

Houses tell tales of early Miamians

WEST GROVE, FROM 3M

drawn from African and West Indian traditions and names evocative of their origin and design: two-story "Conch" houses and one-story "shotgun" houses, the latter because the rooms line up one behind the other.

One can see Conch houses in Key West's Bahama Village, and shotgun houses can be found in ever-diminishing numbers throughout the South, but Coconut Grove has South Florida's best — and most significant — collection of early frame architecture, too little appreciated and too little protected. Not long ago, the city of Miami erected a marker at the corner of Charles and Plaza Street to commemorate the historic architecture; the sign bears empty witness to its words these days: Right behind the sign, 11 shotgun houses were summarily torn down.

Only a small portion of them — those in the tiny section of the West Grove that is actually in Coral Gables (a triangle bounded by Grand Avenue, Brooker Street and South Dixie Highway) — is protected by a historic preservation ordinance. The rest of the West Grove is in Miami where only one house, the Mariah Brown house dating to the 1880s, is a landmark and is now under reconstruction.

SHOTGUN FANS

The vernacular architecture of the West Grove is not without its admirers. Architect Max Strang spent a month last year photographing more than 50 shotgun houses and privately published a book of images; University of Miami professors David Burnett and Rocco Ceo have done an extensive computer documentation of



PHOTOS BY NURI VALLBONA/HERALD STAFF

Nine years ago, Wind & Rain founder and president Andy Parrish began building affordable housing in the West Grove. These mirror-image shotgun houses are two of his.

the history of Bahamian building types.

All of this adds to our appreciation, to our knowledge, to our understanding. The task at hand in the West Grove is more than just preserving architecture; it is a matter of preserving culture and tradition, as expressed in architecture and more. That is why the new houses are so noteworthy. The yellow house on Thomas Avenue was a student project from the University of Miami School of Architecture's Center for Urban and Community Design; students designed the house and worked on its construction with the developer, Wind & Rain.

The West Grove has many ardent proponents these days

but none more so than Wind & Rain's founder and president Andy Parrish, who nine years ago began building affordable housing there. Parrish describes himself as a "small 'd' developer," in that he builds to suit the neighborhood rather than to eke the largest profit out of the smallest piece of land, and that is significant. The mint green and sky blue houses are Parrish's too.

SIMPLE, ELEGANT

Designed by Strang, they are simple and direct, elegantly proportioned and definitively of their place. They are compact houses — these are 25-foot lots — but they make the most of their space, inside and out, without losing a sense of scale, a sense of the neighborhood.

And — with more houses to come (some financed by a city grant and money from the James S. and John L. Knight Foundation) — they are a showcase for the future. Miami's Planning Advisory Board is about to take up a proposal that would make great strides toward returning the West Grove to what it once was. This "vision plan" is the product of the Coconut Grove Collaborative (a consortium of 17 neighborhood and service organizations) and UM's schools of architecture and law, in conjunction with the city planning department and others.

IMPORTANT STEP

The plan lays out architectural guidelines for the creation of the Coconut Grove Village West Island District, to be one of the city's neighborhood conservation districts. It is an all-important step. The conservation district would encourage preservation of existing architecture (more is needed here by way of actual historic designations) and encourage compatible new construction that invokes the historic architectural styles.



Shotgun houses got their name because the rooms line up one behind the other.

There's a lot at stake here. The West Grove was long beleaguered by poverty and its attendant problems, but as its prospects grow — and housing values increase, some doubling and even tripling in value in the past few years — so does

the danger that it will lose its historic character.

This is a neighborhood of powerful traditions, and dramatic steps are being taken these days not to lose them altogether. The architecture of the neighborhood expresses its

history and its culture, and we can either choose to capture that now while the opportunity is still at hand, or we may find ourselves forging into the future without much sense of who built Miami, and how they long lived.



Parrish walks through the kitchen of a new home in the West Grove.

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