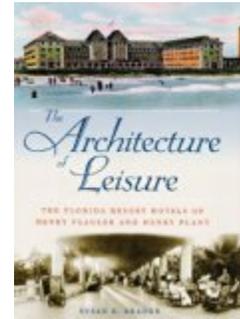


Susan R. Braden. *The Architecture of Leisure: The Florida Resort Hotels of Henry Flagler and Henry Plant*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002. xxiii + 394 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8130-2556-8.

Reviewed by Dave Nelson (Department of History, Florida State University)
Published on H-Florida (August, 2004)



Constructing Paradise in the Gilded Age

Just days after the multiple terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, many within Florida's media circles began asking what would be the effect of the attacks upon Florida's tourist trade. Although on the surface these concerns may appear off-target, their worries had historical roots. Throughout the twentieth century, Florida's prime industry had been leisure and tourism. For most non-Floridians, Florida represents sandy beaches and exotic locales, Walt Disney World and Silver Springs, race tracks and alligator farms, and numerous other leisure outlets. The tourist industry has long exerted political, cultural, and economical influence over the state's affairs, affecting matters as diverse as the fishing industries, exotic species introduction, and race relations. And yet only a few scholars have investigated the leisure trades within the Sunshine State. Among the few works include studies of Florida's Seminole peoples and tourism, the environmental impacts of development and leisure, and a few histories of specific tourist attractions.[1] But to date, no one has investigated the physical, built landscape that fed that image and trade. With her book *Architecture of Leisure*, architectural historian Susan R. Braden has started the process with a study of Gilded Age resort hotels. Joining a distinguished line of Florida architectural historians, Braden has also expanded the focus of Florida architectural studies.

For Braden, the resorts represented the introduction of Gilded Age values—complete with theatrical resorts, architectural designs meant to attract the nation's wealthiest, and ample opportunities for conspic-

uous luxury—to the then relatively undeveloped Florida. Henry Flagler and Henry Plant, in their desire to create a "Newport of the South" (p. 107), "transported urban cultural ideas to Florida, transforming a sparsely inhabited, scraggly beautiful near-wilderness into what they promoted as the 'American Riviera'" (p. 1). More than just a catalog of hotels and resorts, Braden's study integrates the architectural developments with the social and cultural worlds of Gilded-Age Florida.

Originally a dissertation at Florida State University, the book is divided into two parts.[2] The first part, approximately a third of the book, discusses the social and cultural contexts within which these resorts were built. The second is an architectural analysis and summary of the construction of the hotels. It is the book's first half that will be of most interest to Florida historians.

Braden starts her study with a chapter tracing the lives and careers of the two developers. Although offering little new information, Braden does a good job of summarizing the earlier biographical works on Plant and Flagler. Both men were wealthy New York business leaders—Flagler with Standard Oil and his Florida East Coast Railroad, and Plant with the Southern Railroad—with Florida interests. Each began their affairs in Florida through trains, and later expanded their involvement with hotels to serve their rails. Infrastructure—supplies, workers, public utilities, even entire towns—followed, as did tourists. As Braden points out, railroads "reshaped" Florida's land, separating the East coast for the elites

from the lower classes. By 1913—the year of Flagler’s death—the East Coast Railroad served nine hotels and the entire Florida east coast. But Braden’s study is not a mere repetition of Flagler’s and Plant’s capitalist exploits in Florida, but rather looks at what effect the architecture and designs sanctioned by the two men had upon the state’s cultural and social make-up.

For Braden resort hotels possessed specific criteria: use of “historic and contextually meaningful architectural styles;” physical and functional autonomy; and “blatantly conspicuous (often decidedly feminine) luxury” (p. 11). Resort hotels offered “interesting scenery, amusements or ... a salubrious climate” (p. 55). Transcending the goals of mere hotels, these resorts functioned more as proto-amusement parks. Unlike inns and hotels before or since, the hotels built by Flagler and Plant served as stand-alone experiences, the end destination of thousands of Florida tourists. Braden argues that in the nineteenth century, the ability to partake in these experiences—especially in the winter, a time when most are unable to travel—represents conspicuous leisure; a social marker separating the elite from the common workers.

In chapter three, Braden traces the development of hotels in the US. Braden outlines the changing architectural styles of hotels, and the evolution of travel and leisure those changes reflected. Today’s hotels began as simple taverns and inns—offering little more than a room and food—as well as rented rooms in private houses. As Braden demonstrates, the hospitality trade in the present United States has deep roots. For instance, the first inn in North America opened in 1610 in Virginia. But until well into the nineteenth century, travel within the US (aside from residential relocations) was primarily an occupational pursuit, and remained a male-dominated activity. Because the nature of travel was more of necessity than desire, the architectural styles of inns and hotels leaned towards the vernacular as well as local aesthetics. However, by the 1850s, as expendable wealth grew and transportation and roads improved, the nation’s first resorts appeared, utilizing neoclassicism and romantic styles to attract venturesome tourists. But it was only after the 1880s, as conspicuous consumption increased, that there was a market for conspicuous leisure. And men like Flagler and Plant were more than happy to accommodate this new wealthy, mobile class. By the late 1800s, six architectural styles dominated the burgeoning hotel and resort industry: Stick, Queen Anne, Shingle, Renaissance Revival, and neo-Georgian. But as Braden points out, while the resorts targeted the nation’s elites with their

furnishings and architectural styles, many middle-class tourists also registered as guests—partly to gawk at the hotels and partly to experience a few days living as the “other half” did. Chapter four continues in this vein, tracing the development of hotels, resorts, and leisure in the Sunshine State. Braden does an admirable job describing how a typical resort hotel in Florida looked and operated. Although her focus is the hotels of Plant and Flagler, it would have been nice for Braden to have ventured into a detailed discussion of a few of the other, non-Flagler/Plant hotels here. Such a discussion would have further bolstered her arguments for Plant’s and Flagler’s introduction of Gilded Age hotels to Florida.

Despite Braden’s thorough work throughout the book, it is chapter five that will prove to be of most value to Florida historians— as well as, perhaps, cause the most aggravation. Here she delves into the social aspects of resort hotels, using the filter of gender, race, and class. It is often mentioned that book reviewers must continually remind themselves to review only the book at hand, and not the one the reviewer wished to see in the proverbial perfect world. Such reminders were necessary while reading Braden’s skillful, yet all too brief, analysis in this chapter. Still one cannot help but wonder what sort of book would have emerged had she flip-flopped the book’s emphasis—expanded this chapter, and truncated the entire second half of the book. As she only touches upon here, the social, racial, and gender implications behind the hotels’ design and operation, as well as the cultural and economical changes brought about by the money and the tourists these properties attracted, is fertile ground for study. In one of the book’s more intriguing discussions, Braden suggests that because of the higher number of the female guests, the hotels targeted them with the hotel’s specific designs and motifs, including gendered spaces, such as sitting rooms and parlors, enabling women to maintain the gender-specific activities common at the time. Likewise, there were also available male-centered spaces, including billiards and smoking rooms. And then as women began to join the men in public activities by the early twentieth century, and as inter-gender social activities grew increasingly popular, the hotels shifted their designs and operations accordingly. However, Braden goes too far when suggesting that these adaptations revealed progressive tendencies among the resort planners and managers, when the evidence she presents suggests they were instead simply good capitalists adjusting to an evolving market. But alas, such an analysis was not the aim of her book, and her inclusion of this discussion, no matter how brief, within a work

of architectural history is to be commended. Along with the book's outstanding visual presentation, Braden has with her social analysis raised the bar for future Florida architectural scholars.

The book's second half is concerned primarily with architectural styles and design, and therefore may prove of less interest to many of the subscribers to this list-serv. Here Braden delves into the minutiae of the construction and operation of Flagler's and Plant's Florida resort hotels. For each property, Braden traces the architects who designed them, the architectural styles and motifs represented, and their construction, use, and ultimate demise or destruction. (Only a few of the hotels are still in existence, such as Flagler College, which originated as the 1888-built Hotel De Leon.) Through maps, architectural plans, advertisements, and photographs, Braden is able to reconstruct for readers the many sites that no longer exist. Most valuable are her descriptions of some of the lesser-known resort properties, such as Plant's Hotel Kissimmee, the Ocala Hotel, and Flagler's Hotel Continental in Jacksonville and the Long Key Fishing Camp. As any scholar who writes about the past—Florida's or otherwise—can attest, the ability and means to visualize the cultural landscape of the past is one of the most important but yet elusive tasks to complete. Braden's work has made that task easier for historians of Florida's Gilded Age a bit easier. And as scholars devote more attention to material culture, the politics of built environments and public spaces, as interest in historic preservation builds, many historians may yet find much in the book's second half useful.

This book will be of use to nineteenth- and twentieth-century Florida historians, academic as well as public, historic preservationists, and local historians. And with its handsome presentation—the book contains twenty-seven color photographs and over a hundred images and diagrams—the book can sit just as easily on the coffee table as upon the bookshelf. My only substantial criticism is the lack of in-depth Florida, Southern, and Progressive Era historiography. While Braden has obviously read far and wide on architectural and material culture (Braden has included an eight-page bibliographic essay), a greater familiarity with related works on the South and Florida might have proven fruitful. For instance, more discussion of how the development of leisure architecture and the tourist industry fit within the wider New South narrative would have been desirable. Was there a similar move towards conspicuous leisure in other southern states? For Florida studies, linking Plant's and Flagler's development of Florida with the scholarly debates over the extent of

the southern-ness of Florida would have also been worthwhile. Did elements of Florida's cultural heritage affect the resort's architectural styles, or were they imported whole-cloth into the state? And finally, works such as Grace Hale's *Making Whiteness* and Kathy Peiss's *Cheap Amusements* would have added greatly to her analysis of the social impacts of resorts.[3] For instance, what role did leisure play in marking racial and gender boundaries?

While many fine works on Florida architecture has appeared over the past forty years, Braden has managed to shift the focus from strictly material culture to include not only social context, but also the interplay between architecture and culture.[4] Although not completely successful in all aspects, she also delves deeper than most architectural historians, blending architectural studies with social history to explore the social, political, and cultural worlds in which these luxurious resorts resided. While its stated aim was only an exploration of Florida resort architecture of the Gilded Age, its execution achieves much more than that.

[1]. Patsy West, *The Enduring Seminoles: From Alligator Wrestling to Ecotourism* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998); Mark Derr, *Some Kind of Paradise: A Chronicle of Man and the Land in Florida* (New York: W. Morrow, 1989); Tracy Revels, *Watery Eden: A History of Wakulla Springs* (Tallahassee: Sentry Press, 2002); Cory Gittner, *Miami's Parrot Jungle and Gardens: The Colorful History of an Uncommon Attraction* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000); and Richard Martin, *Eternal Spring: Man's 10,000 Years of History at Florida's Silver Springs* (St. Petersburg: Great Outdoors, 1966).

[2]. Susan R. Braden, "Florida Resort Architecture: The Hotels of Henry Plant and Henry Flagler," (Ph.D. diss: Florida State University, 1987).

[3]. Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998); Kathy Peiss *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York City* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986).

[4]. Works include Albert Manucy, *The Houses of St. Augustine, 1565-1821* (St. Augustine: St. Augustine Historical Society, 1962); *Sixteenth-Century St. Augustine: The People and Their Homes* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997); Ronald W. Haase, *Classic Cracker: Florida's Wood-Frame Vernacular Architecture* (Sarasota: Pineapple Press, 1992); Alex Caemmerer, *Houses of Key West* (Sarasota: Pineapple Press, 1992);

Elsbeth Gordon, *Florida's Colonial Architectural Heritage* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002); Wayne Wood, *Jacksonville's Architectural Heritage: Landmarks for the Future* (Jacksonville: University of North Florida Press, 1989); Donald Walter Curl, *Mizner's Florida: American Resort Architecture* (New York: Architectural History Foundation and MIT Press, 1987); and William N. Morgan, *Precolumbian Architecture in Eastern North America* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1999).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-florida>

Citation: Dave Nelson. Review of Braden, Susan R., *The Architecture of Leisure: The Florida Resort Hotels of Henry Flagler and Henry Plant*. H-Florida, H-Net Reviews. August, 2004.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=9684>

Copyright © 2004 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.