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Jerry Wallace
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Art Deco with a twist out west

Barbara
Capitman, the
Art Deco lady
from Miami
Beach, is making
waves in
Opa-locka. She
and architect Bob
Shapiro believe
the city's
Arabian-style
buildings can be
used to lure
developers and
fashion
illustrators
caught up in the
newest trends.

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Art Deco preservationist Barbara Capitman wants to capitalize on the Arabian trend in fashion to help bring economic development to Opa-locka.

By TINA MONTALVO
Herald Staff Writer

Ten years ago, Barbara Capitman saw the possibilities Art Deco held for Miami Beach.

To her, the 800 buildings between Sixth and 23rd streets, with their streamlined facades, porthole windows and funky feel, were treasures built by 1930s escapists. She worked three years to place them on the National Register of Historic Places, succeeding in 1979.

Capitman and her fellow preservationists brought national attention to the district. And despite opposition from City Hall and developers, Deco flourished, bringing new life to the sluggish city.

Capitman now looks west to Opa-locka. Mention the city to the average Joe and he thinks crime, decay, poverty.

But as Capitman wrote in a recent article, "There is probably no better example of romantic fantasy in Miami than the Opa-locka neighborhood, built by the young flying ace, Glenn Curtiss, around his airfield in the '20s."

Curtiss envisioned Opa-locka as an ideal city, complete with bridle paths, community gardens and a look inspired by *The Thousand and One Tales from the Arabian Nights*.

Sixty years later, all that's left of the plan conceived by Curtiss and designed by architect Bernhardt Muller are the Opa-locka Airport, a dozen or so exotic but neglected buildings, 65 historic homes, and storybook street names — Sharazad, Sinbad, Ali Baba, Caliph.

Capitman is determined not only to help restore the architecture, but to promote it. Her brand of preservationism is flamboyant and far-reaching, the kind that makes outsiders talk and developers invest. It may take 10 years, but the city, she believes, will thrive again.

"Opa-locka could come much further than the Art Deco District," she says. "We never really took advantage of it in Miami Beach. It's too timid."

"In Opa-locka you can do something enormous, complete."

Capitman's first contribution toward the "Save the Arabian Nights District" campaign is her work for the city's annual Arabian festival, which this year celebrates Opa-locka's 60th anniversary.

The festival spans three days, May 15-18, and a fashion show the 16th is her baby. There, she will introduce the "Opa-locka look" — flowing Arabian styles, reflections of the city's greatest assets.

"It's a pretty marvelous way to show the architecture."

Fashion never entered Capitman's scheme in Miami Beach. But in Opa-locka, she considers it the key to national visibility. In the world of haute couture, the Arabian and aviator looks are hot, and Capitman predicts Opa-locka will soon become a backdrop for fashion layouts and a subject for architectural writers.

Already, she has tapped her sources in the design world.

For the show, she has enlisted local support from fashion and history departments at Barry University,

Miami-Dade Community College and Florida International University.

That's not all: David Leddick, Capitman's friend and vice president of New York-based Grey Advertising, is sending top black model Tery Ferman and beauty casting director Delores Fisher down for the 16th; Humps, a Bal Harbour boutique, will provide the clothes; Evelyn Perlman, head of Florida promotions for Christian Dior New York, has promised to lend a display of jewelry; and internationally known fashion illustrator Antonio Lopez has given permission for one of his designs to decorate the festival program's cover.

The fashion show is only the beginning. The goal, as Capitman sees it, is a city with a lively economy and a bustling downtown, a network of offices, restaurants and shops, an international bazaar.

"She's a dynamite lady," said Opa-locka Commissioner Helen Miller, who appointed her to the city's Historic Preservation Board in February. Capitman, paid \$3,000 by the city for her festival work, stepped down earlier this month to squelch complaints of conflicts of interest.

Miller continues, "I'm with her 101 percent. We needed someone to give us a shot in the arm, someone to take an interest in us."

"She knows the people who can help. I don't."

But Capitman has already become a target for skeptics: WINZ-AM talk show host Neil Rogers recently ridiculed her for her interest in Opa-locka. They see the city as hopeless.

In his book on the city's founding, *A Dream of Araby*, Frank Fitzgerald Bush wrote that the city quickly degenerated after World War II, facing the same problems that plagued all of Dade County: the effects of urban growth and the rootlessness of a transient population.

What began as a small WASPish community has grown into a poor city of 14,500 residents, 70 percent black. In 1980, the average Opa-locka family earned \$12,207, compared to a county average of \$15,571. A typical home in the city is worth \$30,700, half those elsewhere in Dade.

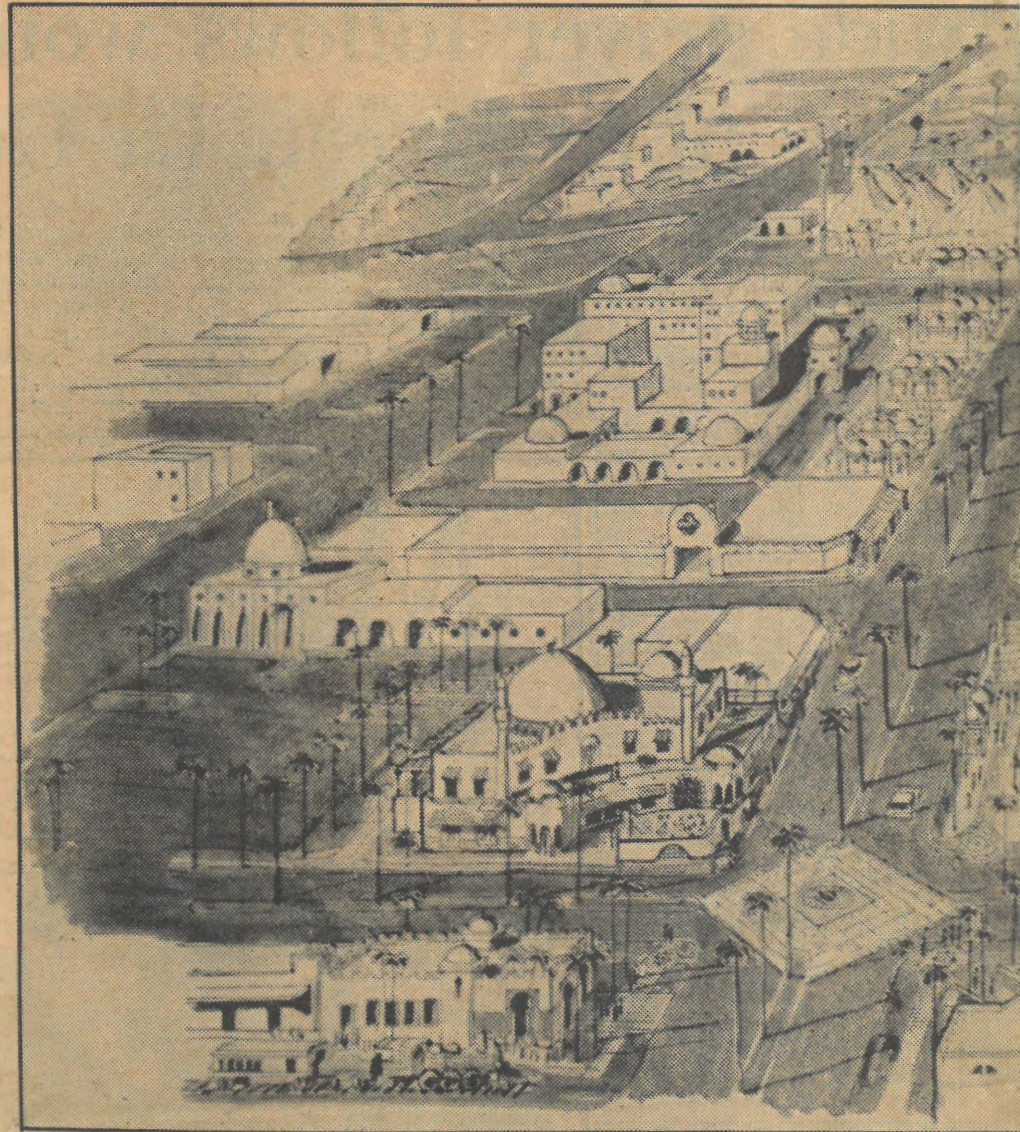
Some city officials are quick to say that they, for the first time in recent history, are making good on old promises. Last year, the city commission engineered a \$5 million bond issue to improve streets and drains and begin, in June, restoration work on City Hall, which was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1982.

"She's bringing people in here and she's a tremendous asset, but I don't want the story coming out that she's responsible for the revitalization," Commissioner Stuart Susaneck said.

"Drainage and road resurfacing may not be glamorous, but they're the bottom line to revitalization. We've made more strides and progress in the past two years than probably has been done in the past 20."

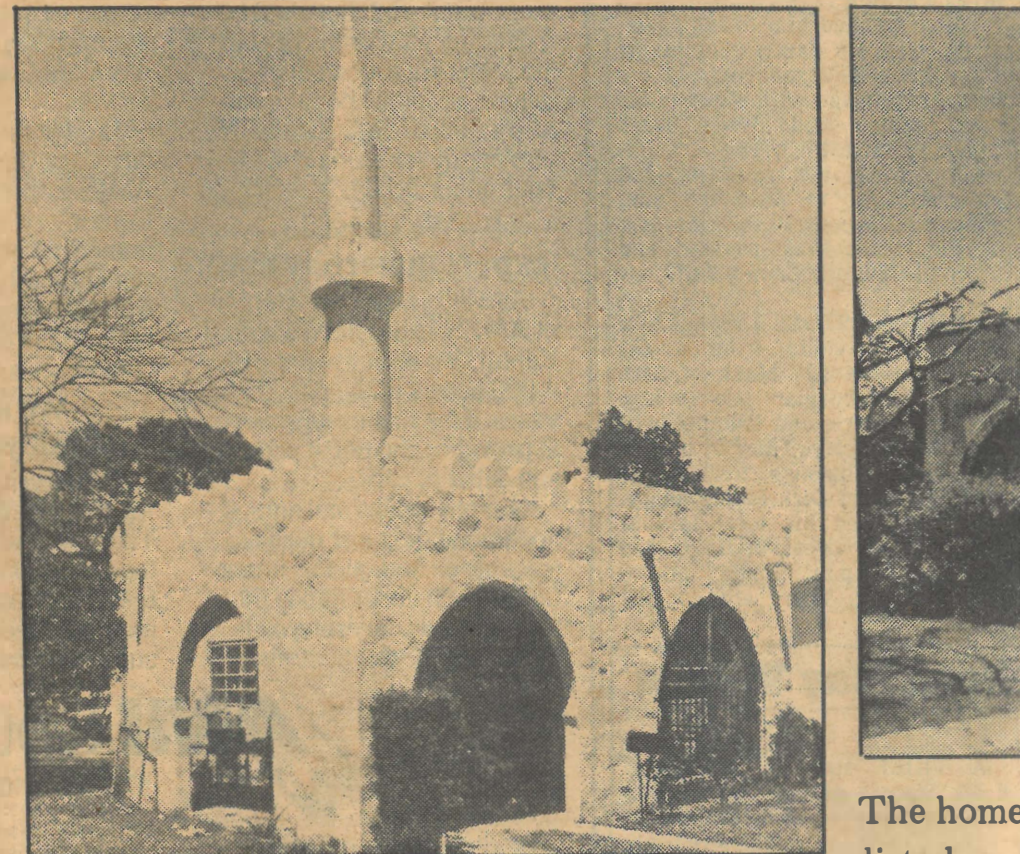
Capitman acknowledges the foundation that has been built.

Dade Heritage Trust, the county's biggest preservation group, and the city's Historic Preservation Board worked to put



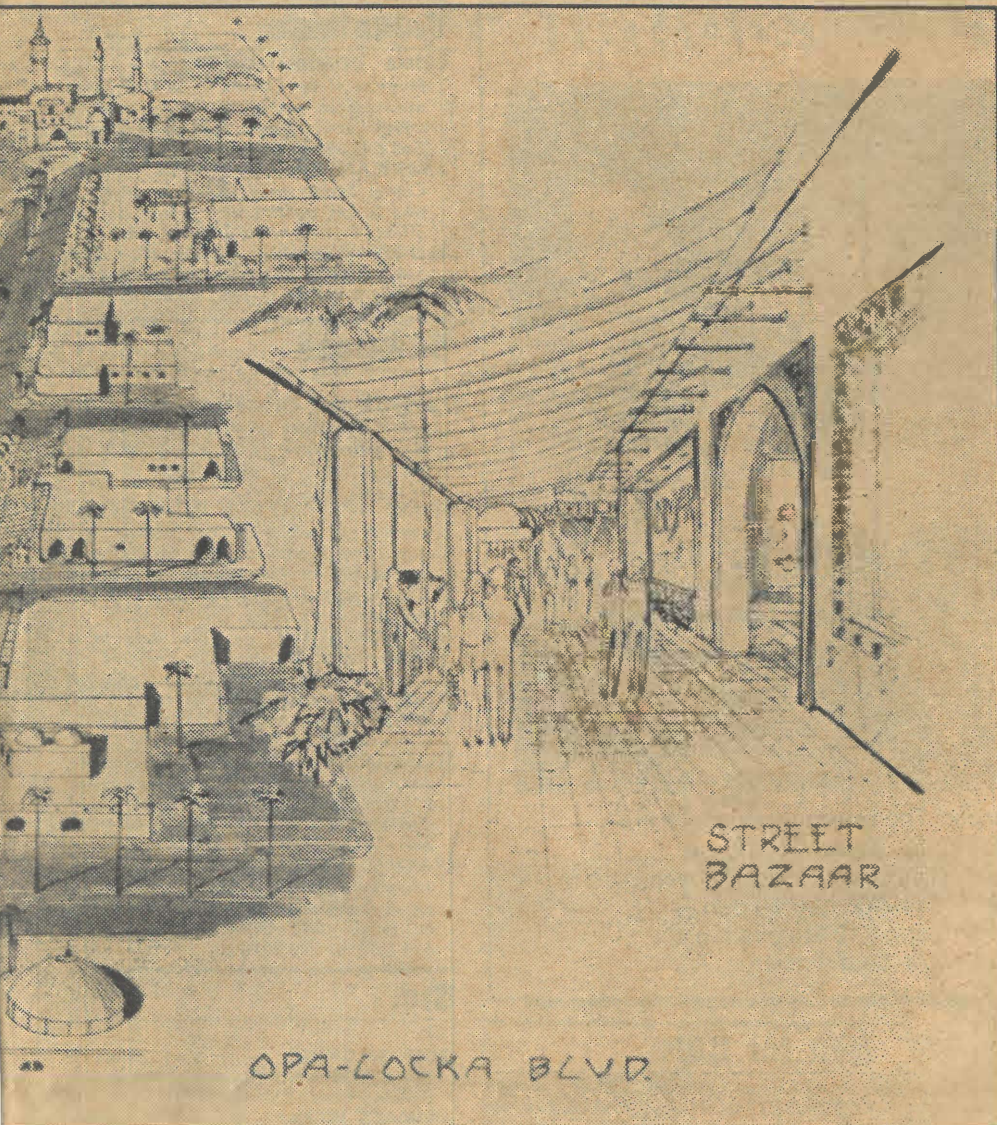
This conception of an Opa-locka Boulevard of the future was prepared by Barbara Capitman.

A city dressed



The home of the late Opa-locka resident, listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

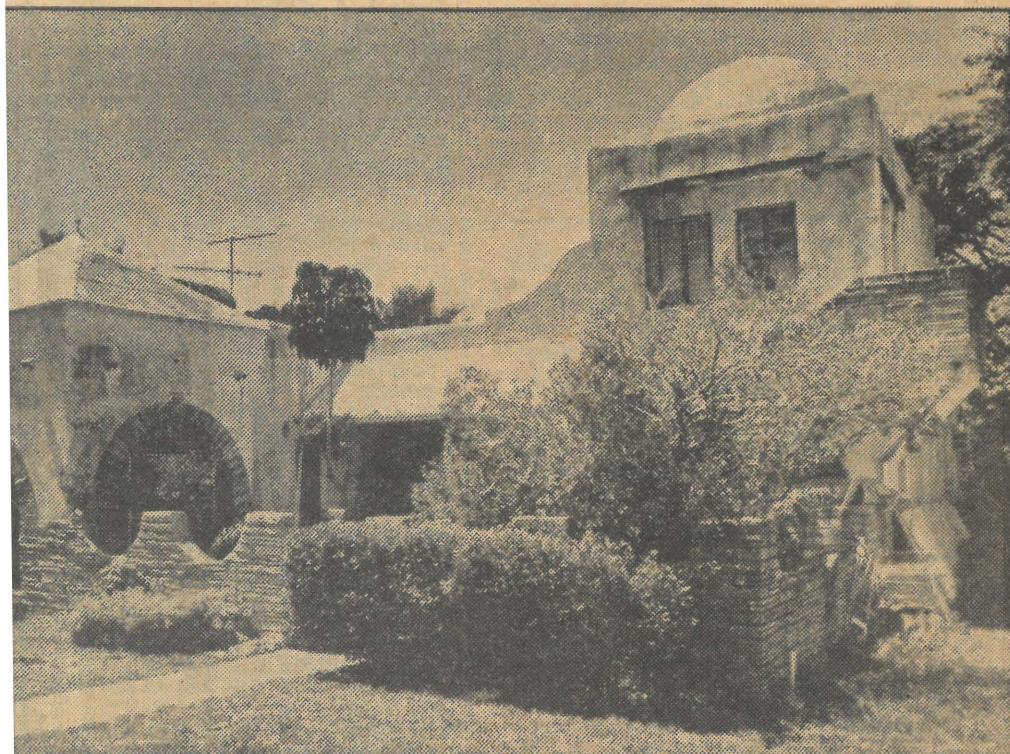
AL DIAZ / Miami Herald Staff



DANIEL HOUSTON / University of Florida

red for the Opa-locka Redevelopment Corp.

s for success



AL DIAZ / Miami Herald Staff

t left, at 1141 Jann Ave., and one above, 811 Dunad, are
e National Register of Historic Places.



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Barbara Capitman, second from right, and architect Bob Shapiro discuss festival plans with the fashion committee formed through the Art Deco Society of Miami.

Opa-locka's Arabian buildings on the Register. The Opa-locka Hotel was listed in 1982, along with City Hall. So were 65 homes and 10 commercial buildings, under a thematic resource area designation. The First Baptist Church on Caliph Street was added in 1983.

"We've been talking about revitalization for years," said Michael Maxwell, Dade Heritage Trust president-elect and consultant to the city's Historic Preservation Board. "Now things are starting to happen and she's right here."

Maxwell said the Trust has \$100,000 in low-interest loans available for owners of Opa-locka's historic homes, to be used for restoration. The Trust is also working to place Opa-locka's train station on the Register. The station will then be moved about 30 feet to the corner of Opa-locka Boulevard, sold to a developer and used for offices and a restaurant.

"This is the year it's all happening, and it would happen without her," Maxwell said. "No one is begrudging her. Her priority is being a conduit between the press and the community, and that's what she's really good at."

The city's preservation board has set eight goals, ranging from designating the old city pool a landmark to passing a city ordinance requiring original designs be incorporated into the renovation of historic buildings.

"None of these are necessarily immediate," said board chairman Winifred Amdor. "But they are goals for long-term."

Capitman says the Board's and Trust's methods are too slow. They haven't capitalized on the prestige that comes with Register listing, haven't made maps of historic homes, haven't conducted academic studies of the influences on Opa-locka's style. They have taken a mild approach to preservation, she says, one that focuses mostly on cement, mortar, history.

"We're the new preservationists. We work in every possible way with the city and use every possible tool."

"You have to do everything simultaneously to bring consciousness of Opa-locka to the whole community. It shouldn't be left to people in the city who are struggling with unemployment."

Capitman also criticizes the Opa-locka Community Development Corp., a not-for-profit organization formed five years ago to revitalize the downtown,

develop housing, build a massive industrial park at the airport and find a buyer and developer for the deteriorating Opa-locka Hotel, which the city sold them for \$1.

Except for construction of a handful of townhouses and work completed on roads and sewers at the airport, none of the goals has been accomplished.

"I defy you to show me a single project they've done for this community," City Commissioner Brian Hooten said.

State Rep. Willie Logan, CDC executive director, said he has found a potential buyer for the hotel, but added that attracting developers and getting grants and government backing isn't easy.

The CDC paid \$2,000 for designs by University of Florida architecture students, showing plans for the corners of Ali-Baba Avenue and Opa-locka Boulevard and the five blocks leading to City Hall and Sharazad Boulevard.

The drawings were completed early this year, and Logan used them when asking the state for \$200,000 for the hotel. He won't have the answer until June.

If she had known about the designs earlier, Capitman says she would have publicized them and even thrown parties for the students.

A former market researcher and editor of trade magazines, Capitman at 66 calls herself an "old Jewish lady" who wanted to continue a variation of the work her husband started. Bill Capitman, a crusader for corporate responsibility, died of cancer in 1975.

"I went to Opa-locka out of a sense of anger, because so much hadn't happened that could have happened. I saw that 10 years ago but I stayed away. I'm coming in now because if they let it get any worse, it's a tragedy."

Her friends — designers, artists, developers — are talking about Opa-locka now, she says, coming to see it, considering buying property. One of them, architect Bob Shapiro, 31, an expert on the Beaux Arts homes in Manhattan, has moved to Miami Beach and taken her place on Opa-locka's Historical Preservation Board. The National Art Deco Society society has adopted the "Save the Arabian Nights District" campaign as a project.

"I've had enough experience to know what's going to happen, I know what touches the community," Capitman says.

"It could be wonderful."