

THE SURF CLUB
9011 COLLINS AVENUE, SURFSIDE, FLORIDA

I. BACKGROUND

The Surf Club building has been a social and architectural landmark in South Florida ever since its construction in 1930. Designed by Miami Beach architect Russell T. Pancoast (1899-1972) early in his career, it occupies the oceanfront block between 90th and 91st Streets. Although this area had been platted by the Tatum brothers' development company in 1925 as Altos del Mar Subdivision 4, until 1935 it remained an unincorporated part of Dade County.

The Surf Club itself had been formed by a group of 100 wealthy seasonal visitors when the Bath Club, constructed a few years earlier 30 blocks to the south in Miami Beach, was filled to capacity. These clubs were exclusive, high-status private enclaves for the wealthy to enjoy the beach, a swimming pool, dining, entertainment, and lavish parties, and initially as a refuge from Prohibition. Membership was selective and expensive.

In 1935 it was Surf Club members who persuaded and financed local residents to incorporate the Town of Surfside, largely to prevent annexation of their domain by the City of Miami Beach. During World War II, the Surf Club was leased by the Army-Air Forces for \$45,000 per year and served as officers' quarters, with 235 guest rooms.¹

Due to its exemplary Mediterranean Revival-style architecture, the fame of its architect, its role in the development of Surfside, and its contributions to local social history, the Surf Club was designated a Historic Site by the Miami-Dade County Historic Preservation Board on May 18, 2011. The designation includes interior spaces, as noted in the Resolution (Amended Resolution 2011-06):

¹ "Investigation of the National Defense Program," S.Res. 6, Jan. 1, 1944, online.

The interior spaces of the Surf Club present important architectural and design features such as original floors, ceilings, arches, etc., that enhance the historic character of the property and shall be preserved and are included in this designation.

II. ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY

The Surf Club has undergone many alterations over the years, but its original design is well-documented in Pancoast's 1930 plans, as well as many archival photographs. Several pages of the remarkably detailed original plans, annotated by restoration architect Les Beilinson in 2007, are included in the Historic Designation Report. Full-size copies of the plans are also in the Surf Club's own archives, together with a large collection of photographs. These are kept by facilities manager Martin Garcia, who in recent months has restored a number of original or early elements of the interior furnishings. Other photographs and information were found in the HistoryMiami archives in Miami.

The Surf Club is a sprawling one- and two-story composition of many architectural elements, both open and enclosed, connected by a network of loggias. The original design was much more open than what is seen today. It should be remembered that the original Surf Club was constructed without air conditioning, it was open only for the "season" from December to April, and the loggias functioned largely as breezeways. Air conditioning was installed in the summer of 1959,² which allowed year-round use but required many open elements to be enclosed. The largest structural additions to the building occurred along the entire east elevation, and can be seen in comparable aerial photographs taken in 1935 and 1952

² "Spectacular' is Word for the Surf Club," *Miami Herald*, Nov. 8, 1959, p. 5-E.

III. ARCHITECTURAL FEATURES

The Front Entrance of the Surf Club on Collins Avenue now has a large porte-cochere structure of pecky cypress, masonry columns, and a wall of breeze block that was constructed in at least two parts, probably in the 1960s to '70s. The original entrance is seen in photographs as a plain rounded arch, with a canvas awning extending over the driveway and four steps up to the doorway. The elaborate wooden door depicted in Pancoast's plans is still in place. A pair of large clay urns originally flanked the steps; in a photograph included in the 2010 Designation Report, the same urns are seen relocated to the rear entrance.

Just inside the door is the double-height Lobby. The floor here, probably original, is of lozenge-shaped red and black clay quarry tile. The two hanging lamps seen in the 2010 Designation Report photo have been replaced in recent months by a single brass chandelier that Mr. Garcia retrieved from basement storage, cleaned and restored. The second-floor landing above the front door opens onto the lobby with three round arches supported by two stone columns. The metal railing here is probably a recent replacement, but the stone columns are shown in the original plans. They have an antiquated appearance, and may be actual relics imported from Europe or elsewhere, or more likely are the products of one of the many local workshops that made "authentic reproductions" to furnish and decorate Mediterranean Revival buildings in the 1920s. Mizner Industries in Palm Beach was one such workshop. Items of cast stone, wrought iron, and distressed wood were given an artificial patina of age that was in keeping with the architectural style.³ The large clay urns that stood by the front door, as well as other decorative elements of the Surf Club, may have come from such workshops.

³ Beth Dunlop, "Inventing Antiquity," Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts, vol. 23; Wolsfsonian/FIU, 1998, pp.191-206.

For example, on the same second-floor landing, the metalwork in the fanlight over the front door can be seen through the window. Further to the north, a short section of original wrought-iron stair railing survives, with figures of a dolphin and a seal on two of its brackets. This metalwork could be the product of one of the “antiquities” workshops.

The original floor plan of the Surf Club included two large open-air spaces, separated by the main east-west loggia, known as “Peacock Alley,” that connects the front and rear entrances. This loggia, and most of the others, consisted of open, rounded arches interspersed with decorative round medallions. On the south side of Peacock Alley is the open swimming pool deck. The present rectangular pool replaces the original, which was L-shaped.

Originally, two narrower loggias extended along the east and west sides of the pool deck, perpendicular to Peacock Alley. The western one still remains, but the other loggia was enclosed and enlarged with an “Ocean Room” and “Card Room” sometime after 1952, judging by photographs. Running along the south side of the pool was a pergola structure, with wooden beams and latticework. It is shown in an archival photo, but was demolished by 1959.

A square tower housing a stairwell rises nearly four stories at the northeast corner of the pool as the tallest feature of the building.

On the north side of Peacock Alley, across from the pool deck, is the Fountain Room. This was originally a completely open, unroofed rectangular space. It had an elaborately patterned floor and was surrounded on three sides by open, round-arched loggias. The fourth (west) side was a solid wall with an orchestra platform flanked by two fountains, shown in an early photograph. Other photos show this space filled with dancing couples and umbrella tables. Many photos show a large canopy spread over the Fountain Room. Eventually,

once it was air-conditioned, a roof was added, but it was “adjustable, and can be completely opened to the stars on moonlight nights.”⁴

The Surf Club at first had two main enclosed public rooms, east of the Fountain Room, that originally faced the ocean. Adjacent to Peacock Alley is the Lounge, with a high, wood-beamed ceiling buttressed by curved and ornamented “ribs.” An imposing fireplace with three bas-relief panels, detailed in the plans, dominates the south wall. A 1934 photo shows the floor with a decorative pattern and three elaborate chandeliers. The room is furnished with easy chairs, sofas and lamp tables. Other photos show the room set up for dining service. The east and west walls consist of French doors with fan lights, set into rounded arches. A brochure from circa 1959 refers to this room as the Ballroom.

Three large rounded arches in the north wall of the Lounge lead into the Main Dining Room, referred to as the Green Room in the c.1959 brochure. This is a long room with an angled, coffered ceiling. An early photo shows the west wall as solid except for two service doors leading to the kitchen behind. There are three large wrought-iron chandeliers. The east wall, facing the ocean, was lined with trios of thin, graceful round-arched windows with stone columns between them.

The north wall of the Main Dining Room originally had a fireplace, documented in the plans as well as early photos, but it was replaced at an unknown date by the stage that is still present. Another original feature of the room, seen in plans and photos, was a mural painting in the trapezoidal space at the upper part of the wall above the fireplace. Its artist and subject matter have not been discovered. Though this wall is now blank, the mural may still exist behind the plaster.

⁴ “The Surf Club,” (booklet); Surfside file, HistoryMiami; undated, circa 1959.

A small extension at the northeast corner of this room is shown on the plans as a “Party Room.” Two small “Private Dining Rooms” were located behind the north wall, and were entered by two doors to the left of the fireplace. Several original features remain here, including a corner fireplace, and wood paneling with a drapery motif. This paneling may be an example of Woodite, a composite material patented by Mizner Industries around 1924, that could be molded to resemble intricately-carved wood.⁵ Addison Mizner used a similar drapery motif in the paneling of his own Palm Beach mansion in 1919.

The original Rear Entrance, at the east end of Peacock Alley, is clearly seen in a 1931 photo in the Matlack archive at HistoryMiami. The uniformed service staff stand in formation on the stairway of keystone leading down to the beach. Two wrought-iron lamps stand on the bases of the balustrades. In the background, beyond an open terrace, the doorway has a rounded arch of masonry, and a pattern of radiating spokes in the fan light. Quoins are seen at the edge of the building.

Extensive additions to the northeast portion of the Surf Club were completed by 1952 and obscured many original features. The Lounge and Main Dining Room lost their openness to the ocean when the terrace that ran alongside them was enclosed to create new dining rooms. The aerial photo on the cover of the Historic Designation Report shows these additions extending from the rear stairway to the little “Party Room” projection at the northeast corner. The stairway and balustrades remain intact, but the location of the rear entrance was moved several yards to the east. The masonry arch of the original doorway still remains where it was built; a new mural with classical motifs now decorates its lunette and side walls.

--- Carolyn Klepser, researcher
July 19, 2012

⁵ “Addison Mizner: Architect of Dreams and Realities,” (catalog); Norton Gallery of Art, Palm Beach, 1977, p. 59.