucco should have the effect of an old building, painted many times, weathered over the years, and that displayed fragments of its previous coloring. Paist no doubt was mindful of the observation by Denman Fink, Merrick’s artistic adviser for Coral Gables, that “quality of age-old beauty...is the real keynote for this Coral Gables development” with the motif taken from “such grand old Spanish cities as Cordova, Salamanca, Toledo and lovely old Sevilla.”²⁴ Paist employed the term “use zone coloring” in reference to the different sections of the Coral Gables development. By this he meant that buildings in some zones would have full rich coloring, in others a grey color, and yet in others an almost pure white color. Even though the houses remain, the colors have changed over time so the original intent has been lost. Paist’s idea was to create an analogy with music as he believed an architectural environment was “a tone symphony from cold to warm colors.”

Paist maintained that color cannot be separated from consideration of the material to which it is applied. He described in his article how in Coral Gables the exterior facing material was stucco with color applied by a colored wash. To obtain the weathered effect it was necessary for the stucco itself to have a texture. Paist wrote:

Stucco as applied in Coral Gables is unusually of a so-called “Spanish effect,” which means that the scratch coat has been quickly and roughly troweled on about 1/2 inch thick, followed almost immediately with a texture finish applied as a second coat troweled upon with accidental thickness and surfaces uneven in effect. Sometimes this second coat is knocked down or brushed to give an old weather worn texture. In applying color to this stucco the effect tried for is that of an old building that has been colored many times and through time, or weathering, retains

fragments of all of its old age colorings. Usually the first coat of color is of some deep rich color, well waterproofed and completely covering and filling all of the stucco. This is followed by half tone colorings either grey or possible subsequent stucco coloring, then by a high light color wash. The general effect of the building will show in the deepest interstices of the stucco the deep rich coloring, in the slightly higher spots, the half-tone color and, on the very high spots, or points of the stucco a high light color that will give the effect of a bleached or weathered color.²⁵

A glimpse of what Coral Gables looked like in the mid-1920s comes from the pen of Marjorie Stoneman Douglas, then a journalist before reaching fame decades later with her book on the Everglades, *The River of Grass*. She noted that while the color of the roof tiles was important so was the coloring of the walls in the Gables buildings.²⁶ She described quite vividly, no doubt with journalistic license, that with the “warm cream and amber of the tinted cement and native rock, there are window casings of dull blue or sage green, timbers touched with designs in chrome yellow and Italian blue and Chinese red, touches of cool vermilion and sienna and emerald about a gable end, hints of burnt orange and that purple which is the color of new grapes, in a doorway.” Furthermore, she continued, “the awnings were made the high lights of the whole plan...striped with dull red and brown, on a cream colored house, with just one front awning shouting in a warm henna.” Awnings of some houses were “dull blue and lemon yellow, others sage green striped with black.”

Supervising Architect

George Merrick first considered a Spanish type of architecture for Coral Gables for the reason, as he explained in an interview with *The New York Times*, “I can hardly say, except that it always seemed to me to be the only way houses should be built down there in those tropical surroundings...I made a trip to Mexico and Central America and was more convinced of the Spanish and Moorish type of architecture.”²⁷ In 1921, Merrick called on his uncle and an accomplished artist, Denman Fink, to help him visualize his scheme for the city.²⁸ When Fink called together a group of architects to discuss the type of architecture for the city, they decided after some consideration that instead of the Spanish type of architecture for Coral Gables it should have a broader,

Mediterranean type of architecture.²⁹ The original group of architects who designed buildings in Coral Gables included H. George Fink, a nephew of Denman Fink who had designed buildings on Miami Beach for Carl Fisher from 1915-1921, Richard Kiehnel, Walter De Garmo, Harold Hastings Mundy, and M. L. Hampton. Merrick established a development team to plan and build Coral Gables.³⁰ Members of the team were Denman Fink as artistic adviser, Frank M. Button (who had first joined the team in 1921 and who is given credit for the general city plan of Coral Gables) as the landscape architect,³¹ architects H. George Fink and Harold Hastings Mundy, and Edward E. "Doc" Dammers as real estate counsel. Phineas Paist was not an initial member of the "dream" development team for the Coral Gables Corporation.

During the hectic building activity of 1925, George Merrick and the Coral Gables Corporation became concerned that their artistic vision would suffer in the rush to build. They searched for an architect they felt could help maintain the quality they were after. They found him in the office of Walter De Garmo. The architect was Phineas Paist whom they considered had "the soul of an artist." Whether they were aware of his article on color, discussed above, published the previous year is not known. To build the garden city of Coral Gables, the corporation named Phineas Paist as supervising architect in May 1925, a position he held until 1937, and Denman Fink as art director.³² Paist and Fink were to be assisted in the approval of building projects by a planning board that included other architects, artists, and builders. The public announcement of Paist's appointment underscored that a "Designer of Noted Homes in Miami Will Supervise Construction" as "Gables Building Chief."³³ His duties as supervising architect, as reported in this announcement, were to supervise all architectural plans "so that the interpretation of Mr. Merrick's ideas shall be carried out and so that the completed city will have the semi-tropical ensemble with every practical city planning problem put into effect." At the height of the building boom in 1925, Paist as supervising architect for the Coral Gables Corporation, was issued with over fifty building permits between August 28 and December 30 by the City of Coral Gables.³⁴ Most of the permits were for private residences. Others were for three office buildings, a field sales office, a hotel, private school, riding academy, rectory, and warehouse.

In the first zoning ordinance of the City of Coral Gables, passed in 1930, the role of the supervising architect was codified and at the same

time the criteria to be used in the approval of plans were made explicit.³⁵ The stated criteria (with their contorted wording) were to ensure that plans “conform to architectural type, appearance, exterior decoration and coloring of the building or structure for harmonious and artistic architectural construction of buildings in the subdivision or section in which such land is located...Outside of the village districts, most other lots in Coral Gables are to be considered within the district of Spanish type of buildings.” With regard to color specifically, the Ordinance required the exterior coloring or awning work to be approved by the supervising architect who also “shall require the use of appropriate and harmonious colors therein [i.e. the work].” Prior to adoption of the zoning ordinance, color approval for buildings and structures was controlled through deed restrictions written by George Merrick and Phineas Paist.

Designer

The work of Paist as a designer in Miami can be divided into three periods: his work as an individual architect from 1918-1927, his work in collaboration with other architects from 1923 to 1926 and his work produced in partnership with Harold Drake Steward (1896-1987) from 1926 until 1937.³⁶ Steward had been a draftsman in the office of De Garmo where Paist no doubt gained his acquaintance. In 1940, after Paist’s death in 1937, Steward formed a partnership with Coulten and John Skinner. They had designed residences in three of Merrick’s villages and many buildings at the University of Miami.

Individual Work

Paist’s earliest work in Miami was on the James Deering estate, Vizcaya. He drafted plans for the casino and Chinese bridge, the so-called “O” bridge in the south gardens, and farm structures.³⁷ After he moved full-time to Miami in 1924, he designed the Art Center (1925), the Granada Shops (1925), the Deitrich Commercial Building (1926), and the Coral Gables Bakery (1927). Paist’s classical background is evident in the façade compositions of these buildings, the use of orders and the arch, among other features. Awnings were an acknowledgement of the tropical sun.

The three-story Art Center Building housed the offices and studios of most of the architects and artists who worked for George Merrick on

the Coral Gables development, including Phineas Paist. The three-tiered entrance tower of the art center consists of a two-story hexagonal lower section, topped on the third level by a smaller multi-sided structure that features pilasters and blind arches. A small drum structure with a tiled roof crowns the whole. The Granada Shops, later the Charade Restaurant, was noted for its patio, tile floor and cypress ceiling. Large arched windows that run the full length of the first floor characterize the Deitrich Commercial Building. Paist designed the



Paist's classical background is evident in the façade compositions of the Deitrich Commercial Building, Coral Gables, 1926. Courtesy of the City of Coral Gables Historical Preservation Division.

Coral Gables Bakery Building to feature a second floor arcaded balcony with wrought ironwork balustrade and window grilles.

Collaborative Work

Phineas Paist collaborated with many different architects on various projects. First was the Charles Deering mansion in Old Cutler that he designed in association with Frank Hogdon. Paist worked specifically on the library.³⁸

Construction of the mansion began in 1918 and was finished in 1923.³⁹ The large, two-story mansion has an eclectic style with arched openings, both semicircular and pointed, arcaded loggias on the first and second floors facing Biscayne Bay, a barrel tiled gable roof, and a bell tower and tall chimney. The ceiling of the south side porch is inlaid with sea shells. The following year, Paist collaborated with Denman Fink to design the Venetian Pool and Casino in Coral Gables. It is known what role Paist had as a report of the opening mentioned that the "Venetian pool was really by Denman Fink."⁴⁰ Paist, however, contributed in some way, as he later included the project in his firm's booklet of work. The design consisted of an irregular shaped pool about three hundred feet by two hundred feet in size. A natural looking pool was achieved with rock outcroppings that included underwater caves, cascades of falling water cliffs, and one of which was made into a diving platform. The whole complex was lushly landscaped. The use of Venetian features—lamp posts and a bridge that linked a small palm island to the casino—provided a feeling of old

world charm. The three-story tower buildings of the Casino were to provide entertainment areas to take advantage of the poolside and



Paist collaborated with Denman Fink to design the Venetian Pool and Casino in Coral Gables, 1924. Courtesy of the City of Coral Gables Historical Preservation Division.

mundane functions such as dressing rooms and lockers. Between the square towers was a pergola, under which outdoor meals and refreshments were served, and a terrazzo dance floor. There was also a loggia and a Spanish fountain with dazzling colored ceramic tiles. Paist and Fink also collaborated with Walter De Garmo in the design of La Puerta del Sol—The Sun Portal (Douglas Entrance) (1924-27) at the northeast corner of Coral

Gables. The elliptical arched gateway, the imposing tower, and two wings of shops, galleries, apartments, and a ballroom on the uppermost floor were the only elements completed of an intended ten-acre village centered on a square.

An outstanding building designed by Paist, in collaboration with Walter De Garmo and Paul Chalfin, was the Coral Gables Corporation Sales Organization headquarters (1925-27). The Sales Organization never occupied the building that was renamed the Colonnade in 1927. The front façade, which is over two hundred feet long, is distinguished by commanding two-story Corinthian columns placed on tall bases along the entire length of the building. A dominant feature of the façade is a two-story arched and ornate Spanish Baroque portal in the center. A singular central rotunda is reminiscent of Roman models, specifically Hadrian's Mausoleum or the Castel de San Angelo, which is not surprising considering Paist's classical education and postgraduate studies in



Paist and Fink also collaborated with Walter De Garmo in the design of La Puerta del Sol (Douglas Entrance), 1924-1927. Courtesy of the City of Coral Gables Historical Preservation Division.

Italy. It is interesting that the design of the Colonnade building resembles very closely that of the Central Building of the University



The Colonnade building resembles very closely that of the Central Building of the University of Miami High School designed by Bob Fink, son of Denman Fink. Courtesy of the City of Coral Gables Historical Preservation Division.

of Miami High School designed a few months earlier and illustrated by the Corporation artist, Bob Fink, son of Denman Fink.⁴¹ The columned façade is also strikingly similar to that of the city hall in Antigua, Guatemala. The suggestion is that there was such close collaboration between design professionals and artists on Coral Gables projects in the Merrick organization that it makes it difficult to assign individual design credit.⁴²

Founding regents and officers of the University of Miami applied for a charter of incorporation on April 8, 1925. After discussion of various options for the location of the university, they eventually accepted the site donated by George Merrick in Coral Gables. In a letter from the Board of Regents to Merrick, dated May 25, 1925, they explained that the Coral Gables site “contains better landscaping opportunities, contains a large lake, connecting with the main canal and also contains a large pool of water which will act very beautifully as a reflecting pool for the Court of Honor of our main buildings as contemplated by our architect.”⁴³ It would appear that “our architect” referred to Denman Fink, Phineas Paist, and Paul Chalfin whose names appear on a “Preliminary Study of University of Miami.” They had been commissioned by George Merrick to prepare architectural plans for the university. The plans envisaged a large administration building as well as buildings for science, liberal arts, engineering, law, medicine, music, and art, all in a Mediterranean architectural style.⁴⁴ The foundation stone for the administration building was laid on February 4, 1926 but work was halted by the September hurricane that devastated the area. The combination of the hurricane, collapse of the land boom, and stock market crash, left the building as a skeleton that stood uncompleted for over twenty years. After the end of World War II the university experienced a flood of students, former soldiers under the

G. I. Bill. Revival of the abandoned building program became necessary. Temporary wooden structures were quickly erected followed by the completion of the unfinished administration building, renamed the Merrick Building. Phineas Paist's design for this building was abandoned. It was completed in the prevailing post war style of modern architecture as were all subsequent buildings on the campus.

Partnership

The partnership of Paist and Steward designed many notable buildings in Coral Gables, from commercial buildings, churches, to public buildings, as well as some buildings in the city of Miami. One of their first commissions was the San Sebastian Apartment Hotel for the Coral Gables Corporation (1926). The purpose of the three-story building, which contained seventy-two apartments and seventy hotel rooms, was to provide housing for the company's employees. The University of Miami purchased the building in 1939 and used it for student dormitories and office space. When the University sold the building in 1967, it reverted to an apartment building. The architects used five projections to deal with the design problem of a long unbroken front facade. These projections were a central five-bay entrance structure, two three-bay corner "pavilions," and a three-bay projection with a gable roof between the center and each of the two corners of the façade.

Their design for the city hall of Coral Gables was one of their outstanding works of architecture. The cornerstone was laid in November 1927 with a formal opening on February 28, 1928.⁴⁵ Facing Miracle Mile they placed a structure consisting of a monumental semicircular colonnade of twelve Corinthian columns and an entablature topped by a series of stone



The partnership of Paist and Steward designed many notable buildings in Coral Gables. One of their first commissions was the San Sebastian Apartment Hotel for the Coral Gables Corporation (1926). Courtesy of Nicholas N. Patricios.

balusters. At the center of the balustrade is a large Baroque panel that contains the coat of arms of Coral Gables, a shield with the emblems of a crocodile, a fish, and a lion, designed by Denman Fink. On either side of the shield there are the symbolic figures of art and labor and at the back of the shield the Venetian Pool and Casino is depicted. Behind the colonnade is a loggia associated with the Commission Council Chamber that sits in the semicircular wing. The three-story rectangular building that forms the remainder of the city hall is crowned by a three-tiered clock and bell tower. Inside the tower there is a mural, painted by Denman Fink, which depicts the four seasons in radiant colors. Apparently the so-called "Spanish effect of dust-caked age" on the exterior walls was obtained by workers throwing mud on the walls and then washing it down.⁴⁶ It is strange that in their resolution recognizing the work on the building, the city commission did not mention Steward's name, only those of Paist and Fink who were praised for their "artistic rendering, careful planning and painstaking supervision of the construction of the city hall."⁴⁷ It would seem that Paist modeled the City Hall building on the Merchant's Exchange in Philadelphia that he was familiar with from his early days in that city.



The partnership of Paist and Steward also designed the Coral Gables City Hall, 1927-1928. Courtesy of the University of Miami Otto G. Richter Library, Archives and Special Collections.

Paist's classical background is clearly evident in the design of the three-story Miami post office and courthouse (1931).⁴⁸ Major features of the two frontages are the Corinthian columns and pilasters. The entrance lobbies of this building are decorated with coffered ceilings and brass postal fixtures. A splendid colonnaded courtyard has welcome shade and the cooling sound of gushing water from a fountain. Both counteract the heat of the South

Florida summers. A magnificent mural by Denman Fink graces the second floor courtroom. The painting in oil measures 25' 2" X 11' 2" and is titled "Law Guides Florida Progress."⁴⁹ It appears that a common practice of mural artists was to include familiar faces in their work. It is surmised that Fink depicted Phineas Paist in the lower right corner and

George Merrick as a young man in the center of the canvas. The mural has an apparent “pyramidal” composition with the figure of Justice at the peak. Below, at the base of the composition, the evolution of Miami from a wilderness to a modern city is depicted. On the left side of the mural are views of American Indian life, in the center scenes of pioneer agricultural bustle, and on the right a panorama of contemporary cultural endeavors in music, architecture, science, and the arts. On the extreme left of the mural is a rendering of lush trees while on the extreme right buildings under construction are depicted. A bathing beauty under a swaying palm tree is portrayed in the background on the far right with pleasure craft as a backdrop.



Paist’s classical education shows through in the design of the First Church of Christ Scientist building in Coral Gables, 1934-41. Courtesy of Nicholas N. Patricios.

Paist’s classical education again shows through in the design of the First Church of Christ Scientist building in Coral Gables (1934-41). It is very much Palladian in character with its centralized plan and symmetrically composed exterior façades. Towards the end of the 1930s, many public buildings came to be designed in what has been called Depression Moderne style.⁵⁰ This is evident in the design of two-story old Coral Gables firehouse and police station designed by Paist and Steward (1937-38). The façade of oolitic limestone features arched openings in the three-story tower on the northwest corner of the building and arched second floor windows. The entrance to the police station was on Aragon Avenue and marked by carved stone pelicans perched above the first floor. The entrance to the fire station was on Salzedo Avenue with the entrance marked by carved firemen’s heads. The building was in use as a fire station and police station until 1975 before both were moved to larger quarters.

The surviving correspondence between Paist and Steward and a client, Governor James Cox of Ohio, provides a glimpse into the workings of the partnership.⁵¹ The first letter from Cox requested Paist to “look over the premises constituted by what I now own on the Beach, plus the lot immediately south, and see what you can suggest in the way of a

new layout.” In his reply, Paist wrote that he will prepare a drawing of the new scheme for the Governor’s winter bay front residence on Miami Beach. He mentioned, in addition, that “I am in the midst of designs for the new City Hall at Coral Gables” and that “in Coral Gables residence building is going on in a substantial manner” (May 21, 1927). He did not mention any effects of the devastating hurricane that passed through eight months previously. Steward’s role is evident in letters to Cox in which he does not sign his own name but signs on behalf of Paist. Clearly he was the junior partner. It is not known why letters from Paist to Cox in the years 1927 and 1928 were on Coral Gables

Corporation letterhead, listing Paist as supervising architect, whereas those written in 1929 were on letterheads of the Paist and Steward firm. Paist, apparently, did not see a separation between his role as a public and private architect. An aspect of Paist’s character is revealed in a letter of commendation from Cox to the Graham Brothers in Detroit. In the letter, Cox wrote that he recommended Paist to a Harry Timken to design a million-dollar house in Venice, Florida, as “I considered Paist by long odds the superior of anyone in Florida; furthermore, that



The Sarmiento Mansion, named “Snug Harbor,” in Coconut Grove was also designed by the firm of Paist and Steward. Courtesy of Arva Parks.



The firm of Paist and Steward designed many buildings outside of Coral Gables, including residences in Miami Beach and Miami. Courtesy of Paist and Steward, Architecture and Design, Office Booklet, undated.

he was absolutely honest” (September 3, 1929). He then added: “Both he and Mrs. Timken think Paist is in a class by himself.” Praise indeed!

In discussing Paist’s collaborative work and that in partnership with Steward only major buildings were mentioned. The firm of Paist and Steward designed many buildings outside of Coral Gables. A booklet produced by the firm illustrates

Surfside town hall, residences in Miami Beach and Miami, including the Edison Courts Housing project. The office booklet, in addition, contains many illustrated buildings but most are unnamed and undated. Two examples are fine residences shown in. Published work of the partnership includes House Mossman in Miami Beach, an “Ideal Small Home in Miami”, and a Public Works Administration project at Liberty Square in Miami.⁵² Various references mention other buildings but details are lacking.⁵³

One residence on which detailed research has been undertaken is the Sarmiento Mansion named “Snug Harbor” by the owner.⁵⁴ The Coconut Grove residence was designed with seven bedrooms and seven bathrooms, keystone paved patio and terrace, and included many striking features such as the dining room fireplace, an Otis elevator with bronze doors, decorative wrought iron, and famous wallpaper.

Beyond Practice

In addition to his busy practice, Paist found time to be active in professional activities. He served on the City of Coral Gables committee on zoning, the committee on building codes, and the planning board.⁵⁵ He was a member of the Florida South Chapter of the American Institute of Architects since its inception and served as president of the chapter from 1935 until 1937. Prior to this, he was director of the Florida Association of Architects. Paist also served as chairman of the architecture committee and the exhibition committee of the Architectural League of Greater Miami.⁵⁶ Other prominent architects who served as chairs of League committees were F. M. Button (Landscape Architecture), Richard Kiehnel (Foreign Exhibits; Professional Practice), Marion Manley (Catalogue), Coulton Skinner (Publicity), and Anthony Zink (Current Work).



Paist (left) on a site visit. Courtesy of Arva Parks.

Soul of the True Artist

Although this article has focused on Phineas Paist, as architect it should not be forgotten that he was also an accomplished artist. George Merrick acknowledged this in a letter when he wrote that “Mr. Paist, (who) was my main architect and artist in my Coral Gables building work.”⁵⁷

“Soul of the true artist” were the words Richard Kiehnel, a distinguished architect in Miami, used in his written tribute to Phineas Paist who died at age sixty-one on May 2, 1937, following a long illness.⁵⁸ Kiehnel wrote that it was a great pleasure to have known Paist who had so many friends and no enemies, who possessed such a rare combination of lovable human qualities. Paist’s modesty was reflected in his refusals for personal interviews as he felt his architecture spoke for itself. He is quoted as saying “I don’t care to have my name in the paper.”⁵⁹ Kiehnel went on to write:

“Paist was a true artist. To him remuneration was not the inspiration for his superior productions. He possessed that rare urge to do everything well and put the full force of his soul into it regardless of size, compensation or importance. He did not measure the scope of his commissions with a yard stick of dollars and cents; so likewise the rare value of his artistic productions cannot be measured by any standard. This is inestimable. This reflects the soul of the true artist.”⁶⁰

Acknowledgements

Arva Parks Archives

Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts Archives

Wright State University Library Archives

Notes

- ¹ Anonymous, *Travel and Sport in Many Lands*. Typescript of Chapter XXVIII, "Miami, the Magic City, and Coral Gables, the Queen of Suburbs." Historical Museum of South Florida, George E. Merrick Papers, Box 2 File "T," c. 1927.
- ² George Merrick, *New York Times*, 15 March 1920; Katherine Ashley, *George E. Merrick and Coral Gables, Florida* (Coral Gables: Crystal Bay Publishers, 1985); Walter Chambers, "Merrick's Romantic Story of Great Coral Gables Development," *Jacksonville Times-Union*, 28 June, 1925.
- ³ George Paist is listed in the Franklin City Directories of 1871 and 1974 as a carpenter and "county sealer" [Sealer of the Weights, probably a political appointment from S. P. McCalmont, a leader in Franklin]. According to a deed recorded in Venango County on April 29, 1875, in Book 3, page 362, the sheriff under local law sold the Paist property in Franklin to the Exchange Building and Loan Association as George and Maggie Paist had defaulted on a debt of \$1,875 and interest on it. After Phineas was born in August and it could be that the family moved to Philadelphia soon afterwards.
- ⁴ Philadelphia American Institute of Architects, *Biographical Dictionary of Philadelphia Architects*, AIA Archives, N. D., 589.
- ⁵ Addison, *op. cit.*
- ⁶ Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Archives.
- ⁷ Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, *History of the Academy*. <http://www.pafa.org/info/history> 1999.
- ⁸ Schools of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, *Circular of Committee on Instruction: Season of 1903-1904*. Archives of the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts.
- ⁹ Membership Form, Philadelphia Institute of Architects completed in part by Phineas Paist himself. The handwriting matches that in his personal letters written from Europe (The Athenaeum of Philadelphia).
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*
- ¹¹ Phineas E Paist, Letter to H. S. Morris, undated. General School Correspondence, 1902-03, Archives of the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts.
- ¹² H Schuchardt, Letter to Frank Miles Day, 8 May 1903. Archives of the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts.
- ¹³ Schools of the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, *op. cit.*

- ¹⁴ The surviving letters in Paist's handwriting are addressed to Mr. Harrison S. Morris dated "Rome July 8th, /05"; to Mr. Frank from "Orvieto Aug. 8th '05"; to Mr. Frank from "Florence–Aug. 22nd/05"; and Mr. J. D. Frank from "Venice 9-23-05." Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Archives.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁶ Membership Form, *op. cit.*
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁹ Susan Hall Freeman, "Monument to Three Artists," *Update* (Historical Association of Southern Florida, August 14, 1987), 3-5.
- ²⁰ Ellen Caroline Buckley, "Revisiting the Architecture of Walter De Garmo: Lessons for the Future of Speculative Housing in South Florida" (Magna Cum Laude thesis in Architecture, University of Miami, May 2003).
- ²¹ Phineas E Paist, "Stucco-Color," *National Builder*, October 1924, 46-47.
- ²² Coral Gables brochure, undated, probably c. 1923, mentions Paist as "Supervisor of Color."
- ²³ Paist, *op. cit.*
- ²⁴ Denman Fink. "Castles In Spain' Made Real," *The Miami Herald*, 19 November 1921, 15.
- ²⁵ Paist, *op. cit.*
- ²⁶ Marjorie Stoneman Douglas, *Coral Gables: Miami Riviera—an Interpretation*, promotional brochure (Coral Gables: Coral Gables Corporation, 1925).
- ²⁷ Interview with George E. Merrick, *The New York Times*, 15 March 1925. Reprinted in *Coral Gables—Miami Riviera*.
- ²⁸ Malinda Lester Cleary, Denman Fink, "Dream Coordinator to George Merrick and the Development of Coral Gables, Florida" (University of Miami, M. A. thesis in Art History, 1996).
- ²⁹ Merrick is quoted as saying: "Mr. Fink [Denman] called into conference a group of architects, some of them local and others of national repute. They, after mature study and reflection decided with me that the natural setting of Miami, swept by the breezes from the gulf stream, made its climate identical with along the shores of the Mediterranean. And so we decided to adopt the Mediterranean style of architecture. Our designs have been popularly classified as Spanish, but this is not a correct description. We have buildings and residences

of Italian, Venetian, North African and Mayan as well of Spanish design and plan to add to these Japanese, and Chinese as well as ancient Greek models,” *Jacksonville Times-Union*, 28 June 1925; the call for a Mediterranean style of architecture is evident in a 1923 *Miami Riviera* publication, with photographs of houses already built, promoting Coral Gables.

³⁰ “Judge a Man By His Works and a Suburb By Its Development,” *The Miami Daily Metropolis*, advertisement, 9 January 1922; George E. Merrick Papers, Historical Museum of South Florida, Box 4, Newspaper Advertisements 1921-22.

³¹ Cleary, *op. cit.*

³² Ashley, *op. cit.*

³³ “Phineas Paist Named Gables Chief,” *The Miami Daily News*, 5 May 1925; “Phineas E. Paist National Figure: Supervising Architect Designer of Many of City’s Finest Buildings,” *Miami Riviera*, 12 November 1926.

³⁴ Freeman, *op. cit.*

³⁵ Board of Architects, Coral Gables. *Chronology 1925-1988*. Historic Preservation Division, Coral Gables, N. D; *Ordinance No. 153*, City of Coral Gables, December 15, 1930. City Clerk’s Office, Coral Gables.

³⁶ The spelling used here is Steward as this appears to be the common use. In surviving letterheads and typed letters of the partnership, however, the spelling is Stewart even though the signature is Steward. It is not known why there was this variation in the spelling of this name.

³⁷ K.C. Harwood, *Lives of Vizcaya* (Miami: Banyan Books, 1985).

³⁸ Addison, *op. cit.*

³⁹ Jean Taylor, *Historic South Dade. Self-Guided Tour* (Miami: The Junior League of Miami, 1988).

⁴⁰ Marjory Stoneman Douglas, “Water Sports and Flower Parade Scenes at Opening of Venetian Pool, Coral Gables,” *The Herald*, 16 December 1924, 3A.

⁴¹ Vincent Scully, “A Dream of Coral Gables,” *Coral Gables: An American Garden City* (Paris: Norma Editions, 1997), 31-64; a drawing of the Colonnade’s entrance contains Phineas E. Paist’s name as the architect and Bob Fink’s name as the artist, *Coral Gables Bulletin*, Number 2, 1926.

⁴² Joseph L Herndon, *Archival and Physical Investigations, Colonnade Building*, Historic Preservation Division, Coral Gables, 1985.

- ⁴³ Frederic Zeigen (Managing Regent, University of Miami), Letter to George Merrick, 25 May 1925. Historical Museum of South Florida, George E. Merrick Papers, Box 2 University of Miami; Ashley, *op. cit.*
- ⁴⁴ Nicholas N Patricios, *Building Marvelous Miami* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1994).
- ⁴⁵ Samuel D. Jr., LaRoue and Ellen J. Uguccioni, *Coral Gables in Postcards: Scenes from Florida's Yesterday* (Miami: Dade Heritage Trust, 1988).
- ⁴⁶ "Something to Talk About," *Coral Gables Times*, 11 February 1961.
- ⁴⁷ City Commission of the City of Coral Gables. "Resolution #525," Minutes of the Regular Meeting of the City Commission of the City of Coral Gables, 20 November 1928. City Clerk's Office, Coral Gables.
- ⁴⁸ In 1978 the building became a U.S. Federal Courthouse.
- ⁴⁹ Susan Hale Freeman, "Monument to three Artists," *Update*, Historical Association of Southern Florida, August 1987, 3-5.
- ⁵⁰ Patricios, *op. cit.*
- ⁵¹ Cox manuscripts (Governor James M. Cox). Eighteen letters dated from May 16, 1927 to December 17, 1929, between James Cox and Paist and Steward. Archives, Wright State University, Dayton, Ohio.
- ⁵² "House of Major A. T. Mossman, Miami Beach, Florida," *American Architect*, 146, 1935, 42-43; H. L. Blits, "Ideal Small House," *Florida Homes of the Year*, 1940; "Housing Project, Liberty Square, Miami, Florida," *Architectural Forum*, May 1937, 422-423.
- ⁵³ Addison, *op. cit.* The interview mentions buildings for "M. Cox, E. T. Purcell, Dr. Gray and George E. Merrick...five waterways and Venetian houses for the Meyers Y. Corp....the convent at Coral Gables and the Dr. Tallman hospital;" a newspaper article "Phineas E. Paist National Figure" noted that he designed the Smoot, Knoffen, Bentley and Gray residences," *Miami Riviera*, *op. cit.*
- ⁵⁴ Arva Parks, "Snug Harbor," unpublished report, 1988.
- ⁵⁵ City Commission of the City of Coral Gables. Minutes of the Fourth Meeting of the City Commission of the City of Coral Gables, 29 June 1925. City Clerk's Office, Coral Gables; "Resolution #646," Minutes of the Regular Meeting of the City Commission of the City of Coral Gables, 20 November 1928. City Clerk's Office, Coral Gables.
- ⁵⁶ "Architects Plan for the District: Future Program of League Points to More Uniform Building Code," *Miami Riviera*, 19 November 1926.
- ⁵⁷ Letter from George Merrick to Miss Helen Powell Roddick,

23 January 1941; George Merrick Papers, Charles W. Tebeau Library of Florida History, Historical Museum of Southern Florida, Box 2.

⁵⁸ Obituary, "Phineas E. Paist Dies After a Long Illness," *The Miami Herald*, 3 May 1937; "Phineas Paist, Widely Known, Dies at Gables," *Coral Gables Times*, 3 May 1937; "Paist's Body is Sent North," *The Miami Herald*, 4 May 1937; *The Octagon*, American Institute of Architects, June 1937, Vol. 9, 6.

⁵⁹ Miami Riviera, *op. cit.*

⁶⁰ Richard Kiehnel, "A Tribute to Phineas E. Paist," *Florida Architecture and Allied Arts* (Miami, Fl.: 1938).