

The Needham Estate

“An Old World Sanctuary In The 21st Century”

By: Kevin Lane

When the Jungle Queen glides by the historic Needham Estate, the Captain usually explains that this stately home was the first mansion built on the New River with indoor plumbing.

Designed by Francis Luis Abreu, the two story, 6,500 square foot house was built in 1925 for John Needham, the first manager of the Hotel Broward. As the city's premier architect in the 1920s, the house was designed in the then-fashionable Mediterranean Revival style. Other Abreu buildings in Fort Lauderdale include the Riverside Hotel, built in 1936, St. Anthony's School, which is on the National Register of Historic Places, and the Moroccan-style Casablanca Cafe, a 1920s era home converted to a restaurant, at 3049 Alhambra Street on Fort Lauderdale Beach.

"Much of the house is original, from the wrought-iron stairway banisters, Cuban Tile floors and Pecky Cypress ceilings in the family room," the new owner proudly pointed out.

The two-story yellow stucco mansion is protected by a tall, vine covered wall, with an entrance to the two-car garage and another entrance to the stone courtyard with a stately Canary Island Palm, surrounded by a circle of colorful flowers.

The entrance hall, with its soaring two story high ceiling, is the central corridor that opens to all of the ground floor rooms and leads to the second floor via a winding staircase. Painted an antique gold and richly appointed with dark wood furniture, the wall opposite the staircase is dominated by an oil painting of... stairs!

To the left is the spacious living room, with a wood burning fireplace, which is often used by the current owners during the Fort Lauderdale "winters." The original floor to ceiling French doors along the front of the house, still contain their original beveled glass. The room is furnished with two oversized and comfortable couches, large square, glass topped coffee table and stately chairs.

The owner loves to cook and enjoys her kitchen, which is to the right of the vestibule. It's the only room that the couple updated. It has dark cherry wood cabinets, granite countertops and all stainless-steel state-of-the-art appliances. The flooring is Mexican Terracotta tile. An added bonus to the kitchen is a charming round breakfast room and adjoining old-fashioned butler's pantry.

From the vestibule, you can walk straight ahead into the formal dining room Filled with “old-world” furniture the couple purchased from the previous owners. There is a large Chinese Ginger Jar, a 5-foot high Ming Urn and solid onyx, antique and marble sculptures. An oversized oil painting of flowers is on the east wall and looking out the

arched floor to ceiling window to the west, there is a Chicago Brick courtyard, with its lovely, multi-tiered fountain surrounded by stone benches and sculptured trees.

Off of the living room, or opposite the dining room, is a cozy Family room, with an old fashioned bar and several leather couches around a square coffee table and a flat screen television set. A painting of a Puma and one of a Lion adorn two walls along with several wooden masks from Africa.

Actually, the art throughout the house is an eclectic mix of modern, old-world, African, Chinese and Italian renaissance. Adding art is an on-going process. As the owners visit art galleries, they will find a certain piece that they feel will go in a certain room... "Sometimes we measure a space and then actively look for a painting or sculpture that will complement the room."

In typical Abreau style, the rear of the home has a overlooking the New River, the first floor being, a casual dinner relaxing. The second floor contains the owners office which has a panoramic view of the New River with its nerve of yachts. The Master Suite and sitting room and two guest suites upstairs.

When Addison Mizner was almost single handedly transforming Palm Beach and Boca Raton through Mediterranean Revival architecture and George Merrick was building Coral Gables in the Mediterranean style, Francis L. Abreu was creating some of Fort Lauderdale's grandest homes and public buildings, including the Casino Swimming Pool in 1928 and the Sailboat Bend Fire Station, that was recently restored.

Mediterranean Revival Style Architecture is considered the product of varied architectural motifs along the Mediterranean coast, expressing Italian style and Moorish themes from southern Spain as well as North Africa. The eclectic design style was first introduced in the United States around the turn of the nineteenth century, and came into prominence in the 1920s and 1930s. The style was derived from many sources including colonial Spanish missions in California as well as architecture from Renaissance era Spain and evolved from "rekindled interest in Italian Renaissance palaces" and seaside villas dating from the sixteenth century.

The style flourished as Florida's communities imaginatively promoted themselves as fantasy lands, but also with a view to creating "antiquity" in hopes of competing with that offered by European travel destinations.

Structures are typically multi-story and based on a rectangular floor plan, and feature massive, symmetrical primary façades. Mediterranean Revival is generally characterized by stuccoed wall surfaces, flat or low-pitched terra cotta and red tile roofs, arches, scrolled or tile-capped parapet walls and articulated door surrounds. Feature detailing is occasionally executed in keystone.

Balconies and window grilles are common, and are generally fabricated out of wrought iron or wood. Ornamentation can range from simple to dramatic, and may draw from a number of Mediterranean references. Classical, Spanish, or Beaux-Arts architecture details are often incorporated into the design, as are lush gardens.