

## Architect Ralph Twitchell – The Making Of A Sarasota Legend

Ralph Twitchell's name is best associated as being the "Father of the Sarasota School of Architecture". He is also noted for having practiced with two of the nation's most renowned 20th century architects. The first was with prominent New York's society architect Dwight Baum, whose credits in Sarasota include John and Mabel Ringling's Ca' d'Zan and the Sarasota Courthouse. In the late 1940's, Twitchell teamed with Paul Rudolph, who went on to become internationally famous as one of the world's most acclaimed modernist architects during the 1960's and 70's.



Broughton Street are considered by many to be the most attractive grouping of houses in the region.

With a vision to build a community of homes reflecting the old-world glamor of Spain and Italy, in 1925 Twitchell purchased 13 lots in the bay side section of Whitfield Estates. To accommodate his building designs, he reconfigured them into 12 new lots and named his venture "Revellian Gardens at Whitfield Estates".

Construction of the first four houses began in early 1926 during the height of the famous Florida Land Boom. As construction proceeded, the plans he designed meant nothing more than "a piece of paper". For as the frames and masonry grew into shape, new ideas inspired new designs so that upon their completion, each home only slightly resembled its original design.

They were as individual as four homes on four corners of the earth, yet harmonious as four homes should be that stands side by side. Their Spanish style

exteriors were embellished with arched windows and doorways, wrought iron balconies and grille work, twisted and scroll motifs, and tree shaded walled patios. Garages and servants' quarters were charmingly grouped in the rear of the residences, suggesting picturesque peasant houses of southern Europe.

Each 2-story house contained eight rooms, featuring beamed ceilings, quaint fireplaces, pecky cypress walls, iron grill work, and classical arched doorways. As builder, Twitchell's craftsmanship and personal labor was reflected throughout. Entry floors of beautiful slate mined from



quarries of Vermont, rarely used in the south, were laid by Twitchell himself. Floors of wormy oak planks and woodwork and beams of pecky cypress, were treated by Twitchell's own method to make them authoritatively antique. An untimely rail freight embargo in 1926 curtailed the delivery of materials and forced contractors to finish their own lumber and make their own door trims, doors, and baseboards.

So highly regarded for their design and setting, the homes were featured in the September 1927 issue of Arts and Decoration, a prestigious publication of international importance. Titled "Old World Glamor in New Florida World", the article described the homes as "all having the glamor and artistic tradition of the past... like a scene for a sixteenth century romance."

Unfortunately, the events that followed were far from glamorous. With the unexpected collapse of the Land Boom, the market for Florida home buyers disappeared. Unable to sell the houses, Twitchell and his family took up residence in one until 1936 and rented the other three for more



than a decade. The remaining eight homes he planned were never built. In a taped interview prior to his death, Twitchell sadly recounted that his Ravellan Gardens endeavor was a financial disaster, having come out with less than fifteen percent of his investment, including his personal labor and design work.

Today the four houses proudly represent an architecture style popularized during one of Florida's most exciting eras. While some

modifications have occurred during the past 90 years, the homes retain their architectural integrity and exceptional setting.

In 1993, these distinctive residences were listed in the National Register of Historic Places as the Whitfield Estates Broughton Street Historic District for their notable architectural style, their important contribution to the 1920's Florida Land Boom, and for their association with master architect Ralph Twitchell.



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