City opens door to world of ‘Arabian Nights’

By Lidia Dinkova
The Miami Herald

A black and white 1927 photograph depicts horsemen bearing sabers — swords with curved blades — and dressed in Arabian attire galloping out of a building that resembles a castle from stories such as “Aladdin’s Wonderful Lamp” or “Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves.”

Other photographs taken on the same day show women clad in harem clothing with scarves draped over their heads and men in pantaloons and turbans.

The images resemble scenes from a movie shot on location in the Middle East or from tales that are part of Arabian Nights — and that very well may have been the intent of the organizers of this elaborate show.

The historical photos, however, were taken in a northwest Miami-Dade County municipality — Opa-locka — on the day that the first train, the Orange Blossom Special, arrived in the city on the Seaboard Railway. That day was commemorated with an Arabian Nights fantasy festival. Atop a white horse, the Grand Vizir — portrayed by the Opa-locka Company’s President G. Carl Adams — greeted the train’s visitors who had come for the festival.

Opa-locka was the perfect place to hold an Arabian Nights festival, as the city is home to municipal buildings, as well as private homes that are designed to resemble illustrations in One Thousand and One Nights, or Arabian Nights, a collection of tales based on Arabic, Persian, Indian and Egyptian folklore.

The architecture is not Moorish in the sense that it resembles architecture of the Islamic domination over North Africa and South Spain, but it is rather an inspired interpretation from the tales in the Arabian Nights.

Common architectural elements appear in city buildings, both public and private: minarets, or tall towers, doorways placed off-center or to the side of the building’s façade, roof domes, flat roofs with crenelated parapets, horseshoe or pointed arches, textured stucco walls and, in some cases, barrel-tiled roofs.
The city's boundaries are: Northwest 151st Street on the north; Northwest 125th Street on the south, including a section that extends to East 65th Street; Northwest 47th Avenue to the west; and Northwest 17th Avenue to the east.

Glenn Curtiss, an aviation pioneer and also the developer of Hialeah and Miami Springs, embarked on the development of Opa-locka. Before the city incorporated in May 1926, it carried the name of Opatishawokalocka. While accounts differ on what the name means, historical books often define it as, "big island covered with many trees in the swamps."

In the early 1920s, Curtiss commissioned New York City-based architect Bernhardt Muller with the task of designing Opa-locka's buildings. According to some historical accounts, Curtiss sent Muller a copy of Arabian Nights as a guide of what he wanted the city to look like.

The first building Muller designed, the administration building — or the old city hall that the current Opa-locka commission outgrew and moved out of — became a signature of the city's architectural style.

The three-story building, modeled after a sultan's palace in "The Talking Bird" story, has five domes and five minarets, as well as multiple horseshoe and painted archways leading into a courtyard.

"The architect was trying to capture the feeling of these stories with this building," said Jose Vasquez, a Miami Dade College architecture professor, who with his students over the course of three years put together an exhibit at HistoryMiami that chronicles Opa-locka's architecture.

The central courtyard, or the paradise garden, is divided in four and has one central piece, Vasquez said. In one corner is a bronze fountain carved to resemble the face of Princess Perizad, a character from the Arabian Nights tales.

"This is meant to be her garden," Vasquez said.

The neighborhood just north of the former city hall building is dotted with private homes designed in the Moorish Revival style. On the 1100 block of Jann Avenue is a light beige-colored home with a minaret and an archway leading toward the entrance. A block away is a similar home with crenelated parapets and an archway that was filled in to create an extra indoor room.

Throughout the years, some Opa-locka residents took out the domes on their homes and filled in the horseshoe or pointed archways to create more indoor space, Vasquez said.

Curtiss wanted for the city to not only be one-of-a-kind architecturally, but also a self-sustaining community where property owners had land plots next to their homes where they could grow crops. In addition, Curtiss wanted to provide myriad entertainment and leisure activities for residents, so he also included a city swimming pool, a zoo, a golf course, an archery club, an airport and a hotel.

In an Opa-locka Times article, Muller, the city's architect, wrote: "Mr. Curtiss was anxious to be able to give the world a city of beauty, with homes expressing aesthetic yearnings. He felt that the public should be provided with something better than the stereotyped boxes in which it is accustomed to live."

Curtiss also wanted to develop sections within Opa-locka that represented Chinese, Egyptian and English architecture.

But that initiative never came to fruition and died with Curtiss' own death in 1930. Today, a color-pencil-and-watercolor illustration made by Muller of a hotel resembling Chinese architecture is part of what remains of that dream.
About 105 buildings are said to have been erected in the Moorish Revival architectural style.

The National Register of Historic Places has approved 20 of Opa-locka's buildings for listing in its database. Those include the city's old city hall, at 777 Sharazad Blvd.; the Opa-locka Bank, at 940 Caliph St.; the railroad station, at 490 Ali Baba Ave.; and the Harry-Hurt building, at 490 Ali Baba Ave. Most of the other properties listed are private homes.

In addition, in 1991, Opa-locka passed a resolution that listed 34 city buildings, both private and public, as historic under a city ordinance. The listing included the buildings that were also already part of the National Register of Historic Places.

In recent years, efforts have been undertaken to revitalize the area's unique architecture. Recently, the city was awarded a $30,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Arts to start cultural programs at the former city hall building. The city also received a $2 million grant from the county's general obligation bond to restore the building.

"This is our diamond," said Mayor Myra Taylor, speaking of the city hall building. "We are who we are because of the historic city hall."

According to records provided by the Florida Department of State Division of Historical Resources, Opa-locka is the nation's only known Moorish Revival city developed in the 1920s.

Said Barbara Mattick, deputy state historic preservation officer for survey and registration at the Florida Department of State's Division of Historical Resources: "It was not unusual that developers had themes for these 1920s buildings. But then you have Opa-locka, which chose this Moorish Revival theme. That is very unusual. I don't know any other place, at least in Florida, that has this kind of architecture."