Las Olas Boulevard

PROGRESS or DOOM?

by MARY McGREEVY

"Life's a Beach!"
In the remote beginnings of what is today called Florida, dark, pest-ridden swampland was filling in to create the future shape of the peninsula. At the same time, thousands of waves were cresting in a to-and-fro movement that formed underwater crystals which gradually surfaced to become sand dunes edging the land with glistening, sun-kissed beige beaches—pristine, clean, untouched for centuries by either natives or those interested in the commercial exploitation of the area.

It is a parcel of this beach today that is the crowning feature of the eighty-five-year-old City of Fort Lauderdale, the center of which stands a little over two miles inland, at the highest point of Las Olas Boulevard, the town's foremost commercial tourist street. This boulevard runs perpendicular to the beach, and was long ago termed "Las Olas"—Spanish for waves—because it runs eastward from downtown Fort Lauderdale to the ocean, becoming, in the process, the principal artery for local traffic between the shore and the center of town.

Few residents would call Las Olas the "gateway into the beach," as did Joe Bordello at the State Department of Transportation in a recent Fort Lauderdale Sun-Sentinel interview. But gateway to the beach had indeed been the original purpose of this beautifully landscaped, divided avenue that Bordello claimed has "long been a signature roadway for the city of Fort Lauderdale." The Sun-Sentinel article went on to explain that workers would soon begin the rejuvenation of the boulevard, which had been sinking during the past decade. New, lush landscaping...
would be planted, more antique lights added (as already installed in the boulevard's commercial area), improved drainage instituted (flash flooding often occurs in heavy rainstorms), and a new sea wall built along the finger canals on the north side, banded with new pedestrian sidewalks. The cost to the city is estimated at $5.4 million. Pete Witschen, assistant city manager, commented in the same article, “We want to set the tone we’ve been able to set at the beach,” where new, white-walled beach sidings and old fashioned lamps, plus flowers on the sidewalks have been added. “We also want to maintain the ambience on the islands and carry it through as a link between downtown and the beach.”

Relevant as these comments are, most townspeople ignore Las Olas' linkage to the beach, as do many of the older tourists. For them the boulevard is a site of commerce, often directed at tourists, but also a prestigious place for local denizens to enjoy good restaurants, purchase unique items in small shops, conduct bank business, and engage the services of local architects. There are also many service industries located there—beauty shops, poodle-grooming parlors, film developing and sales, framing shops, and art galleries. Those in the wealthier echelons of society can find elegant clothing stores—for either men or women—as well as jewelry stores, bridal shops, and chic accessory boutiques. A recent addition is “thrift” shops, selling used clothing and household items of a quality and price lower than the boulevard’s ornate antique shops, which charge dearly for unusual items, fine china, or old silver. Furniture can be purchased both at antique stores and through interior decorating establishments. Real estate agencies are common, as are travel agencies, frequented by office workers and local residents. Restaurants, food stores, including a Seven-Eleven, two hospitals, and several dry cleaners and shoe repair shops round out the list of conveniences offered along Las Olas—although the years have seen much variety and many comings and goings of both

Above is a typical “Spring Break” scene at Fort Lauderdale Beach, 1961; below, the beach as it appears today (bottom photo courtesy of Mary McGreevy).
long-established enterprises and short-sighted investments which did not allow the owners to keep up with the overhead and high rents inherent on the prestigious street.

For the most part it is the young who seem to appreciate Las Olas Boulevard as the "gateway to the beach." Up at the beach end of the street, young people's shops predominate and then run on to line A-1-A, which meets Las Olas at its eastern terminal and runs parallel to the beach. There the young have restaurants and snack bars of their own, as well as inexpensive clothing stores that sell "necessities" such as bright, phosphorescent bikinis, shorts, shirts with wild tropical scenes screened on them, scuba gear, beach balls, suntan lotion, and film, items without which many local and tourist teenagers could not "live."

"Life's a beach" is the slogan of a generation, which has been drawn to the beach, the water, the fresh winds, frequent tropical sunshine, and seashore and water sports like generations of young people before them. The youth-oriented atmosphere of the beach traces its roots to the 1930s, when the city invited college swim teams to participate in an annual winter Collegiate Aquatic Forum, at the municipal casino pool. The beach's reputation as a magnet for students spread slowly at first, before exploding with the annual "Spring Break" invasions which began in the late 1950s. Perhaps the predominance of the beach by the young reached its apex in the 1970s, when many were choosing a "hippie-style" life so they could be free to sun and sebathe as much as possible. Others rigged surfboards with sails or taught scuba diving, learning to live and support themselves by aspects of their free lifestyle. Their campers were often found parked at the beach, while parents played with young, small children nearby. Out-of-state and out-of-the-country license plates were frequent; casual meetings and conversations were possible, inducing some to stay in the area and take up residence where they could always find friends, sports, and good weather.

Over twenty years later, there are still many brightly striped sails belonging to Hobie Cats resting on the beach or out on the ocean, heeling over with the strength of the trade winds in the winter season. Today most of these boats are either privately owned or for rent, and the spirit of enthusiasm for a unique lifestyle has diminished, as many of those who camped and lived "On the Road" like the "beat generation's" heroes have now disappeared into bank jobs, small cottages, and chic apartments. The "free" lifestyle of the "Age of Aquarius," as it was titled in the pop rock musical Hair, is over, as is the Spring Break phenomena, discouraged by local entrepreneurs as having been "too wild." A new conservatism has taken over the town, and a new conformity to more rigid standards infuses today's youth. Although young people, both local and tourist, still frequent the beach and the nearby stretch of Las Olas Boulevard, campers painted with brightly colored tropical scenes have vanished from the roadways and parks, as has a lenient attitude to drugs and alcohol.

In the Beginning

It is difficult, seeing the hustle and bustle of the beach today, to imagine it before the town built Las Olas Boulevard across the mangrove marshes and the Intracoastal Waterway. The beach was a natural center of activity from the region's earliest years, the scene of the third and most permanent of the forts from which the City of Fort Lauderdale would take its name. The House of Refuge for shipwreck victims was established there in 1876, and the beach was the path of the legendary Barefoot Mailman. With the establishment of a stagecoach route and ferry crossing on New River, the center of activity moved westward in the early 1890s, a shift accentuated by the arrival of Henry Flagler's railroad and the opening of fertile river-bottom and later Everglades lands to agriculture. When the railroad platted the town of Fort Lauderdale in 1896, it laid out the first section of the future Las Olas Boulevard, with no apparent thought to that thoroughfare's future use as a route to the beach. The brief street ran

The House of Refuge on Fort Lauderdale Beach, constructed in 1876.
The 1896 A. L. Knowlton plat of Fort Lauderdale, showing North Second Street (Las Olas Boulevard).

eastward four blocks from Andrews Avenue to the town boundary, and was titled simply “North Second Street.”

Nevertheless, the beach remained home to a few and a place to relax for more in the last years of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. These early years are colorfully expressed by August Burghard and Philip Weidling in their famous history of Fort Lauderdale, Checkered Sunshine:

Youngsters who were bold enough to brave the stinger-infested bay could walk down the canal bank to its edge and, from there, alternately wade and swim their way to the beach. There they found little company. During the winter season Hugh T. Birch, the recluse, resided at his home a half-mile north, but Birch forbade trespassers. Seldom were there people at the big lodge. Until the bathhouse was completed and tended, there was only Captain A. C. Skogsberg and his family at the House of Refuge. On Sunday the excursion boats brought bathers and picnickers. On other days of the week it was a lonely place, wildly beautiful, alive with the chirping of birds

and the antics of sandpipers, which were always present in large numbers at the beach. Downtown seemed far away; and of future destiny there was not an inkling.5

The “big lodge” mentioned above was a hunting lodge constructed in 1902 by pioneer contractor E. T. King for John MacGregor Adams, who owned this stretch of beachfront property and who first applied to it the name “Las Olas-by-the-Sea.” The lodge occupied the site of an earlier cottage built by Adams and Hugh Taylor Birch before they divided the approximately three miles of oceanfront property they had purchased jointly in the 1890s. In 1905, the beach area became the winter home of a nationally recognized figure when Adams’ widow sold the lodge and surrounding property to Thomas E. Watson of Georgia, former Populist Party presidential candidate. Watson, who also published the popular Jeffersonian Magazine, wrote glowingly of his tropical home:

This is Las Olas — he, Adams, called it so, in the indulgence of that fondness for giving pet names to those things which one especially loves. He had already grown old when he chanced upon this spot — old and rich — and the joyousness of his boyhood had come back to him, and he found pleasure in nature and his fellowman.6

Watson, like Adams, “found pleasure in nature” and the solitude of his seaside estate, to the point of getting himself into a legal scrape when he ejected a fisherman at gunpoint from a cove west of his lodge. Watson’s sale of the property to David Clifford Alexander in 1913, however, signalled a significant change in its use. Alexander subdivided the thirty-three acres into 100 lots and converted the lodge into an inn — the first

The Las Olas Inn, ca. 1920.
Las Olas Beach residents Thomas E. Watson (left) and D. C. Alexander.

hotel on Fort Lauderdale's beach. Most importantly, the far-sighted Alexander included in his plat a road, the future A-1-A, running parallel to the shore and permitted no construction east of this street, thus preserving public accessibility to the beach for future generations. Lots in Alexander's "Las Olas-by-the-Sea" sold briskly, but construction was slow since the subdivision could be reached only by boat.\(^7\)

In spite of the overgrown swampland which separated the town from the East Coast Canal and the beach, businessmen who had an eye for tourism and the economic future of Fort Lauderdale recognized the need for a boulevard and bridge to the beach. When the newly-formed Broward County passed a bond issue to build roads and bridges, the Las Olas project got first attention. The building contract for the road went to Bryan and Snyder, and the contract for the bridge over the canal went to the Champion Bridge Company of Wilmington, Ohio. This first bridge was hand-operated and moved sideways on a turntable to let boats pass. It was reached by means of a narrow, wooden, pier-like trestle. The bridge and road opened in January 1917, with appropriate ceremonies which included speeches by local dignitaries and a parade which included most of Fort Lauderdale's automobiles.\(^8\)

The completion of the roadway and bridge allowed full use of the casino built on the beach in 1915, but formerly open only on Sundays when

Las Olas Boulevard's wooden causeway across New River Sound (the Florida East Coast Canal, later Intracoastal Waterway), 1917.
excursion boats transported passengers from town. The building had a large dance floor on the second story and food service. The bathhouse contained seventy-four dressing rooms as well as showers, and local children enjoyed the adjacent playground. The remaining years of the 1910s saw the beach grow as a focal point for the town’s enjoyment. Tourism, new to many economic classes in post World War I America, was just beginning to take hold, as were further plans for the Las Olas bridge and boulevard.

Altogether there have been four bridges over the waterway at the Las Olas Boulevard crossing—or three bridges and a major parts replacement. The 1917 bridge was replaced in 1926 by a better bridge, and a causeway was dredged to replace the old wooden approach. The replacement part was a Warren truss-type swing, installed in 1940. The latest bridge, still operating, was a drawbridge completed in 1958 and dedicated to State Representative and U.S. Congressman Dwight L. Rogers, the father of Homestead Exemption. The swing bridge was saved and shipped to Hendry County, where it was placed across the Caloosahatchee River at Fort Denaud, some five miles west of LaBelle. Another dedication on Las Olas was that of the monument to the veterans of World War I, erected in 1923. At that time the center line row of royal palms, which so distinguishes the roadway, was planted.

“The Venice of America”
On the west side of the Las Olas bridge and to the south is a lovely anchorage where several small sailboats are usually attached to moorings and moving gently with the current. This very picturesque area sometimes provides a visitor’s first pleasant glimpse of Fort Lauderdale’s nautical enterprise, with many small boatyards and small-boat warehouses and stores making up a large part of

Above is the second Las Olas Boulevard bridge with island causeway, photographed in 1934; at right is the present Dwight L. Rogers Memorial bridge, shortly after its 1958 completion.
the economy. These facilities are utilized both by resident boat owners and by owners from all parts of the east coast who are attracted by the excellent workmanship of the Fort Lauderdale labor force. Many pleasure craft crowd the waterways and, especially on Sundays, long lines of boats wait for the Las Olas bridge, among other spans, to open and allow them through. Conversely, when the bridge is open, long lines of cars form at each end, waiting for it to close and allow regular traffic flow again. This phenomenon forms both part of the charm of Fort Lauderdale, whose many waterways demand numerous bridges, and an annoyance for those rushing to or from work, waiting anxiously for the long horn signal that the bridge is closing.

The area immediately west of the Intracoastal crossing, a region of waterfront homes placed on small islands and peninsulas and known collectively as the Las Olas Isles, is one of the most beautiful residential locations in Broward County. How this tropical wonderland grew from the tangled mangrove marshes that once bordered that stretch of the Intracoastal known as Las Olas Sound is one of the more fascinating chapters of Fort Lauderdale's history.

As early as September 1916, four months before the bridge to the beach at Las Olas Boulevard was completed, a group of Fort Lauderdale businessmen led by newspaper publisher and editor Colonel George G. Mathews discussed the possibilities of dredging canals through these tidal marshlands and using the fill to create islands large and dry enough to sustain homes, making the as-yet uninhabitable region a "modern Venice, the winter resort of the wealthy of the nation." While Mathews described himself and his fellow promoters as "a visionary group, dreamers if you are pleased," their dreams were not long in taking shape.

By early 1920, the creation of the Las Olas Islands began when local realtors M. A. Hortt and R. E. Dye teamed with a group from Anderson, Indiana, led by Thomas N. Stilwell to form the New River Development Company. By the end of the year, the company had cleared the mangroves from the western edge of Las Olas Sound, dredged a semi-circular peninsula extending south from Las Olas Boulevard, and begun laying out streets and lots for Idlewyld, as the new subdivision was called.

The success of Idlewyld, coupled with the growing momentum of the Florida real estate boom, precipitated several subsequent island developments along Las Olas Boulevard during the 1920s. Stilwell himself dredged and developed the area directly west of Idlewyld as Riviera, advertised as the "Lauderdale Suburb Splendid." Perhaps the most notable of these early island developments was Charles G. Rodes' Venice, a name which recalled Colonel Mathews' 1916 prophecy, and which in turn would give Fort Lau-
Announcing the First Offering of “Home Sites” and “Water Fronts”

AT

VENICE

Fort Lauderdale

Thursday, Jan. 22nd, 1925

This group of “Home Sites and Water Fronts” is one of the most refined and completely improved residential developments in the State of Florida. Located on the Las Olas Boulevard and extending to the Northern Shore of New River at famous Tarpon Bend, a series of waterways has been constructed, giving every lot a waterfront and private dock. Twenty-six miles from Miami (one hour by auto). Short walking distance from the city and the Ocean, exclusive neighborhood, healthful location, always a refreshing breeze, public golf course and tennis courts nearby, excellent fishing, pure filtered city water, Coconuts, Palms and Australian pines planted in front of each lot, several homes already built and others under construction. The

Advertisements for lots in “Venice,” which appeared in the Fort Lauderdale Daily News in 1925.

Map of the Las Olas Isles, showing the various subdivisions.

underdale its enduring nickname as “The Venice of America.” Rodes’ property, east of the Sospire Canal and south of Las Olas Boulevard, was too swampy to dredge into a sizeable, contiguous peninsula like Idlewyl. As a result, the persistent and innovative Rodes pioneered the technique of “finger-islanding,” dredging just enough fill to create a series of slender, parallel, one-street islands, upon which every lot was waterfront property. Rodes’ success was widely copied during the boom years of the mid-1920s. At the western edge of the marsh, and south of New River, William F. Morang constructed “Rio Vista Isles,” adjoining the older, mainland development of Rio Vista. Morang also began construction of Lauderdale Isles, across Las Olas Boulevard from Rodes’ Venice.15

A visitor to the Las Olas Islands today, impressed by their peaceful, almost timeless tropical beauty, might assume that the area has rested in the sunshine, warm waters, and gentle breezes for the sixty years which followed the boom. Such is not the case. Along a small anchorage
near the bridge, the Las Olas Bight, is a small green park, to which boat owners may row their small tenders and tie up, leaving their larger vessels at anchor while they make their way to buy groceries or boating supplies for the rest of their trip. In this park is a monument to Merle Fogg, who established the Merle Fogg Flying Service in 1925, at the height of the Boom, when he built a small runway and hangar there. Fogg flew the first airplane from Fort Lauderdale to the Bahamas, landing at Nassau. Fogg's experiences also recall more turbulent times among the isles. In September 1926, he took his friend August Burghard, a reporter for the Fort Lauderdale Daily News, up in his plane to survey the devastation of the beach area after the great hurricane of September 18—one of the fiercest storms ever known on the coast. Burghard's description of what he saw from the air in the Las Olas Beach area is an outstanding example of descriptive newspaper accounts of disasters. He used the metaphor of a toy city, vulnerable to destruction with the sweep of a hand, to explain the violence of the hurricane, which broke seawalls and sidewalks along A-1-A and Las Olas Boulevard. Boats and barges were run aground on the beach, houses were roofless, trees dislocated, and new "lakes" everywhere. Lake Mabel had joined with the Atlantic Ocean during the storm to sweep away bridges. This was the other side of the coin to living in the tropical sunshine on the beautiful waterways of the Las Olas Isles.

The 1926 hurricane finished off a boom already weakened by overspeculation and logistical complications. The resulting "bust," and the Great Depression which followed, ended the development of the isles for nearly two decades. The years immediately following World War II, however, brought a new surge of growth to Fort Lauderdale. Among the developers who exploited the Las Olas Isles for real estate interests was Victor Nurmi, who rose to prominence during the post-World War II era. He was among the most Fabulous Fort Lauderdale visionaries and deserves recognition.

Born in Finland, a sailor at age twelve, Nurmi travelled the world, worked in the construction of the trans-Canadian railroads, built bridges, developed properties, engaged in wartime production in Michigan, and worked to end the Depression in Florida, where he had been a winter visitor since 1929. In 1944 he bought four dredged but undeveloped islands that were to become "The Nurmi Isles," named in order of descent from the beach: Royal Palm Drive, Nurmi Drive, Fiesta Way, and Isle of Venice. The first three islands he planned totally for single-family homes, whereas Isle of Venice was slated for apartments, which are closely packed together on it today. Since the dockage at these apartments is short, boats are allowed to tie stern-to the docks, and their many masts make the canal look more crowded than any other anchorage in Florida or the Caribbean. The lots and homes are smaller and more economical on Fiesta than on Nurmi or Royal Palm Drive. At the time he built, Nurmi's motives of efficiency and economy did not allow him to envision magnificent estate homes. Rather, most of the houses he built were one-story, cinder-block stuccos; and when he added a second story, it was usually only half the floor plan. For some purchasers, their Nurmi Isle homes were only vacation houses; for others, Nurmi's vision of a simple life with reduced costs among the tropical lushness of nature was most appealing for full-time residency. Few of these houses, sadly, remain in their original state today, having been replaced by large, brightly-colored Spanish-style villas.

Victor Nurmi's plans and execution of the islands exceeded city requirements. These islands were the "highest in Florida," according to Nurmi, with canals 120 feet wide at a depth of eight feet, which allows large keels to transverse them. All utilities were buried underground; wide, low-level bridges with well-lighted sidewalks connecting them to Las Olas Boulevard were built, along with new, concrete seawalls and wide, paved streets with low-level lighting which gave them a garden effect, or that of a "lover's lane." A rather formal effect was achieved by planting royal palms on each property at the street edge. As these grew majestically tall and dignified, it made the drive along Royal Palm or Nurmi look like a private roadway to some historic southern plantation, although the design of the homes at the time they were built was hardly historic, but rather innovative and daring. Nurmi saw to it that each lot was planted with the very decorative, red-blooming ixora bush, adding much to the landscaping and conformity of the individual lots to a greater, integrated whole.
The design of the homes was also one-of-a-piece, being white, modern, with the simple geometric planes and lines and large glass openings of the Bauhaus style of architecture which developed after World War I and was popularized by such European greats as Mies van der Rohe and Marcel Breuer. These men later became so well-known that their work and that which it inspired was called the "International Style." Other parts of Fort Lauderdale today show appreciation for Bauhaus architecture, the most notable being the prize-winning Broward County Main Library, completed in 1984.

Although William F. Morang, the 1920s developer, had begun dredging Nurmi's islands, he had left the job unfinished when the boom collapsed, and they had partly filled in during the intervening years before Nurmi purchased them. Thus, in order to execute his plans, the "Fabulous Finn" had to buy a dredge, which he tells us in his autobiography was called the Hallandale and was purchased from the Arundel Company of Baltimore. Fortunately, this machine was capable of cutting rock, which the fifty-five man crew did around-the-clock for about ten months. Then the awesome task of building five miles of seawalls around each island was begun.

The first coral-filled lots were sold in 1946, but economic difficulties prevented Nurmi from building until 1947. At that time he started about seventeen homes on Royal Palm and Nurmi Drives. Although Nurmi had been told he could not dredge enough rock in that area, he refused to give in to this depressing prediction or any other difficulties he encountered. Fort Lauderdale architect Robert Hansen said, "A good example goes a long way. Nurmi set that example."19

Mr. and Mrs. Nurmi's ideals of beauty and quality combined with simplicity and efficiency were appreciated by the buyers and future residents of Nurmi Isles, who joined the townspeople in a new mood of optimism as they emerged from the Depression and the World War II years. Victor Nurmi had indeed worked a near miracle turning mangrove flats into the highest rock-filled islands in Florida and surrounding them with uniform, concrete seawalls and deep yachting highways. With only the Las Olas bridge and the Seventeenth Street Causeway bridge (completed in 1956) between Nurmi Isles and the open Atlantic, owners of tall-masted yachts are especially attracted by the possibility of docking their boats behind their homes.

The development of Nurmi Isles completed the construction of the Las Olas Isles, stretching on both sides of Las Olas Boulevard from the Intracoastal Waterway westward to about Sixteenth Avenue, where the commercial area of the street begins. However, Las Olas Boulevard, and countless notable avenues in countless cities across the United States are much more than just residential and commercial streets. Those who see Las Olas only in these terms are unaware of the background of architectural planning, urban studies, landscaping, and civic movements which have contributed to the development of the boulevard.

"Avenues of the Ambitious"
Dr. Anthony Cantanese, now president of Florida Atlantic University, headquartered in Boca Raton, points out in his anthology, Urban Planning, that the Renaissance "established the concept of urban design."20 During this period, cities grew rapidly, and new aesthetic values prompted planners to embellish and enhance the city centerline not only to indicate the importance of rulers, but to add classic grace for the appreciation of all.

Aerial view of the Las Olas Isles, ca. 1926.
Such motives as these also inspired the “City Beautiful” movement in the United States during the late nineteenth century. As population increased, central city areas, overbuilt with apartments, hotels, stores, and office buildings, fell under the influence of “ugly” commercialism. To counteract this trend, art societies and park-and-boulevard commissions were formed to preserve the cherished streetscapes. One of the greatest endeavors to come out of this movement was what the authors of one book call “avenues of the ambitious,” created by and for influential businessmen to build up and enhance their images as enlightened leaders of their communities.†† Inspired by the grand boulevards they had seen in Europe, such as the Champs Elysees in Paris and the Unter den Linden in Berlin, urban planners such as landscape architect Frederick Law Omsted and architect Richard Morris Hunt joined forces with captains of industry to shape the face of America’s grand avenues. Thus Fifth Avenue, marking John D. Rockefeller’s stature in New York, or Massachusetts Avenue, which reinforces the image of Andrew Mellon in Washington, or Ward Parkway in Kansas City, the legacy of developer J. C. Nichols, still remind us of these “ambitious” leaders.

While such grand designs for America’s Gilded Age population centers had little meaning to Fort Lauderdale in its frontier village infancy, the growing community soon attracted world travelers who were aware of the grand boulevards in Europe as well as those in prominent American cities. Although Las Olas Boulevard began its existence in a haphazard way, with one “foot” in Fort Lauderdale’s downtown and the other on the beach, with no comprehensive or unifying plan, the development of the Las Olas Isles in the 1920s, and the creation of an upscale shopping district in the 1940s inspired attempts to decorate and plant the boulevard, embellishing it in an effort to emulate these earlier models. As a result of these efforts, Las Olas has become, in a small way, Fort Lauderdale’s own “avenue of the ambitious.”

Although several beautiful homes from the 1920s grace the Las Olas Isles, one grand mansion remains on the boulevard itself—the Sheppard Estate, which has been recently renovated. Although the 1926 Mediterranean Revival style house on a 1.3-acre lot was restored, the surrounding centuries-old hammock was destroyed by the building of townhouses adjacent to the mansion. About eighty trees were lost from the Sheppard property, some of them forty to fifty feet high.22 Although the mansion had been declared a historic site by the city commission in 1987, several years passed before architect Michael Shiff came up with a plan to save and renovate the structure that won city and neighborhood approval. However, many have regretted the loss of the trees and the natural habitat which provided a sanctuary for the animals and birds of the region. “It does look pretty barren now,” said Susan Bryan, president of the Colee Hammock Association.23 The restored Sheppard home was decorated by local commercial interests and has served several non-profit organizations for benefit events recalling the glitzy, glamorous era of the affluent ’20s.

An important planning and control organization for the boulevard is the Las Olas Association, a society of owners and merchants. In their magazine, Las Olas Boulevard, they date the “coming of age” of Las Olas as a commercial center of significance to the building of the Champ Carr Hotel, now called the Riverside, which was completed in 1937.24 In 1940, another event contributed to the style and future elegance of Las Olas’s shopping district—the opening of the Maus and Hoffman store for menswear. The owners were at first interested only in the “winter trade,” when they opened their enterprise next to the hotel as a branch of the thriving store they already had in Petosky, Michigan. They persuaded other top stores in Petosky to join them: Alice John Rogers and the Carriage Trade for women’s clothing; Bob Baker for beautiful leather goods, women’s shoes and bags; Games Imported; Flora Ottimer for children’s clothes—all of these were among the first “prestige” stores on the street. Other luxury stores followed, including Robert Drake’s sportswear.

The Sheppard Estate at 1620 East Las Olas Boulevard, 1976.
Michel Reid’s bath shop, Carroll’s Jewelry and Fine China, a leading desideratum for the town’s brides, Ed Behan’s Tweed Shop, and Shep’s Ltd., the popular owner of which, Otto Young, once remarked, “Since there’s no strictly ‘for men’s store’ anymore, [Shep’s] is a good place to buy button-down shirts for the whole family.”

Another men’s store has replaced Young’s on Las Olas—Sterling’s, which has had a long history in Fort Lauderdale since “Pop” Sterling founded it in the mid-‘30s on First Avenue, near the New River. Sophie Curson’s, from Philadelphia, a luxury shop for women’s apparel, is still on the street after many years of tenure. According to her daughter Susan, Pearl Gouldner, the owner, still works in the shop during the “season,” although she is now in her eighties. Among the restaurants advertised in the Las Olas Magazine in 1981 were the Riverside Hotel’s “Copper Cup,” the French Quarter, Le Cafe de Paris, and il Giardino’s Italian fare.

A man who left his mark on Las Olas was Wells Squier, who died in March, 1993. A monument in his honor has been erected in the median of the divided street, near the Chemist’s Shop, appropriately. The interior of this shop, a popular local pharmacy, includes a restaurant for lunchers and a gift shop. It was one of Squier’s first designs after he moved to Fort Lauderdale to be near his parents in 1957.

“I think the sense of continuity up and down the boulevard is due to Wells, which I think is what gives the boulevard its feel,” said Robert Van Fleet, executive director of the Las Olas Company, the largest property owner along the boulevard. Bill Maus, Jr. of Maus and Hoffman commented, “His designs have lasted a long time because they have a timeless quality to them. They look as good today as they did all those years ago.”

Some feel that Squier’s crowning achievement was Las Casas de Las Olas, a Mediterranean-style building for shops and offices which has become “a magnificent polarizing point for the boulevard. Squier ad-

The Champ Carr (now Riverside) Hotel, soon after its completion in 1937.

Las Olas Boulevard, looking east from U.S. 1, ca. 1948-49, a period when its reputation as an elegant shopping district was beginning to take shape.
hers to a sense of tradition that started in the residential areas adjacent to the boulevard. At this site, graceful colonnades reminiscent of Europe contribute shade and coolness for the passers-by, while time is told by a pale blue clock tower high above the rooftops. The building, painted in subtle shades of terra cotta, fits in well with the ambiance of its surroundings.

The spirit of the merchants on the street was perhaps best described by editor Henry Kinney of Las Olas Magazine:

... Las Olas with its shade trees and flowering shrubs, its Mediterranean-flavored architecture, its arched galleries, distinctive places, carries well the responsibility for presenting Fort Lauderdale the way the first-time visitor expects the city to be.

The city merchants, the restaurateurs, the landlords, and the city fathers themselves have been working at this since the 1940s. It is no mere stroke of chance that Las Olas is flowered with tropical blossoms, accented with plots of grass, shaded by neatly trimmed trees, lined with broad walks meant for strolling and bordered by fronts of old brick, leaded glass, aged stone and ironwork, giving it a look that lies somewhere between Paris, Brussels, and Rome.

Both patrons and merchants have contributed to this special feeling of Las Olas Boulevard as a center of commerce. In 1971, the street won first prize in a nationwide contest to find the outstanding highway in an urban setting. The competition, sponsored by the U.S. Department of Transportation's Federal Highway Administration, attracted 723 entries from 123 contestants in eleven categories. Fort Lauderdale's prize was awarded for improvements made by the city in cooperation with the Las Olas Merchants' Association, which shared in the cost of landscaping median islands and sidewalk areas in a $73,000 venture. Old-fashioned street lights were donated by businessmen. The road was resurfaced and curbs reconstructed. The Miami Herald congratulated the city and the merchants: "Any visitor to Fort Lauderdale can testify that East Las Olas is a good street. It is an example of what can be done with imagination and cooperation."

Just as quaintly-designed shops and lush landscaping characterize the boulevard's famed shopping district, the western portion of East Las Olas, firmly rooted in Fort Lauderdale's downtown, is dominated by large buildings, many of them housing banking establishments. Among the several banks that have been located on the street, Century Bank advertised itself as "the oldest financial institution in Fort Lauderdale, having been there since 1928." SunBank, successor to Century Bank, has recently occupied a huge skyscraper on Las Olas just west of U.S. Highway 1, adding to the city's growing skyline, which was virtually non-existent until 1970, when the Landmark First National Bank broke ground for a twenty-eight story tower at Broward Boulevard and Southeast Third Avenue, which, despite others now silhouetted against the bright Florida sky, still dominates the Fort Lauderdale skyline.

The original First National Bank was organized on March 17, 1937, on a lower floor of what was then called the Sweet Building at Las Olas Boulevard and Andrews Avenue. Hardly a skyscraper by today's standards, this nine-story office building was the tallest edifice in the city for many years after its 1926 construction. As one looks westward down the boulevard, it is this building that marks the end of East Las Olas, planted across the street on Andrews Avenue. Now a curve in the boulevard leads drivers to turn on Andrews Avenue where East Las Olas terminates. Several blocks westward, the street name is carried on as West Las Olas Boulevard.
through the historic Sailboat Bend residential district.

One of the most significant new towers in the downtown Fort Lauderdale skyscape is that which now houses the Sun-Sentinel at 200 East Las Olas Boulevard. Under various names and in various locations, the Sun-Sentinel has been the city’s leading newspaper since it began as a weekly, titled the Fort Lauderdale Sentinel, in 1911. In 1925, the paper was purchased from founder George G. Mathews for $140,000 by Leroy and W. J. Galvin, who consolidated it with another local paper, The Herald. The Galvins renamed the paper the Fort Lauderdale Daily News and Evening Sentinel, selling it at the end of the year to Idlewyld developer Tom Stilwell and his brother Horace. In 1929, the Stilwells, in turn, sold it to Robert H. Gore. Gore transformed the newspaper plant on Southeast First Avenue and North New River Drive into a modern facility with the addition of plentiful floor space and state-of-the-art equipment. By the 1960s, the Fort Lauderdale News and Sun-Sentinel was no longer a small town press in what was no longer a small town.

Besides the newspaper, Gore, “a loner who rarely fraternized with others outside his family,” purchased the unfinished Wil-Mar Hotel (a relic of the real estate bust of the 1920s), located at the intersection of Las Olas and First Avenue. Gore completed the hotel and called it the “Governors’ Club,” after a meeting of the Southern Governors’ Conference held there soon after the facility opened in 1937. He conducted some of his business from the ground floor restaurant of the hotel. Gore created a dynasty with his nine children, the youngest of whom eventually ran the hotel, which served as a center of Fort Lauderdale for local businessmen and a place of prestige for visiting dignitaries until it closed in the mid-1970s.

The Chicago Tribune bought the newspaper itself in 1963, a time when the old era of big business and big businessmen in general were disappearing from the town to be replaced with a more anonymous bureaucracy in both public and private concerns. Today, the news of the world and the nation are published in complete, if brief, coverage, and local developments are summarized each day and fattened out the newspaper for heavy Sunday editions.

If the “avenues of the ambitious” were only downtown business thoroughfares or residential and commercial streets with small “beautification” projects, they would hardly have the significance they do today. However, ambitious men of commerce have always wanted their cities to be known for culture and the arts, for education, and to stand for America’s version of what Europeans had accomplished in centuries of urban endeavor. The construction of civic institutions and museums did much to achieve this goal. These avenues are also ideal locations for churches, which, along with other monumental structures, give a spiritual dimension to the lives of those who dwell in the community.

Typically, the first St. Anthony’s Catholic Church was located on Las Olas Boulevard, but as the parish grew, the 250 available seats in the building proved inadequate. The announcement of plans to build a larger church at 900 Northeast Third Street was made in the Fort Lauderdale Daily News on August 1, 1946. At that time, St. Anthony’s was the only Catholic church in town. St. Anthony’s original church building on Las Olas, constructed in 1921, was later moved to Northeast Third Avenue, where it now serves a Lutheran congregation. Fort Lauderdale’s First Baptist Church occupied a building on the corner of East Las Olas and Southeast Third Avenue from 1913 to 1946, and the First Presbyterian Church met in a small building at Las Olas and Southeast First Avenue from 1920 to 1942. Like St. Anthony’s, these churches left their Las Olas sanctuaries for larger quarters elsewhere as their congregations grew.

The Fort Lauderdale Museum of Art, as it exists today, a large, beige building at the corner of East Las Olas and Andrews Avenue, with a rounded wall on its Las Olas side, was begun in 1980, when the Downtown Development Authority sold the trustees the site for $365,000. Architect Edward Larabee Barnes was commissioned to design the building, and the development campaign received a much-needed boost when

The Fort Lauderdale Museum of Art at Las Olas and Andrews Avenue (photo by Mary McGreevy).
August Urbanek of Fort Lauderdale donated $1,000,000 toward what was then estimated as a $7,000,000 building cost.40 The museum opened in 1986 with much fanfare and newspaper notice. Besides its own collections, principally of ethnic art, Cobra Art, and William Glackens' American Impressionism, the Museum of Art has featured many impressive exhibits, including the opening show on a Renaissance of Modern Art, a collection of impressionist work from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and a unique exhibit of work by the famed Columbian sculptor Fernando Botero, which utilized the museum's facilities perfectly. The massive, monumental statues were displayed on a sculpture terrace off the second floor, in a big, rotund space on the second floor, and at the dramatic entrance off Las Olas Boulevard, where one of Botero's gigantic torsos was displayed for all in the city to see.41

The Multiversity

With the development of avenues, museums, monuments, churches, parks, art, and architecture, it is no wonder that urban planners and patrons, as well as the governments which support them and facilitate their use, have paid so much attention to education, not only for its commercial uses and values, but also for the intangible qualities by which it informs and enhances the life of the community in which it exists. Indeed, East Las Olas Boulevard, an unlikely setting for a college campus in the traditional sense, has become a center of higher education in Fort Lauderdale as a result of changing concepts in education and the boulevard's significance as a hub of commercial and cultural life.

Traditionally, a university has been a "center of learning," as Cardinal Newman defined it about 150 years ago when he helped found the Irish university at Dublin. Clark Kerr, a leading American educator and president emeritus of the University of California at Berkeley, expressed America's current attitude to higher education as taking place in a "multiversity," a new development since World War I.42 Not a single, centralized, unified community, the multiversity has no single campus location, but comprises a huge system built over several campuses in various cities or suburban locations. It is comprised of separate schools and colleges, each administered on its own and having some autonomy from the main college administration, and is held together spiritually by student, faculty, and administrative enthusiasm and endeavor.

For most of its 150 years of statehood, Florida has been slow in the development and funding of higher education, giving it primary status beginning in the 1950s, when Tallahassee became aware that tremendous population and economic growth demanded more institutions of higher learning. As a result, the state government planned twenty-eight junior colleges, among which was Broward Community College. Today, BCC operates a large central campus in Davie, branch campuses at Coconut Creek and Pembroke Pines, and administrative offices on Las Olas Boulevard.43 Broward Community College opened in the fall of 1960, with only 701 students and Dr. Joe B. Rushing as president.44 It has now joined forces with rapidly growing Florida Atlantic University, so that holders of the BCC Associate of Arts degree will be able to continue and graduate from FAU with that university's four-year degree.

Florida Atlantic University was founded in Boca Raton, and, like the community colleges, developed out of the population boom of the '50s.45 Despite difficulties in its planning, the university, originally established as an upper level institution offering junior and senior level courses primarily for community college graduates, was constructed on a World War II military airfield, and opened for classes in September 1964. It was formally dedicated in October with President Lyndon B. Johnson as the speaker.46

Just off Las Olas Boulevard, somewhat behind the BCC building, is Fort Lauderdale's FAU Tower, located in the heart of downtown. The university's College of Urban and Public Affairs and the Graduate School of Business are housed in this building. This division of FAU's "multiversity" also offers graduate programs in public administration, business administration, and related fields. Nearby, the Broward County Main Library on Andrews Avenue
houses an outstanding collection of books for the school’s use. In conjunction with Miami’s Florida International University, a doctorate in business administration is offered at the FAU Tower. While attempting to gain support for his plans to extend the College of Urban and Public Affairs at the Las Olas complex, Dr. Cantanese, a leading force in establishing FAU’s strong presence in Broward County, confounded, “If we want it, we’re going to have to pay for it.” His listeners highly approved of his aggressive and costly foray into the downtown area, and he got the $4,500,000 needed to purchase the site of the old Governors’ Club, which was subsequently demolished in 1995.

Whatever the cost, the university was desirous of obtaining the site on prestigious Las Olas in the rapidly re-developing downtown area. As early as November 1991, the university had announced plans for a College of Architecture and Construction Management, plans which were later modified to create a School of Architecture within the College of Urban and Public Affairs. By 1995, the state Board of Regents granted planning approval for a professional architecture degree program, which will make FAU the only public university south of Florida A & M to offer a five-year bachelor of architecture degree.

Also scheduled to be housed at the Las Olas site is FAU’s newly-approved graduate program in justice policy and management, which will be part of the College of Urban and Public Affairs’ School of Public Administration. With the opening and expansion of these facilities on prominent, historic, and prestigious Las Olas Boulevard, FAU is launching further into the concept of the “multiversity” as part and parcel of the community as the twenty-first century rapidly approaches.

**Progress or Doom?**

In the century since Fort Lauderdale was platted, and the nearly eighty years since Las Olas Boulevard was extended eastward to the Atlantic, the boulevard has provided residents and visitors alike with a multiplicity of functions and environments. From its beginning as a road through a wilderness of hammocks and mangrove marsh, it has evolved into a “grand avenue” that for many captures the essence of Fort Lauderdale. It has served at once as the core of a youthful, tourist-oriented beachfront, as the center of a beautiful, waterfront residential section, as a quaintly-designed, upscale shopping boulevard, as an integral part of Fort Lauderdale’s dynamic downtown, and as a nucleus of the city’s cultural and educational activities.

Today, the future of the boulevard remains in question. A major concern, for example, surrounds the plans of large development interests to introduce high-rise buildings to the Las Olas shopping district and adjacent properties. Such plans have met strong opposition from more preservation-minded citizens, who appreciate a quaint village atmosphere and tropical foliage near the downtown area. The construction of large condominiums near the shopping district, or on the street itself, they argue, would destroy the intimate qualities of the boulevard. While Fort Lauderdale continues to redefine itself, it remains to be seen whether the demographic and economic trends and redevelopment plans of the present and future will preserve and enhance the boulevard’s significance and appeal, or consign them to the colorful but vanished past.

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Postcard view of Las Olas Boulevard in the 1940s.
Notes

1. "Las Olas is Paving its Future," Fort Lauderdale Sun-Sentinel, March 27, 1995.
2. Ibid.
4. A. L. Knowlton plat of "Town of Fort Lauderdale, Dade Co., Fla.," 1896, copy in Broward County Historical Commission archives.
5. Burghardt and Weidling, Cheekered Sunshine, 70.
6. Ibid., 31.
7. Ibid., 52.
8. Ibid., 72; See also materials in the archives of the Fort Lauderdale Historical Society, Fort Lauderdale.
11. Euston, Cruising Down the River, 8.
13. Ibid.
17. Victor Nurmi with August Burghardt, The Fabulous Finn (Fort Lauderdale: Victor Nurmi, 1979), 30-36. Most of the information about Nurmi presented here is found in this autobiography, but the author also knew Nurmi and has a copy of the book which he signed and in which he attested to the fact that her home at 113 Nurmi Drive is one that he built.
18. Ibid., 33-34.
19. Ibid., 50-51. The architect Robert Hansen, who cooperated with Nurmi in the design of the houses, was also known to the author, who consulted him about rebuilding 113 Nurmi Drive. The original blueprint of this work is in the archive of the author.
23. Ibid.
25. Ibid., 16.
29. Ibid.
31. Ibid.
34. McIver, Fort Lauderdale and Broward County, 182-183.
35. Ibid., 194-195.
36. Ibid.
40. Ibid.
41. The description and shows mentioned here are from the author's personal knowledge and point of view.
43. For the history of the educational policy in the region and for a very good analysis of the founding of FAU, the author was happy to have Roger H. Miller's account of "the creation and beginning of FAU," The Inside Story (Boca Raton: Florida Atlantic University, 1989). Miller covers the years 1955-1983. The author has been auditing philosophy classes at FAU and attending lectures there for six years. She speaks regularly at Florida Philosophical Conventions, at the university, and at the Broward County Main Library.
44. McIver, Fort Lauderdale and Broward County, 211; Maurer, Ode to the City, 118.
45. Miller, The Inside Story. See also George, "Broward's Flagship City," for a good overview of the post-World War II boom.
47. Private conversation with the author.