

Apartments and Hotels on Davis Islands

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Davis Islands was conceived as an escape from reality. Vibrant and tropical landscaping, exotic architecture and a wide variety of amenities awaited residents and visitors alike. To accommodate as many people as possible, David P. Davis included a number of apartment buildings and hotels for tourists, as well as the Islands' seasonal and year around residents. By placing these larger structures along Davis Boulevard, he also created a buffer between that busy street, and the commercial district on East Davis Boulevard, and the single-family homes that he saw as the lifeblood of the Islands.

Probably the most recognizable apartment and hotel buildings are the Mirasol, Palazzo Firenze (Palace of Florence), Palmarin Hotel (now known as Hudson Manor) and the Spanish Apartments. They embody the grandeur of Davis Islands, each reflective of a different component within the overall Mediterranean Revival style of architecture. The largest and most elaborate is the Mirasol, which includes a small marina, large lobby, dining area and penthouses. The recently restored Palace of Florence first opened as a seasonal hotel, but now serves the Islands as an apartment building. Like the Palace, Hudson Manor started out as a hotel, featuring a restaurant that was popular with Islands residents and visitors alike for decades.

Some early multifamily buildings, notably the Biscayne Hotel and Venetian Apartments, have since been demolished. The Biscayne was located along Biscayne Boulevard, serving first as a hotel, then later as apartments and finally as the campus for Berkeley Preparatory School. The building was demolished after Berkeley moved out, making way for a series of townhomes, which still occupy the site today. The Venetian Apartments was at the northern tip of Davis Islands, on the west side of Davis Boulevard. The Venetian was demolished to allow for construction of the second Davis Islands Bridge. A condominium also occupies a portion of the old apartment site.

Smaller apartment buildings, such as the Augustine and Columbia Apartments on Columbia Drive, Flora Dora Apartments and Boulevard Apartments (now the Ritz Apartments, completed shortly after Davis' death) on Davis Boulevard are still in use. Though smaller and less elaborate than their sisters, they are just as important to the Islands history and architectural heritage.

Davis sold his Davis Islands investment, shortly before his death in 1926, to the Boston engineering firm of Stone & Webster. By the time of the sale, most of the major hotel projects were under construction or were already complete. Only one of the original hotels planned for the Islands did not get off of the drawing board. That one, the Davis Arms Hotel, was projected to sit between Blanca Avenue and the waterfront at the end of Biscayne Boulevard, but it did not have the financial backing necessary to insure its completion.

The hotel market on the Islands did not live up to the high expectations placed on it by D. P. Davis Properties. By 1929 many operated well below total occupancy and one, the Palace of Florence, functioned as an apartment/hotel. The Biscayne Hotel represented the only closure, in late 1929 - early 1930, only to re-open in 1931.

The financial picture was not totally bleak. One area of marked growth on the Islands occurred in the rental market. Davis Islands featured six apartment buildings in 1927: the Venetian Apartments, Spanish Apartments, Royal Poinciana Apartments, an apartment building at 48 Davis Boulevard, Boulevard Apartments and the Flora Dora Apartments. Combined, they sustained a sixty percent occupancy rate, which is somewhat skewed by Boulevard Apartments lying entirely vacant. By mid-1928, twenty-three apartments were added when the Augustine and Columbia Apartments opened on Columbia Drive. In total, there were eight apartment buildings with a combined total of ninety-two units. Of those, thirty-seven remained unoccupied, maintaining the sixty percent occupancy rate from the previous year.

The occupancy rate dropped in 1929, to fifty-three percent, but again the figure is misleading. Fifty apartments were added, two entirely new buildings plus the transition of the Palace of Florence from exclusively offering hotel rooms to also providing rooms for rent. The total number of leased apartments increased by twenty. The rental market enjoyed a surge by 1930, when both the number of available apartments and the number of rented apartments both increased. The red brick Kornell Apartments opened at 25 Davis Boulevard (the first departure from Mediterranean architecture in a Davis Islands commercial building), and offered three apartments, which were all leased, and the Venetian Apartments added two units to the fifteen already available.

Growth in the apartment market slumped until after World War II, when a

second land boom hit Tampa and Florida. The majority of the rental units on Davis Islands date to this second building boom. Hotels, on the other hand, never made a comeback, with the conversion of the existing hotel buildings to other uses coming after the war as well. The presence of multifamily residences on the Islands provides both neighborhood diversity and increased population density, and because of the Islands original plan they complement (for the most part) the homes that Davis knew would be the cornerstone of his Islands.