

FLORIDA BUILDINGS I LOVE: No. 89: Cordova Houses, 1957, Fort Myers

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1303 and 1309 Cordova Ave. William Frizzell, architect

The historic riverside neighborhood south of downtown Fort Myers has plenty of 1920s Mediterranean Revival houses, along with the famous homes at the Edison and Ford Winter Estates.

But nearly lost among the large homes along the Caloosahatchee River stand two modest structures whose designs were influenced by Sarasota School modernism.

They are the “Cordova Houses,” a name given to two delicate, modestly sized houses by Fort Myers architect Joyce Owens, FAIA. A block west of McGregor Boulevard and a hundred yards from the river (perhaps this is why they have not been torn down), they were built at the peak of the midcentury modern movement.

The 1,300-square-foot house at 1309 Cordova appears to be a hybrid between a mobile home and something designed by Mies van der Rohe. A V-shaped grill at the front roof line sits atop a screened porch. Exposed support posts on the sides of the house resemble outriggers. Architect Bill Frizzell elevated the house on five courses of stacked Ocala block, just as Ralph Twitchell was doing 70 miles to the north in Sarasota, to reduce the risk of flooding, allow air flow and keep insects at their distance.

Screened porches allow for ventilation. Terra cotta brick screens, large sliding-glass doors and paneling add to the 1950s vibe.

The house on the corner, at 1303 Cordova, presents a wider façade to the street, with two bedrooms and two baths in 1,484 square feet. It has tongue-and-groove ceilings, cork tile floors, walls of glass and an artist’s studio.

The houses were built by close friends Charlotte Bever and Laura Roediger after both were recently widowed. The friends even had a phone line installed between their bedrooms in their respective homes.

Owens said the houses' designs were considered too progressive by some neighbors, who tried to stop them from being built. They failed.

Both houses were designed by the then-28-year-old Frizzell, who is to Fort Myers modernism what Paul Rudolph was to Sarasota's. In fact, Frizzell once was employed by the Twitchell-Rudolph partnership.

Frizzell also designed several striking commercial buildings in downtown Fort Myers.

"Bill Frizzell was quite the character, as I understand," Owens told the Herald-Tribune in 2012.

"Right out of college, he worked for Rudolph, then Mark Hampton. These houses are early Bill Frizzells. I was thinking maybe Hampton helped him, because these houses are really, really special.

"He was hugely successful, very charismatic, a great designer, great businessman — everything an architect isn't. The whole deal."

Indeed, the Cordova Houses look as if they could stand alongside the Umbrella House and the Hiss Studio in Sarasota's Lido Shores and not be overwhelmed.

"How could a young designer do this so well? They were so cleverly done and so nicely detailed," Owens said.

Frizzell once had 40 architects and engineers on his staff, making it one of the largest firms in the state, with more than 1,000 buildings to its credit.

Frizzell, a native of Punta Gorda who studied at Georgia Tech, also designed buildings on the campus of Daytona Beach Community College. But while flying to visit the campus in 1978, he died in a plane crash in Volusia County at age 49.

"Florida Buildings I Love" is the author's weekly homage to the state's built environment. He presents fee-based architecture tours and PowerPoint presentations to civic groups. Email:

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