

# Florida, A Virgin Dressed in Skeuomorphs

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## 1 SUBJECTIVE PLATONIST ONTOLOGY

It's good to be in Miami, an outpost of outposts, and a product of the imagination. *Every* place starts out imaginary, but few places started as imaginary and as mercenary as Miami. In fact, the entire megalopolis of Miami-Fort Lauderdale-Palm Beach may be unprecedented in the history of marriage between imagination and capital.

I often make a defense of the imagination, but my idea of it rarely involves big capital. Most often, it's an imagination at about \$50 a day. I remember a series of books called, "New York on \$5 a day," "Miami" on \$5 a day, and so on, in the Sixties. If it still exists, it's up to a hundred. I'll split the difference. I like to imagine down. The scale is the phenomenon, as Henry Poincare said, so the difference between the imaginary of Miami and mine is great, but also instructive. To whom, I'm not sure, but since you are architects and teachers of architecture, you might be interested, if only for a laugh. Also instructive is the difference between the marriage of MegaMiami and Big Money and the Marriage of Mickey "Orlando" Mouse and Big Capital, two completely different marriages that represent the past and the future of the marriage between Dreams & Moolah.

My own imagination is not directed toward a practical goal of any giant dimension like Henry Flagler's railroads, Addison Mizner's buildings, Carl Fisher's Miami Beach, or Michael Eisner's MouseEars on the World Project. Flagler, Mizner, and Fisher had founding napoleonic imaginations of the kind you are not likely to find in these days of taxation and regulation. Michael Eisner's imagination is of a different order, equally ambitious, but somehow lacking in the ecstatic panache of the first three. I'll try to make some distinctions later.

My own requirements for living in a place are those of an immigrant, a citizen, and a poet. I require sanctuary, sanity, and romance. I like outposts with a history, old cities open to the sea or a great big river full of ships, a city that has been imagined over time, been lived in by many different people and

has grown organically from the inside. I prefer Naples, Italy to Naples, Florida. The questions I would ask of a city are:

How do you balance wealth and hospitality?

How much of your space is playful enough for innocence?

What's your ratio of ease to history?

Have old disasters led to your well-being?

And finally, are you pedestrian-friendly and are there public drinking fountains and clocks?

Most big American cities, with some exceptions, fail to answer those questions to my satisfaction, which is why I prefer medium-sized ones like New Orleans and Portland. But the exceptions are worth it, especially New York and San Francisco.

For me, cities that have been burned, looted, pillaged, ravaged by cosmic forces and rebuilt, emanate consolation. I relax as soon as I'm in a place where people lived and died dramatically over centuries. New places give me the heebie-jeebies because I have the feeling that the disasters are about to happen – to me – that they are still in the future and not, comfortingly, in the past. Of course, past disasters are no guarantee against future disasters, but the way communities have reconstituted themselves in the aftermath of past disasters is profoundly calming.

Miami has suffered the required number of disasters and may in the end emerge as a liveable place. In 1925 at the height of the land speculation madness, mainland property six and eight miles outside the city of Miami cost nearly \$26,000 an acre. Thousands of people traded deeds on Flagler Street in downtown Miami, dizzy with the prospect of overnight millions. A few years earlier, in 1915, Carl Fisher offered beach property free to anyone who would settle it. In ten years, Miami went from being a gleam in the eye of a developer, a purely imaginary prospect, to a full-grown capitalist vision. Of course, it was the 1920s and when the "paper boom" and the insane

fever peaked. a lot of dreamers were broke. So here is the difference between the imaginations of capitalists and the imagination of poets: capitalist dreams require a lot of suckers, poets require only a few. Sorry. I have to rephrase that. What I mean to say is that if you're broke to start with you won't bankrupt anybody. On the other hand, you won't build a city either.

Anyway, after that first disaster, two devastating hurricanes hit, in 1926 and 1928. The storm of 1926 drove waves over Miami Beach into downtown Miami and killed hundreds of people. The stock market crashed not long after, in 1929.

These early experiences gave Miami a certain attitude of *carpe diem* and daring that persists to this day and is its best bet for the future. It certainly qualifies the city for the title of "outpost." Outposts are the first to experience disaster, whether from the elements or from human attack, and this gives them the wisdom and authority of survivors. They provide your nineteen-year old with historical cover for a sense of adventure. They also provide models for phoenixologists. They are repositories of stories, they have a narrative surplus for trade and development, and there is always a certain menace in the air.

To reiterate then: In order for a place to be liveable for me, it must be rich in story, eros, and views. These are the three essential components of the community treasury: the narrative store, the libidinal store, and the voyeuristic structure. What's great about these components is that they are not dependent on economy, or homogeneity, or the fickleness of chic. They DO require green spaces, public transportation, friendly libraries, multi-lingual theatres and performance spaces, popular festivals, and civic art created by the various ethnicities within.

Miami has much of that, plus the frantic glamor of South Beach and the specific character of Cuban streets, but there are some major urban absences crying for linkage. Miami is not a city I think about moving to when I fantasize about some other city to live in. This fantasy, by the way, is common to most people who haven't already retired to Broward County: I'd say that one out of two Americans has a recurring fantasy of living elsewhere, and most of us end up realizing it. Moving elsewhere is one of the oldest dreams of Americans since the earliest days of European settlement, a by-now genetic trait in our national makeup – which is why there is hope for any place, any city that can provide decently for history, mystery, and pedestrians, in an environmentally sane and pleasing manner. Any city, that is, that can combine the frisson of an outpost with the consolation of culture.

Miami is a new city in a huge state that contains the oldest city on the North American continent, St. Augustine, the greatest number of non-natives of all the states in the nation, some of the worst racist past of any Southern state, the greatest number

of incoming retirees and refugees, an active inner migration, and a bountiful variety of eco-systems that have been nearly destroyed by mindless greed and ignorance. And for all that, I like to think that the history that has already happened is only a sketch for the history yet-to-unfold. The presence of humans here, from prehistory to the latest wave of Haitian immigrants, has not yet *irremediably* changed the landscape and ecology of this coast – with some significant exceptions. I grant you.

I know that this is highly debatable, and I'll be the first to debate it, but let's suppose for one moment that we are still in a putative paradise barely scratched by developers and orchid-hunters from Hollywood. In that case, what history this coast has experienced is still open to waves of future humanity seeking ease and paradise. To think otherwise is to close the door to human desire and ingenuity, or to reduce that desire and ingenuity to thinking only of remedy and repair. But the proof that history has only just begun is that few residents feel at ease here: old-timers feel uneasy about newcomers, old people feel uneasy about the perfect young bodies on the beach, the young feel small before the ocean, speculators experience constant vertigo, the cities don't know where they begin or end, spawls and freeways go right through the siesta hour, the animal world is visible enough to reproach human assault, and the climate is both perfect and unpredictable. Florida is known as a "swing state," aptly, because its population is in flux and its politics are a work in progress. I would propose that the human symbol for this polity is the confusing "butterfly ballot" that had so many people voting differently from how they intended to vote because they followed the wrong signals, and as for an appropriate architectural symbol I would propose the Fontainebleu Hotel in Miami where in the late 1950s Frank Sinatra defined the mythic peak of Florida as the land of sunshine, gelt, sequins, and *carpe diem*.

I haven't brought any slides, but I bet that if you put a drawing of the "butterfly ballot" next to one of the Fontainebleu, you'll find them structurally compatible, the perfect equivalency to a tequila sunrise binge and hangover.

By the way, I'm not sure if this branch of comparative cultural speculation exists, but I would, personally, love to see a visual poem that puts side by side Art Deco buildings, let's say, with later political design in the area, such as the body shapes of political candidates; or Hastings' "Ponce de Leon" Hotel in St. Augustine with a heavily copyedited page of Hemingway's "To Have and Have Not." Followed, of course, by the exact drink and hangover that fit. A recent book called "Bob Cobb's Florida Election" has actually attempted some of this. Here for instance is a cocktail entitled: "Cherry Pregnant Chad: 3 parts Canadian Rye, 1 part Cherry Liqueur, Several Splashes of Lemon Juice, a splash of Cherry Brandy, 1 Bulging Chad, Protruding from your Voting Card, 1 Stork Yard Sign that says, "It's Gore!" Bob Cobb, if you haven't guessed it, is a Republican. Working backward

from this recipee would be an awkward photograph of Jeb Bush with his brother George, standing on a floor plan of the Everglades Club in 1918, built by Mizner for the sewing machine heiress, Paris Singer.

But to be perfectly sober about this question of as-yet-unrealized history and a still-hopeful future, I realize that a great deal of paradise was lost in Florida a long time ago – if not *irremediably* – and that one choice we now have is to use a lot of money to fake it – or failing that, to make places liveable enough to imagine that we ARE in paradise, i.e. remedy and repair with a measure of imaginative skepticism. And by this I don't mean the Frank Sinatra solution of soused tropicalism, but a re-listening, da capo, to what the land, the communities, the changing demographics, and the sea say. There is faking and faking, and listening to reality is the difference between art and kitsch.

A big job, and it's all yours. Just kidding. Maybe.

Another solution, of course, is to sell your city, Orlando, let's say, or the soul of your city, the soul of Orlando, to a big corporation and, in exchange for lots of revenue to build schools and roads you become a soulless city at the beck and call of the Devil, I mean Disney. The Devil's specialty is creating illusion and kitsch, which are not very nourishing because they are fake. If you're hungry, you get a luscious bowl of fake food, and if you want to dream, you get one already dreamt for you, at a reasonable price. And when you wake up, if you ever do, your mouse ears itch and there is a strong smell of tourist in your house. But more about that later.

Should I even be discussing paradise? In Florida in 2004? Just saying it makes it a purely rhetorical trope, a jingle of cheap advertising, a fly-by-night developers' come-on. So much meaningful language has been laid waste by advertising, it's a tough matter to pick one's tender way through the jagged debris. Whatever the Spaniards might have thought of Paradise when they arrived in Florida is now lost to us. But imagine for a second that paradise means something. As architects you are duty-bound to be suspicious of paradise, especially a meaningful one. – for the simple reason that there were no buildings in paradise, at least not in the original one-everybody just walked around naked and ate out of trees. There was *architecture* in Paradise however, because God was always building the mind of his creations, and one of his constructs was a sense of wonder, the feeling that one might be in paradise even in, let's say, Detroit. This is one of God's finest buildings in the mind, his Parthenon, as it were.

For example, if I'm in the state of wonder, I'll experience Decatur Street in New Orleans at 4 AM with the same intensity I might experience Borneo at sundown. If I'm not in that state however, I might as well be in downtown Detroit in 1988. However, I did have intense experiences of wonder and

understanding in Detroit in 1966 when I first came to the U.S., and wandered lonely as a cloud through the empty canyons of Michigan Avenue after 6 P.M. As the poet William Carlos Williams put it: "The pleasures of travel/depend on the strange hours/we keep/to see them." These strange hours are the times when we are operating from inside God's building of Innocence where every window is a first gaze on the world. If that world isn't nature, it's architecture, and it is a great thing when buildings in a place return this gaze. In such places, the clock is always set at "strange hours," and setting the clock at such hours is, it seems to me, an ideal for architects.

## 2. THE CREATION OF THE REAL WORLD

It's clear that the needs of community must temper the desire of adolescent poets, and that the physical facts of place and economies will dictate the shape of habitats. If any inclination toward innocence survives the hard facts it is because a magnificent intelligence is at work. Such an intelligence is primarily poetic, possessed of several qualities, chief among them the ability to listen to what a place says.

What the South Florida coast, for instance, says, in the many dialects of its regional particulars, is something very complex, constantly changing, and only slightly articulated. Articulating the singsong, the gibber, and the cries for help issuing from this stretch of coast necessitates the collaboration of poets, philosophers, ecologists, historians, anthropologists, sociologists, community-planners, architects, industrialists, merchants, and the so-called "electorate," but all that is just information if it isn't understood in a single, synchronic flash of genius. This is why I put poets at the head of it, with the proviso, of course, that no flash of understanding comes without the fundamentals of narrative, eros, and view, that is to say history, ecology, and ease.

I say "poets" not to privilege a professional or recently-professionalized class, but to make poetry as the pre-eminent medium for envisioning the shape of this coastal speech and translating it into something helpful and concrete.

For the first three hundred years of the five hundred years since the Spaniards first came to Florida by sea, no apparent great wealth flowed back from these shores to Europe. Ships came here with a cargo of slaves, adventurers, colonists, tools for obtaining raw materials, and a few consolatory or missionary myths. They went back full mainly of local stories. The Spanish administrators at St. Augustine were all on Welfare, on the dole of the Spanish government that refused as a matter of principled glory to let go of any conquest. But if supply and colonist holding ships brought only the simplest, most rudimentary, most schematic, most profit-eliciting stories here, chief among them the story of Jesus, a man who promised heaven in the afterlife in exchange for unquestioning faith and obedience

in this life. they took back to Europe many more and more complex stories: stories of native tribes with a multitude of beliefs; geographic, ethnographic, botanical, linguistic, and romantic stories. For every carefully observed story, the returning ships also took back to Europe imaginary stories, containing varying quantities of truth and, usually, much greater amounts of fantasy. The fantasy ingredients of New World stories retold in the Old World consisted usually of blended utopian tales told in the West since at least Herodotus, and increased vastly in numbers since Marco Polo. The flood of stories brought over the sea from the shores of the Floridas, became the primary culture of Europe from 1600 on to the present. There may have been no gold, and not many fabulous plants like potatoes and corn, but the tales of America, real and imagined, became staples of European culture. The Noble Savage, for example, concocted from the observable dignity and seeming edenic liberty of some Floridians, made it via Jean-Jacques Rousseau into the utopia of the Enlightenment, and was then fed back into the American revolution and the doctrine of the equality of all men, from where it arrived via further feedbacks into the hedonistic philosophies of our resorts and beach-towns.

But let's not go too fast. There were also pirates. The pirates of the Caribbean functioned as a cleansing system, a story-purifier, a recycler, and a guarantor of the memory of paradise. Long after the naked and peaceful Taino communists of Cuba were killed by the fierce Caribs of the interior, the pirates revived communal but non-pacifist communism. They robbed and sank European ships and they used the Caribbean lake and its shores to replant stories and wealth with anarchist abandon and communal rituals. The job of the pirates was to complicate the flows of straight-out pillage carried out by intolerant Christian story-tellers from Europe. Consequently, between the idealizations of Jean Jacques Rousseau carried on ghostly round-trip journeys within revolutionary ideologies and utopias, the pirates had the real job of keeping the coastline dangerous and complex.

The Spanish feared the French and the English coming in from the sea, as well as attacks from the interior, so they built forts to withstand both rival navies and land invaders. When the French and then the English and, finally, the Americans, ended Spanish rule of the Floridas, the forts remained only as skeuomorphs, or elements of style, little valued until the late 20th century. In the 20th century when the American republic was firmly established along the Atlantic coast, there was little need for seawalls and forts so the settlements relaxed and began to follow more closely the ecology and climate of their position, and to have, as well, a more complex and poetic relationship with the sea.

Until the mid-1960s, when the economic ascendance of some other port caused the decline of a community, there seemed to be no way to recover. Many Eastern harbors that declined too

soon in the century, before the mid-1960s, simply withered away because they could not perceive their pasts as valuable. Florida, on the other hand, with its seemingly perfect climate and a much shorter modern history, was lucky. From the very beginnings of European fantasy here – Ponce de Leon's fountain of youth – it has produced more fantasy than verifiable history. The combined imaginations of hustling salesmen and speculators reinvented the Florida coast and brought here a flood of what were first called visitors, then tourists. The first visitors were mostly sick, looking for a better climate for their various pulmonary conditions, but the next wave were just curious and in a mood to see what the brochures promised. I will not list the various waves of Floridian settlers from the interior, or the waves of refugees from the Caribbean, Central America, or elsewhere, except to say that each of these migrations confirmed, transformed, or added to the fairy tales of Florida, increasing both its imaginary holdings and the reach of its imagination.

At the same time, a malignant intelligence was at work here under all the bromides of sunshine, youth, and opportunity, an intelligence of relentless destruction of both the material and the fantastic: the material destruction was evident in the rape of the Everglades, the wanton attack on the ecology by aimless sprawl and unplanned building, and the worsening of the infrastructures, including roads, education, public health, public services. On the other hand, the destruction of the fantastic became evident in the the growth and metastizing of utopian kitsch, now consecrated by the innocence-destroying monster of Disney World. Florida's images have always produced utopian kitsch for mercantile purposes: it issued anarchically from many quarters, but had a gentle, whimsical quality always connected to its skeuomorphs, things like forts, pirates, sailing ships, lost treasures, and so on. Disney World has, however, marshalled and centralized all the skeuomorphs in a mega-dream machine that leaves very little room for the fancies of individuals. The narrative crimes of Disney World are paralleled in the material world by its quasi-fascist organization which has eaten the city of Orlando like a bag of popcorn at a horror movie.

It is impossible for a huge corporation like Disneyworld to make any kind of distinction between its production of entertainment and the production of petroleum, for instance. Both are refined products that require an awful lot of land, material, and restructuring of the landscape and of the surrounding communities. There is something wrong, in my opinion, with the colonisation of dreams and the subconscious by an anti-democratic power, whether it be Disney World or Disney Film productions. Our imaginations are last defenses in a world that now mines every inner human resource without any compensation – fooling us, actually, into believing that it's a privilege to be "entertained."

I propose some poetic anti Disney-World means to restore imagination to communities through the creation and maintenance of narrative, libidinal, and voyeuristic stores.

1) **STORY-TELLING:** the elders of the community who, for our purposes, may be defined as anyone over 13 years of age, with exceptions for the precocious, will gather weekly in a story-telling structure (a challenge for you here), where they will tell remembered or invented stories to children and whoever else wishes to attend. Some hip-hop nightclubs already serve this function, but there should be more, for all ages.

2) **ORAL HISTORY PROJECT:** Every citizen contributes written or taped remembrances to a collective work of the history of the community, real or imaginary. Thanks to the internet, this kind of collaboration can now include members of the community who now live elsewhere but remember fondly (or not) their childhoods or time spent here. Parts of this Oral History will be performed in the Story-Telling House, and all of it will, of course, be available on CD-Rom in the library, and carved, graffitied, or mural'd on civic projects. There could also be note-taking walls – protruding keyboards for use by anyone walking by and remembering something, or wanting to check e-mail, send a letter, etc.

3) **MORE CULTURAL SPACES:** In addition to the aforementioned Story-Telling House, and, of course, the Library and the Museum, there shall be added a building per year dedicated to the Muses of the Arts, namely Drama, Poetry, and Music, which could be housed in either the same Arts Complex or in different structures more harmonious with their artistic missions. Additionally, communities with beaches should improve their boardwalks to make room for buskers, craftspeople, fortune-tellers, unamplified libertarians, amateur psychologists and poets, whose numbers should not exceed the number of beach goers or impede pedestrian traffic. Ideally, such boardwalks would have underwater extensions for a mile or longer, provided they do not harm the sea. Functioning within these spaces there should be a number of public employees charged with draining skeuomorphs of kitsch or vice-versa and providing the end results free of charge to small entrepreneurs.

4) **IDIOSYNCRATIC HOLIDAYS:** Every community should declare certain holidays not common to any other community (except by mutual consent), holidays whose deities, archetypes, or rezondettes are drawn from specific events in the community history, or agreed upon at some uber-story-telling town meeting. Collective rituals during these holidays should emphasize the delicate networks of time and space that keep the communal organism alive. I am aware that, like in certain Balkan countries, the making of rituals does not come easily to most people, so poets may be imported for this purpose during the founding stages of these holidays. However, as soon as the poets have had their say, they should be driven from town (not before they are paid well, of course) and sworn to secrecy. In

the old days, such professionals were killed, but we don't, thank God, live in medieval Europe – anymore.

5) **BLACKED-OUT CALENDAR DATES:** pay homage to cultural events of death and resurrection, such as the flight from Castro in 1959, the Mariel exodus and arrival, the equivalent Haitian event, the date of Lucy and Ricardo's wedding, the day Miami Vice went into reruns, the Great Butterfly Ballot Snafu of 2000, and whatever other dramatic turning points the community wishes to either remember or forget. The manner for commemorating these **BLACKED-OUT CALENDAR DATES** will be up to the those affected, and there shall be no interference on the part of authorities, provided all celebratory violence is symbolic. Naturally, the **BLACKED-OUT CALENDAR DATES** can coincide with the **IDIOSYNCRATIC HOLIDAYS**, but my recommendation is to separate them because of the possible confusion between Joyous Meaninglessness, which is the aim of the **IDIOSYNCRATIC HOLIDAYS**, and the purposeful purging of pain and tearful sentiment that will doubtlessly attach to the other.

6) **IDENTITY-(ex)CHANGING FESTIVALS:** Given such wealth of days off from work, one might find more festivals redundant, but these IDCs are the most important community building events yet.

In the 1960s when the real estate became cheap enough for young utopians to move in, some communities, like Key West or Coconut Grove, pulled back from the brink and remembered their imaginary pasts and their places in the landscape. The new Noble Savages, refugees from the interior, were psychically charged by the long-gone Floridian Natives, such as the Timucan, Panzacola, Chatot, Calusa, and Metacumbe, to restore physical and cultural eco-memory. The hippies' dreams of infinite beatitude were driven by a desire to abandon their old American identities. Many of them changed their names and many borrowed their names from native plants and animals. Some of them communed with plants and animals and sea-creatures and some of them became plants and animals and sea-creatures and cannot now be distinguished from the real thing. Sometimes they were eaten in some of the finer restaurants. But I digress. In short, here was a mini-wave of morphed neo-Natives. Soon thereafter, the spots in-between Miami and the Keys were flooded from two directions, by retirees from the interior and by refugees from the Caribbean and the other Americas. The retirees, having no one to turn to, culturally speaking, had to patch together bits and pieces of style to accommodate their needs, but mostly they had to shed their pre-edenic identities to conform to the style of Paradise. In other words, they had to die to New York to be born in Fort Lauderdale.

(Now, just between us, this is impossible. You can take New York out of my mother, for instance, but she'll still be a very short person driving a too-big automobile in a murderous

stream of traffic jammed by too-big automobiles driven by short persons or persons who have just gotten a learner's permit at the age of fifty. Paradise is crowded, and the dream of it takes a lot of maintenance.)

The Cuban and other Caribbean newcomers, as well as Central and South Americans, created their own versions of paradise, some of which were affluent versions of their native environments, and some of which were a blend of the old and the new. Both paradise-operations, the retirees' and the refugees', are very postmodern. Re-imaginings of origin cultures are mostly simulacra: food that looks like home-food is from the super-market, colorful tropical drinks are made by Coca Cola, buildings that look Haitian are made from American steel and concrete, Latino murals are painted with Dutch boy paint, even santero ceremonies are conducted with plastic brooms and Walmart boom-boxes.

These IDENTITY-CHANGING festivals needn't be terribly complicated, because the ground has already been laid by the transitions the refugees have already undergone. Many of them have already changed their identities in order to access paradise. At the first stage of an ICD festival everyone can trade identities with everyone else, and will then undergo some of the

cultural experiences of the others, until at the final stage, at dusk, everyone will hand their identities to the sea and become sea creatures.

I don't doubt that there might be some resistance to this idea from people who resist any new kind of human arrangement, and that Disney World will see to it that there won't be enough non-Disney tax revenue to do anything counter-mouse. Militating against such civic poetry is also the tenor of the time we live in, when people employed by Disney and the Office of Homeland Security would like to rewrite the history of America's coastlines to conform to the old fort mentality. Instead of seeing the sea as a medium of exchange, they view it as a threat. Instead of allowing our coastline to develop a new civilisation, they would wall it in from its great oceanic neighbor, and look entirely inward toward an America that no longer exists.

I propose instead an open poetry of the outpost. Viva Florida Libre!

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