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The Tampa Bay Hotel: The Palace of a Prince

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An 1897 promotional brochure advertising the then recently opened Tampa Bay Hotel in Tampa, Florida described the luxury resort as "...the palace of a prince."¹ In the purple prose common to the period the hotel was characterized as combining "...in an almost lavish degree every known convenience, luxury and necessity of human life."² Although the old Tampa Bay has long since ceased to function for the purpose for which it was built, and has served for more than fifty years as the primary facility of the University of Tampa, its "subtle fascination"³ continues to bequeil the observer and it remains a pre-eminent example of American nineteenth century eclectic architecture.

What were the factors that led to the creation of this magnificent structure? The selection of the site and the choice of the exotic architectural style was a complex combination of economic practicality and romantic escapism. The decision in the mid-1880's by Henry B. Plant, financier and founder of the Florida West Coast Railway to extend his railroad to Tampa where it would link with his already successful steamship line was an effort to create a vibrant transportation system for the underdeveloped state of Florida. The construction of a 511 room luxury hotel on sixty acres of land on the west side of the Hillsborough river fulfilled Mr. Plant's dream of an elegant centerpiece for his expanding economic empire.⁴ It also represented a significant response by Mr. Plant to the challenge extended by his

longtime rival, Henry M. Flagler, who during the same period was developing the Florida East Coast Railway. Flagler's selection in 1885 of, the New York architectural firm of Carrere' and Hastings "to design the Ponce de Leon Hotel in St. Augustine had introduced into Florida the gaiety of Spanish Renaissance stucco decoration."⁵ Plant's competitive spirit may well have been the motivation for him to construct at a cost of more than two million dollars the sumptuous and luxurious Tampa Bay Hotel.

The architectural style chosen for the enormous structure was said to have "...many suggestive reflections of the Alhambra in sunny Spain."⁶ However, as we shall see, the building was only superficially related to the Moorish fortress in Granada and can be more accurately described as an eclectic blending of a variety of Islamic-inspired elements.

Although the attempt to connect the Tampa Bay to the Alhambra may not be architecturally correct, a more significant relationship between the two structures can be found in their tropical surroundings. From the early 19th century and the publication of Washington Irving's Tales of the Alhambra⁷, the Moorish palace has symbolized the exotic in architecture. Its influence grew so pervasive that the term "Moorish" became synonymous with any variant architecture inspired by Islamic forms.

The origin of the so-called Moorish revival can be traced to 18th century landscape designs where ornamental mosque-like garden pavilions added exotic accents to the picturesque terrain. In the early 19th century, European colonial activities in the Near East and North Africa stimulated popular interest in fanciful buildings. Travellers to the Orient discovered the romantic potentials of the complex decorative ornament associated with Islamic architecture. The adaptation of Moorish forms by western architects was made easier by the fact that the Islamic style was itself an eclectic mode composed essentially of screen-like facades placed over traditional structures. The intricate linear patterns were adapted to all manner of buildings including domestic, commercial and religious structures.⁸

Although examples of Islamic inspiration can be found in a wide range of building types its primary identification was with the architecture of pleasure and the concept of the "oriental pleasure dome." From theaters and music halls to exhibition pavilions and bandstands, the romantic fantasy of the Arabian Nights seemed ideally suited to buildings designed for entertainment.

These structures were executed in various materials ranging from wood to iron and were characterized by an overall application of geometric ornamentation. The appearance of horseshoe arches and bulbous domes were another feature common to the eclectic style. Because the Islamic mode was never subjected to the same codification in 19th century pattern books as were other borrowed styles, such as the Greek or the Gothic, architects who chose Islamic were not restricted to archaeologically correct usage, but rather were able to express an almost unlimited freedom of invention.

One of the earliest examples of the inventiveness of Islamic inspired buildings in England was John Nash's Brighton Pavilion.⁹ Designed for the Prince Regent in 1815, the structure was composed of a multitude of bulbous domes and spikey minarets. Although the selection of the Oriental style was said to reflect England's imperial interests in India, in actuality the royal seaside pavilion was a whimsical exercise in romantic escapism.

The influence of Nash's imaginative design was pervasive and by mid-century had found its way to America. In 1848 the architect Leopold Edilitz created a similar conglomeration of domes and minarets for the home for the famous showman P.T. Barnum in Bridgeport, Connecticut.¹⁰ Once again there was no archaeological source for the style but rather the mysterious fantasy of the East.

Although whimsy may have been the determining factor in the selection of Moorish motifs in domestic architecture, the choice of exotic forms for theaters and resort, hotels were more closely associated with the eclectic principle of "appropriateness". For in the Victorian mind the mysterious East was associated with romantic fantasy. Whether the intricate designs were cast in iron or sculpted in stucco, the repetitive patterns of arabesque ornament created the proper ambiance for a pleasure pavilion.

Henry B. Plant's decision in 1888 to build his new luxury resort hotel in the Moorish style was therefore an appropriate choice for the pleasure palace he envisioned. He selected the New York architect J.A. Wood¹¹ to design a facility that would rival Flagler's Ponce de Leon in St. Augustine both in size and grandeur. For to Henry Plant the Tampa Bay was to "...stand

pre-eminent among all others ... a dream of magnificence indescribable.”¹²

The hotel with its distinctive minaret-like towers was open to the public in January 1891. The five-story brick structure was over 1200 feet long and was fronted by an elaborately carpentered horseshoe arched veranda which ran the full length of the buildings. A contemporary account in the New York Journal of Commerce called the hotel "a miracle of human invention which dazzles and astonished the senses."¹³

The interior was richly decorated and furnished with "...paintings, statuary, cabinets and bric a' brac from many lands."¹⁴ The intricate Islamic ornament found throughout the building led one early writer to attribute the hotel's style to an Arabian Nights fantasy. But with true Victorian pride he went on to point out that "what the Saracen created in words and fancies, the late 19th century seeks to create in reality, with the aid of wealth, steam and electricity.”¹⁵

Recent speculation concerning the source of the architectural style of the Tampa Bay Hotel has suggested a specific local influence. David Nolan in his book *Fifty Feet of Paradise* contends that the Moorish style of both the Ponce de Leon and the Tampa Bay can be traced to a private home built in St. Augustine in 1882. The Villa Zorayda designed by Franklin W. Smith for his winter residence was according to Nolan "...a veritable textbook for an architectural style...”¹⁶ Although a strong connection can be made between the two St. Augustine buildings both in their stylistic reflection of Florida's Spanish colonial heritage and their similar use of concrete and coquina, construction, the Tampa structure would seem only remotely related. For J.A. Wood's design did not rely on Hispano-Moresque examples, but rather was a personal

interpretation derived from a variety of Islamic sources.¹⁷

The success of various forms of Islamic inspired buildings in the late 19th century is well documented, but the Spanish variant was particularly popular in the semi-tropical climate of Florida and California. The choice of a so-called Hispano-Moresque style for the St. Augustine resort as well as a recently completed resort hotel in Pasadena, California was justified as an appropriate reflection of the two regions' Spanish heritage.¹⁸

However, the exotic style for resorts was not restricted by climate or historical linkage, and by the 1890's hotel facades in Philadelphia, Boston and Washington, D.C. featured the ubiquitous horseshoe arcades.¹⁹ Even when the exterior of hotels were designed in a more conventional western revival style, Moorish decorative motifs could be found as part of the interior decor, often as the ornamental setting for so-called "Smoking Parlors.”²⁰

As the 19th century drew to a close Islamic-inspired motifs continued to appear on buildings associated with entertainment. Even in the early years of the 20th century the exotic ornament of the Alhambra became a prototype for countless movie theaters throughout the country. But of all the pleasure palaces built in the so-called Moorish Revival none ever surpassed the luxurious fantasy of Henry Plant's creation. For as a contemporary writer so aptly states, the Tampa Bay Hotel is where "...a gentleman's residence is exaggerated to a scale of positive magnificence.”²¹

NOTES

¹ Tampa Bay Hotel, (a promotional brochure reprint), Press of Wynkoop, Hallenbeck, Crawford Company, Albany and New York, 1897, p. 2.

² Ibid, p. 2.

³ Ibid, p. 2.

⁴ Harris H. Mullen, A History of the Tampa Bay Hotel, University of Tampa Foundation, Tampa, Florida, 1981, p.2.

⁵ Barbaralee Diamondstein, Buildings Reborn: New Uses, Old Places, Harper & Row, 1978, p. 198.

⁶ Tampa, op. cit., p. 2.

⁷ Washington Irving, The Alhambra; a Series of Tales and Sketches of the Moors and Spaniards, Carey & Lea, Philadelphia, 1832.

⁸ Gerald S. Bernstein, In Pursuit of the Exotic: Islamic Forms in Nineteenth Century American Architecture, (unpublished doctoral dissertation), University of Pennsylvania, 1968. pp. 88-151.

⁹ Patrick Conner, Oriental Architecture in the West, Thames and Hudson, London, pp. 131-153.

¹⁰ Clay Lancaster, Architectural Follies in America, Charles E. Tuttle Co., Rutland, Vermont, pp. 87-97.

¹¹ Bernstein; op. cit., pp. 119-120. Wood was also the architect of two other Islamic inspired buildings in Tampa, the Old Hillsborough County Court House and the DeSoto Hotel. Unfortunately both have been destroyed.

¹² Tampa, op. cit., p. 12.

¹³ W. C. Prime, "The Tampa Bay Hotel", New York Journal of Commerce, 1896, p. 22.

¹⁴ Tampa, op. cit., p. 2.

¹⁵ Prime, op. cit., p. 22.

¹⁶ David Nolan, Fifty Feet of Paradise, Harcourt Brace, Jovanovich, New York, 1984.

¹⁷ Bernstein, op. cit., p. 120. Besides the Tampa Bay Hotel's connection to the Moorish palace of the

Alhambra some architectural historians have noted that the jig-saw motifs of the ornate veranda may have been influenced by Indian mogul sources. See: Clay Lancaster, "Indian Influences on American Architecture of the XIXth Century." Marg (Pathways), Bombay, 6:20; 1953.

¹⁸ David Gebhard, "The Spanish Colonial Revival in Southern California (1895-1930)", Journal of Architectural Historians, 26:132, 1967. The Pasadena Hotel cited by Prof. Gebhard as having "...as much Islamic as Mission" influence was the Green Hotel designed by Frederic Louis Roehrig.

¹⁹ Islamic decoration appeared in three Philadelphia hotels designed by Angus Wade in the 1890's. The Washington, D.C. example was called "The Cairo" and was built in 1894. In Boston, J.L. Faxon's "Hotel Victoria" was designed in 1886 with elaborate Islamic terra cotta detail. The building is still extant.

²⁰ Bernstein, op. cit., p. 132. An example of a so-called "Moorish Smoking Parlor" could be found in Boston's "Flower Hotel", designed in the early 1890's by the architect Louis Haberstroh. op. cit., p. 23

²¹ Prime,