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*Tropical Splendor: An Architectural History of Florida* by Hap  
Hatton

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**Zora Neale Hurston at a WPA book display in 1938.**

Photograph from *Zora Neale Hurston* by Robert E. Hemenway.

*Tropical Splendor: An Architectural History of Florida*. By Hap Hatton. New York, 1987. Alfred A. Knopf. Photographs. Bibliography. Index. Pp. xii, 210. Cloth. \$40.00

Frank Lloyd Wright once argued that “the one blind spot in our nation, educationally, is architecture” (104). In *Tropical Splendor*, a companion volume to a WEDU series on Florida architecture, Hap Hatton does his best to correct this oversight. In many ways, the book is successful. Hatton demonstrates a firm grasp of national and international social and design trends but never lets them overwhelm his Florida focus. The book is well designed and beautifully illustrated. *Tropical Splendor* provides a good introduction to what Hatton calls Florida’s “surreal real estate,” the “fun and fantastic” buildings which abound in the state (ix).

But the book is not without flaws. The title itself is misleading. Although “tropical splendor” is clearly Hatton’s primary focus, the subtitle “An Architectural History of Florida,” promises more

than is delivered. The architecture of the seventeenth, eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries is dismissed in a mere seventeen pages. The exotic achievements of Henry Plant's Tampa Bay Hotel or Walt Disney's tourist meccas are of far more interest here than the pedestrian "cracker houses" or suburban subdivisions in which the majority of Floridians have lived. Hatton's claim that "Florida has always been a land where architects let imagination reign" (xii) is certainly true, but he bases this conclusion on selective evidence.

Yet what Hatton does cover is impressively treated. The strongest element of the book is its discussion of individual builders and their often idiosyncratic visions. Henry Flagler's St. Augustine hotels are presented in appropriately lavish detail. The developers, like Tampa's D. P. Davis, who created new land from swampy keys and sandbars, are here in all their intriguing and money-grubbing glory. The "classics" (John Ringling's Ca'd'Zan, Miami Beach's Art Deco hotels, Wright's buildings at Florida Southern College and many others) receive loving and careful attention. As a guide to Florida's "architecture of attraction," *Tropical Splendor* is excellent.

Yet Hatton's message is disturbing. He finds in Florida's built environment elements of fantasy and escape that suggest an unwillingness or inability to deal with reality. Since the late nineteenth century, Florida's entrepreneurs and architects, Hatton argues, have spent an inordinate amount of time and money trying to attract non-Floridians to the state. This philosophy was expressed as early as 1875, when innkeeper William Kelly observed: "We live on sweet potatoes and consumptive Yankees and we sell atmosphere" (43). During the 1920s boom, the search for the perfect "atmosphere" expanded. Addison Mizner claimed that living in his Mediterranean Revival Boca Raton was "almost beyond realness" (84). In modern Florida, Disney architects use bricks that are seven-eighths standard size to scale their creations down to proportions soothing to the human psyche. This ploy, Hatton points out, "creates a believable world of dreams" (189).

Hatton wonders why Floridians have so eagerly pursued a false reality. After more than one hundred years of chasing this elusive "ideal," Florida's natural environment and historic architecture have suffered severely. Hatton pleads for historic preservation and environmentally sensitive development, but his story of the "selling of Florida" suggests that we still have a long way to go.

Priscilla J. Brewer

*The Great Cypress Swamps.* By John V. Dennis. Photographs by Steve Maslowski. Baton Rouge, Louisiana, 1988. Louisiana State University Press'. Photographs. References. Index. Pp. xiv, 142. Cloth. \$29.95.

This hard-to-categorize volume on one of the great North American ecosystems is both beautiful and informative. If one first thumbs through the book to look at the pictures, one is struck by Maslowski's exquisite photographs of the swamps and their plant and animal inhabitants. As a coffee-table book, this one equals those of the Sierra Club and Audobon Society that excel in celebrating the glories of nature. A closer look reveals that it is far more than a pretty picture book. The many maps and descriptions of particular swamps throughout the