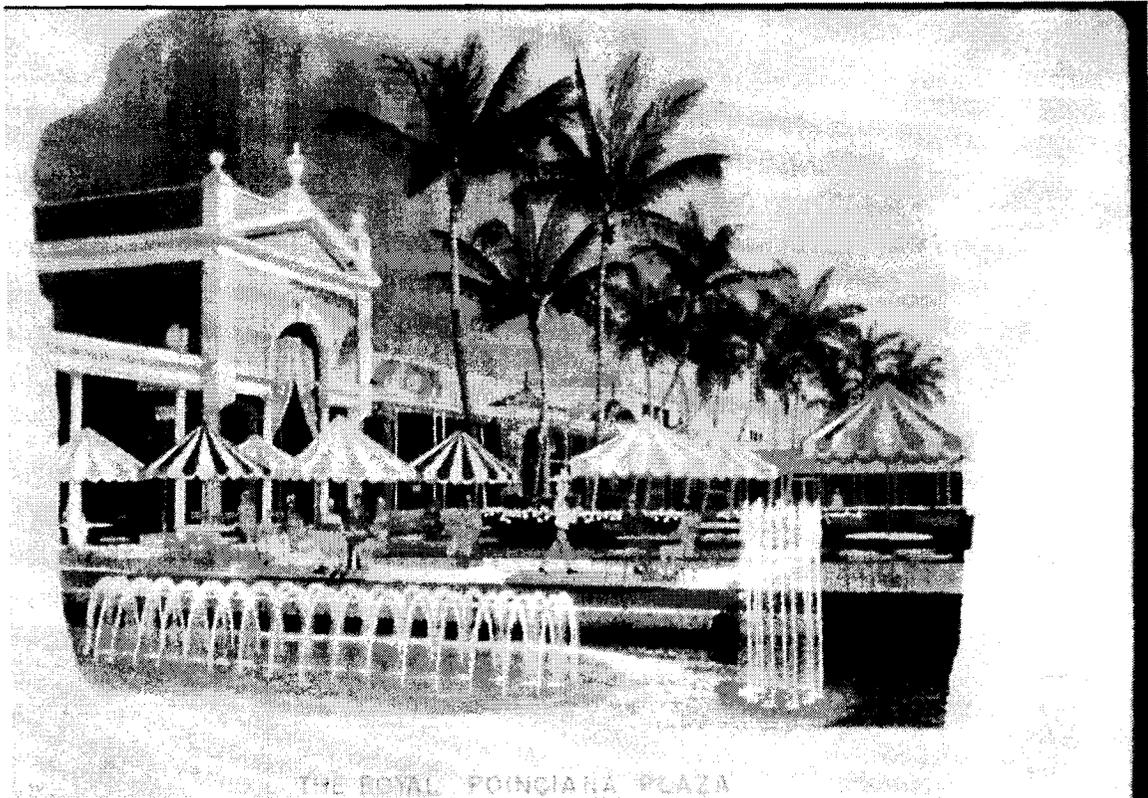


# The Royal Poinciana Plaza



**DESIGNATION REPORT**  
**Wednesday, February 21, 2007**

**Landmarks Preservation Commission**  
**Palm Beach, Florida**

# **DESIGNATION REPORT**

## **Royal Poinciana Plaza**

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**Report written by Jane S. Day, Research Atlantica, Inc.**

**Report edited by Timothy M. Frank, AICP, Planning Administrator,  
Town of Palm Beach.**

**I. GENERAL INFORMATION**

**Location:** Royal Poinciana Plaza  
340 Royal Poinciana Way  
Palm Beach, Florida

**Date of Construction:** 1957

**Principal Architect:** John L. Volk

**Present Owner:** Sidney Spiegel Trust # 31520371

**Present Use:** Shopping Plaza, Offices and Theater

**Present Zoning:** C-PC Zoning District

**Palm Beach County  
Tax Folio Number:** 50-43-43-22-00-001-0050-001

**Current Legal**

**Description:** This designation report documents the entire Royal Poinciana Plaza. The legal description that follows describes the entire property. Its source is the Survey Map prepared by Avirom & Associates, Inc. on September 8, 2004. This survey was submitted to the Town of Palm Beach with the application for a Certificate of Appropriateness to the Landmarks Preservation Commission on December 29, 2006.

**Legal Description:**

A parcel of land in Section 22, Township 43 South, Range 43 East, Palm Beach County, Florida, bounded as follows:

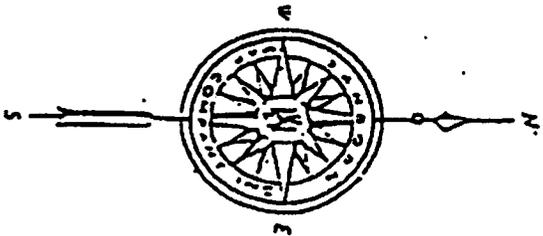
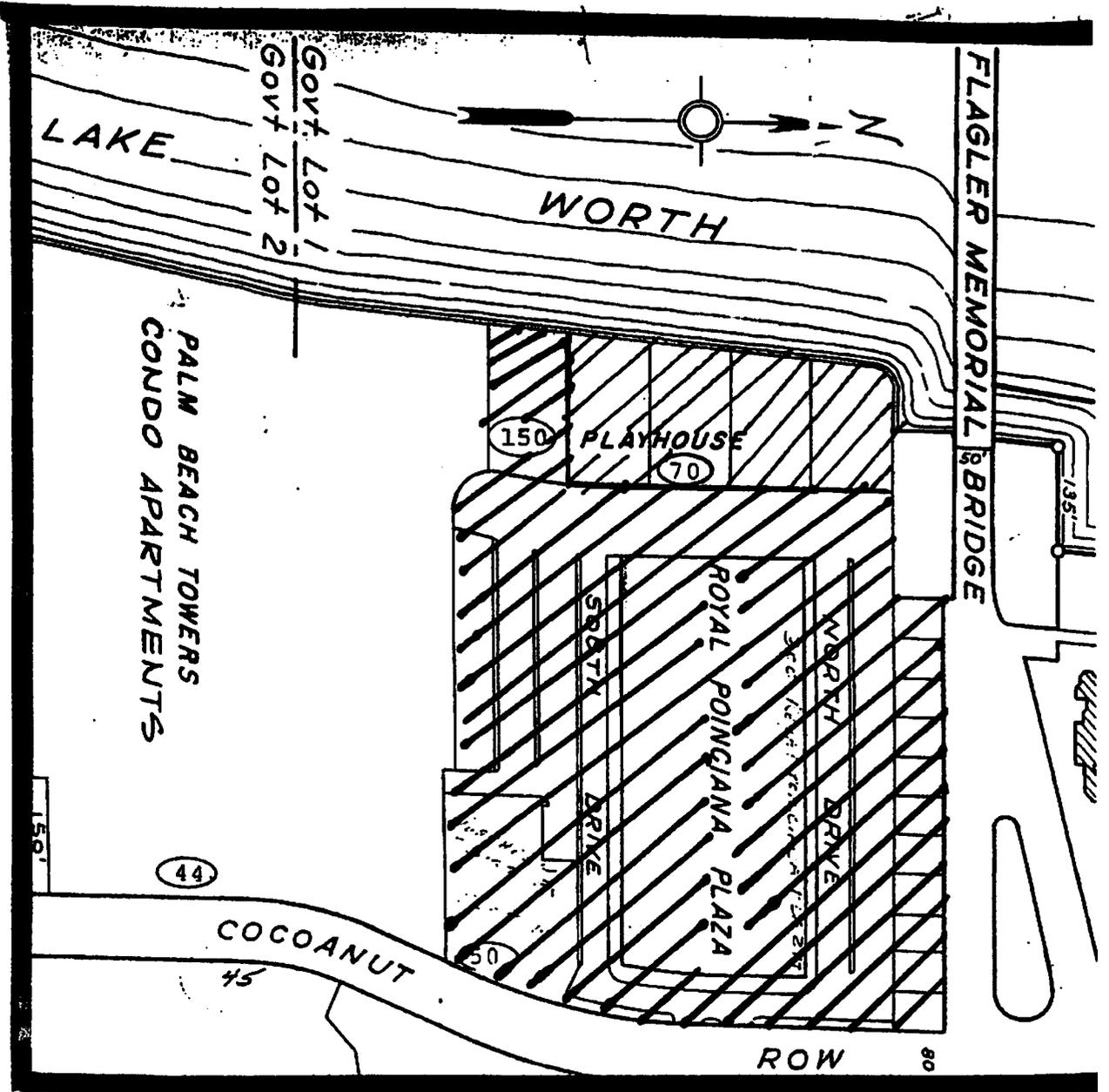
On the north by the southerly right-of-way line of Royal Poinciana Way; on the east by the westerly right-of-way of Cocoanut Row; on the west by the Waters of Lake Worth; on the south by the following described line:

Commencing at the intersection of the northerly right-of-way line of White Hall Way with the westerly right-of-way line of Cocoanut Row, as said streets are described in deed recorded in Deed Book 814, Page 477, and subsequent pages, Public Records of Palm Beach County, Florida; thence northerly along the said westerly right-of-way line of Cocoanut Row, a distance of 444.76 feet to the beginning of curve concave to the east having a radius of 329.60 feet and a central angle of 23' 53'30": thence northerly along the arc of the said curve, a distance of 137.44 feet, to the tangent to said curve: thence northerly along said tangent a distance of 59.62 feet to the POINT OF BEGINNING of the herein described south line; thence westerly making an angle from southwest to west of 66'14'30", a distance of 227.26 feet; thence northerly at right angles, a distance of 25 feet; thence westerly at right angles, a distance of 293.43 feet to the beginning of the curve to the northeast, having a radius of 65.03 feet and a central angle of 85'42'43", a distance of 97.28 feet; thence northwesterly a distance of 33.90 feet, more or less, to the southeast corner of a parcel of land described in Deed Book 1011, Page 226, Public Records of Palm Beach Country, Florida, thence westerly along the south line of the parcel of land described in Deed Book 1011, Page 226, said line being parallel with and 561.20 feet southerly from (measured at right angles to) the southerly right-of-way line of Royal Poinciana Way, a distance of 181.82 feet, more or less, to the waters of Lake Worth and the end of the herein described southerly line.

Excepting, however, so much of a nearly rectangular area of land, together with riparian or littoral rights appurtenant or incident thereto, as is included in the foregoing described parcel of land, and which nearly rectangular area of land has a southerly boundary of 208.44 feet, and easterly boundary of 71.20 feet, a northerly boundary of 190.74 feet plus 12.08 feet on two different coursed coinciding with the south line of the east approach of Flagler Memorial Bridge, and having a westerly boundary of 71.88 feet coinciding with the west face of an existing concrete bulkhead within the Waters of Lake Worth, and all as such nearly rectangular area of land and riparian and littoral rights appurtenant or incident thereto are more particularly described and were conveyed in deed of Florida East Coast Hotel Company to Town of Palm Beach dated September 11, 1939, and recorded in Deed Book 592, Page 478 of Public Records of Palm Beach Country, Florida.

Said lands situate in Palm Beach, Palm Beach County, Florida and containing 502,899 square feet ( 11.9582 acres) more of less.

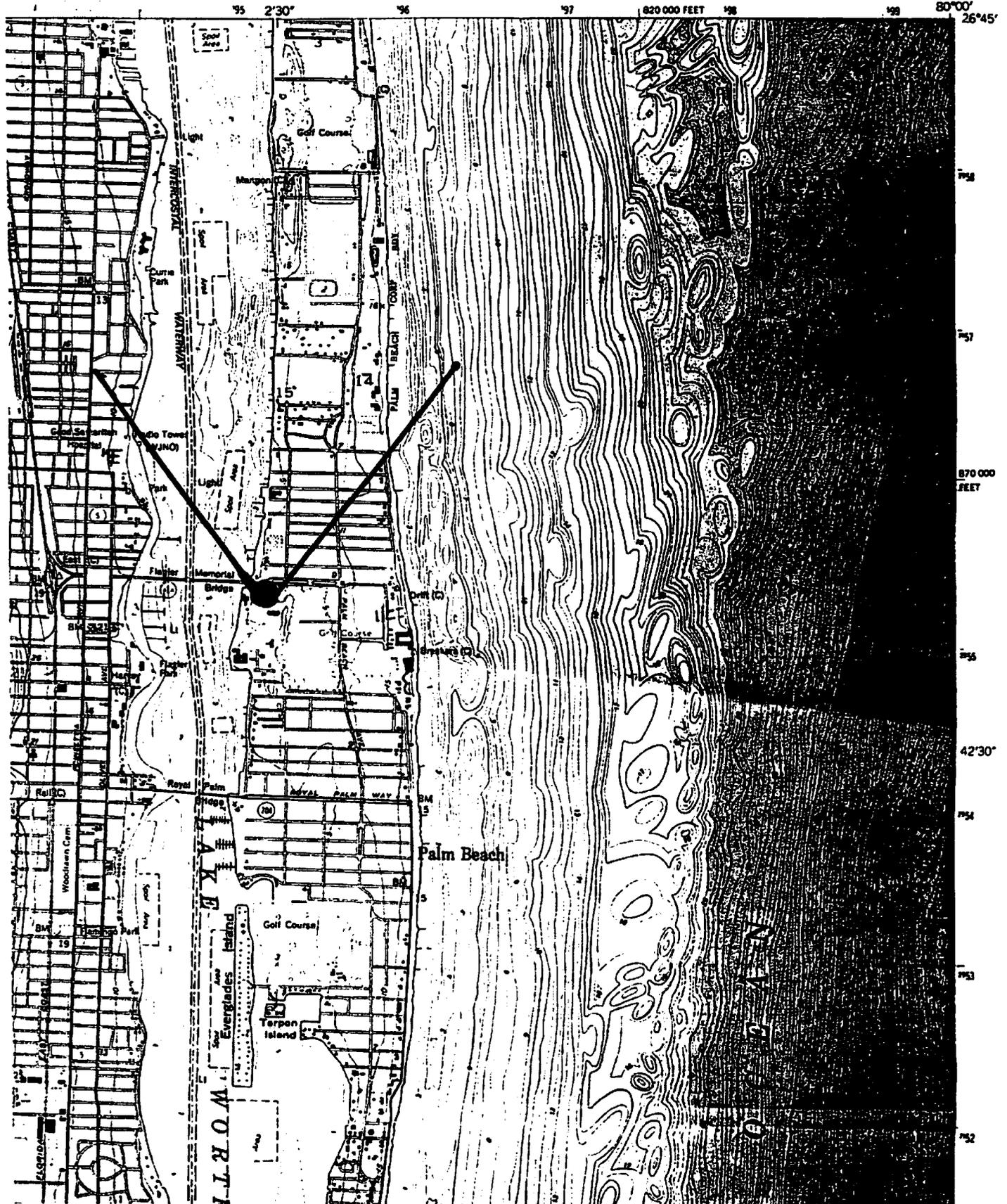
**LOCATION MAP**      **Royal Poinciana Plaza**



ES  
MMERCE  
SURVEY

# Royal Poinciana Plaza Palm Beach, Florida

PALM BEACH QUADRANGLE  
FLORIDA-PALM BEACH CO.  
7.5 MINUTE SERIES (TOPOGRAPHIC-BATHYMETRIC)



### III. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

When John S. Phipps of Bessemer Properties, Inc. hired John L. Volk in 1957 to design The Royal Poinciana Plaza and Playhouse, Phipps challenged the well known architect with a demanding task, "John Volk, design for us a shopping plaza in any style you wish; however, it must endure for fifty years."<sup>1</sup> Volk took the challenge and as was typical of his aesthetic vision, took into account not only the architectural style of the project, but the prominence of its site along Lake Worth and adjacent to the entrance to Palm Beach at the Flagler Memorial Bridge. Volk instinctively knew that good urban planning required him to produce a design that was compatible with the surrounding environment in form and scale, while being functional for the task at hand. He waded through the mid-twentieth century debate of "traditionalism vs. modernism," reasoning through the design process, and recording his thoughts on paper in a significant document that helps the architectural historian understand why the Regency style was chosen for this project. In John Volk's own words:

*Palm Beach is an international resort community which derives much of its atmosphere and charm from maintaining traditional architectural styles in its homes and buildings. These include the Spanish and Italian styles introduced in the 1920's and the British Colonial, Georgian and Regency styles in more recent decades.*

*A strong argument for maintaining traditional architecture in Palm Beach, therefore, is the necessity to avoid marked contrast and discord with existing buildings. An ultra modern structure would break the continuity of styling and no matter what the merits, would create an eyesore in the resort. This would also be true were a Georgian mansion erected in Miami Beach whose major areas are dominated by various versions of "modern" styling.*

*Since contemporary modern architecture is in a transitional period of marked and rapid change, it tends to date quickly. This eliminated modern as a style for buildings expected to maintain a lasting quality and usefulness for a specified period.*

*Considering the above factors and the function of the proposed Plaza as an attractive community center and shopping area, I chose Regency as a most appropriate architectural style for the buildings.*

*Regency is also singularly adaptable to the open modern plan. Its use of large scale openings, wide arches, porticos, doorways and windows makes it particularly suitable for a community center and shopping area such as the Royal Poinciana*

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<sup>1</sup> John L. Volk, "The Royal Poinciana Plaza" and "The Royal Poinciana Playhouse." Original manuscript on file at the Volk archives, Palm Beach, Florida. See also John L. Volk, John L. Volk, Palm Beach Architect, compiled by Lillian Jane Volk, Lory Armstrong Volk, and William Dale Waters. (Palm Beach: 2001) p.206.

## *Plaza.*<sup>2</sup>

Volk makes clear in this document that he was aware of both the importance of tradition and the trend, during the 1950s, toward modernism. His compromise between the two intellectual perspectives was forward thinking and part of Volk's brilliance. Realizing that the Royal Poinciana property was more than just a commercial destination, and in fact with the inclusion of the Playhouse would be a true "community center," Volk adapted the traditional Regency style of architecture for his design. This architectural form flourished during the regency and reign of George IV, and harkens back to nineteenth century England and the work of John Nash who constructed the Royal Pavilion at Brighton and Regent's Park in London. The style also references the Italian master Andrea Palladio and neoclassical influences. Volk turned the elegant, geometric, and rather formal style that features simple lines, uncluttered planes, and Roman columns with porticos, archways and bay windows, into a pedestrian friendly site adopted for modern commercial use. He integrated indoor and outdoor space, while also designing to accommodate for the automobile, parking, and the need to solve contemporary ingress and egress issue. More recent South Florida projects like Mizner Park in Boca Raton, and City Place in West Palm Beach have built on this concept and owe a debt to the work of John L. Volk.

Because this designation report covers the entire 11.9582 acre site of the Royal Poinciana Plaza and Playhouse, the architectural history and style of each building will be discussed individually.

### **The Royal Poinciana Playhouse and Celebrity Room**

The building permit for the Royal Poinciana Playhouse was issued on September 24, 1957, and states that the structure was to include a theater building, club facilities, and offices. The estimated cost on the permit was \$326,000 although eventually the final cost would top one and a half million dollars<sup>3</sup>

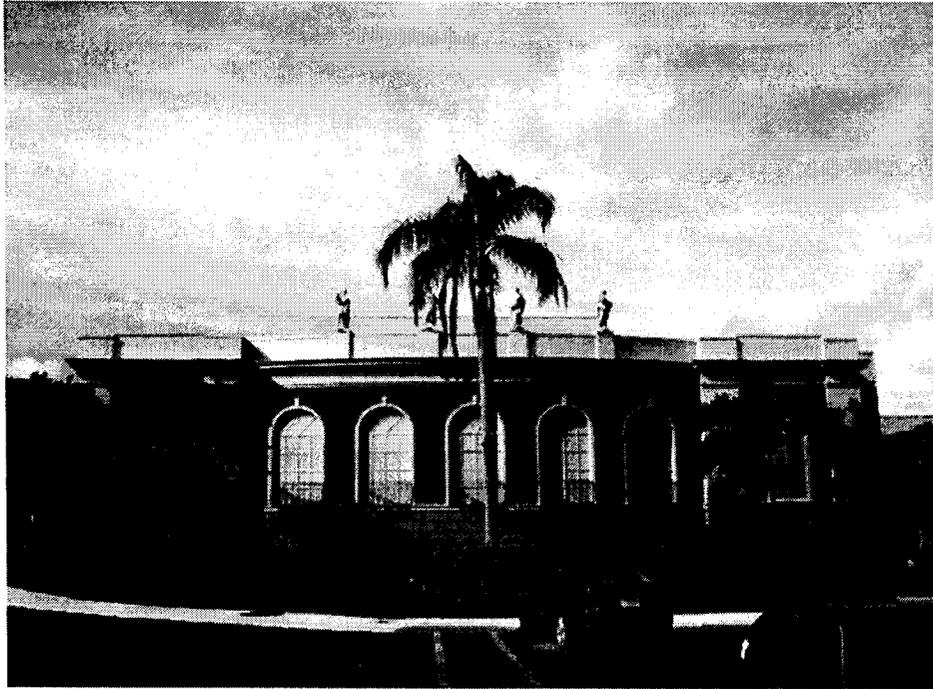
The Playhouse is built of concrete blocks and covered with stucco. It is an irregular shaped building with a flat roof that is situated on the shores of Lake Worth, just south of the Flagler Memorial Bridge. The main entrance to the building is to the east facade, with a secondary entrance just to the south of the main theater doors. This secondary entrance originally went into the club facilities called the Celebrity Room. Design details on the building include shutters, pediments, engaged columns, and a double belt course at the roof line. The most prominent feature is the bowed section of the east

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Town of Palm Beach Building Permit # 49257, September 24, 1957, on file at the Town of Palm Beach. And Edward Colin Dawson, "A Playhouse is Born," The Social Spectator, Volume LXIII, March, 1958.

facade to the north of the entrance. This bay segment of the theater builds from a solid base of scored blocks to five windows that are recessed and topped with fanlights and keystones. Small aluminum balconies add delicate details to the design. Four statues that were imported from Italy and represent the Four Seasons top the theater adding elegance and a classical and timeless reference to the architecture.<sup>4</sup>



The east facade of the Royal Poinciana Playhouse.

Note that the “ugly monolith” as Volk called the towering block that houses the scenery grid is barely visible from the driveway because of the way the building is sited.

On the north facade of the building, recessed in the rear of the structure is another commercial entrance and loading bay for the delivery and removal of scenery and equipment. John Volk designed the theater so that the large vertical block that houses the scenery grid and fly gallery, and usually towers over most theater facades, was terraced to the rear of the structure in graded planes. This strategy allowed the overall design to seem more horizontal and helped integrate the functional needs of a first class theater into the classical design of the whole. This strategy was also important to the overall scheme of the total Royal Poinciana Plaza site plan so that the theater itself did not overwhelm the shopping and office section in height.

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<sup>4</sup>Some sources suggest that these statues represent the Four Muses. Without closer inspection it is difficult to analyze their iconography.

Although the Landmarks Preservation Commission does not usually evaluate interiors, it is important to note that in the case of a theater, the interior dictates its function and contributes to the importance of the building. John Volk was no novice to theater design. Early in his career in New York he had worked on designs for the Rivoli and Capitol Theaters, and during the 1920s, one of his first commissions was the completion of the 5000 seat Mecca Temple in New York which later became the New York City Center.<sup>5</sup> After designing the Royal Poinciana Playhouse, Volk went on to build the Parker Playhouse in Fort Lauderdale in 1966. This continuum of theater design over a long career, adds to the importance of this structure within the framework of Volk's career.

With all this experience, Volk designed the interior of the Royal Poinciana Playhouse taking into account the needs and demands both of the theatrical professionals who would work there, and the comfort of the theater going public. "The ceiling has two separate planes and, over the proscenium, is shaped in an acoustical curve which provides a sounding board to carry voices from the stage to every area of the theater," Volk said.<sup>6</sup> Paul Crabtree, the production director of the theater noted in 1959 that, "We're supposed to have the finest acoustics in the country."<sup>7</sup>

The stage apron curved out into the auditorium and can be removed to reveal an orchestra pit. Seats were arranged in a stadium style to give every viewer good vision. The seats rise outward in a parabolic curve from the apron of the stage, and originally allotted 1200 cubic feet per person instead of the usual 700 cubic feet to provide more comfort.

Backstage the space is deep enough to accommodate three full-stage scenery platforms, and a grid and fly gallery is installed to make scenery change easy. There is also a wardrobe room, a full scene shop, and a paint shop so that scenery can be constructed on site. Lighting and other technical features of the theater were the most up to date of their era. Dressing rooms overlooked Lake Worth and have private entrances to a back terrace area for the comfort of cast and crew.



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<sup>5</sup>Dawson, *ibid.*

<sup>6</sup>John L. Volk, John L. Volk, Palm Beach Architect. 207, and also quoted in Dawson.

<sup>7</sup>"The Royal Poinciana Playhouse," Theatre Arts, February, 1959. On file at the Volk archives, Palm Beach, Florida.

The club facilities of the Royal Poinciana Playhouse are to the south of the theater space in an area that was originally called the “Celebrity Room,” and later became the Champagne Room and the Poinciana Club. This room was elegant in decor and catered to before and after theater suppers and cocktails. There was dancing and entertainment nightly and a broad terrace overlooking Lake Worth gave the theater going public access to the waterfront. The terrace was called the “Venetian Pavilion.”

A *trompe l’oeil* mural on the domed ceiling was painted by artist Robert Bushnell who had also completed murals for the Bali Bar in the Everglades Club, the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, and in New York’s Port Authority building. The mural included the portraits of 125 celebrities looking down from above over a Venetian style balcony and was roughly 45 feet long by 30 feet wide. Originally installed in the building in 1958, the painting was covered with a red canopy in the summer of 1973 and forgotten. When it was rediscovered in 1991, it received much press coverage and the Poinciana Club was renamed the “Celebrity Room” in honor of the painting. <sup>8</sup>



The “Celebrity Room” proved to be so popular that its greatest renovation took place the year

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<sup>8</sup>Chris Romoser, “Poinciana Club unveils Mural,” Palm Beach Daily News, November 14, 1991, Page 1. and Gary Schwan, “Star-Studded Ceiling,” Palm Beach Post, November 14, 1991.

after it was opened in 1958 to accommodate more patrons. Because the room overlooks Lake Worth and the skyline of West Palm Beach, it is the setting of the building and its proximity to the theater that are its most important features. Its interior has been altered over time.



Building permits in the Town of Palm Beach records indicate that the Royal Poinciana Playhouse has had maintenance work over the years but has not been severely altered since its construction in 1957 (except for the enlargement of the Celebrity Room in 1958). Most work included alterations to kitchens, offices and interior updates. The air-conditioning was replaced in 1983, and the building was re-roofed in 1985. Despite these typical changes, the building maintains the architectural integrity of John Volk's original design.

### **The Hibel Building**

A small one story building to the south of the Royal Poinciana Playhouse is almost universally known as the Hibel Building because it once housed the Edna Hibel Art Studio. At the present time the space is occupied by a retail establishment called "Designer To You." This building was constructed in 1954 for the medical clinic of Dr. Edwin B. Davis. The building permit was issued on August 2, 1954 making this the oldest mid-century structure on the site. The architect on the permit was listed as Wyeth, King and Johnson and the cost of the building was \$48,000.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Town of Palm Beach Building Permit # 27654, August 2, 1954, on file at the Town of Palm Beach.



Constructed of concrete block with a stucco exterior in the Regency style, the Hibel building is a one story design with a flat roof and symmetrical fenestration. It was altered in 1968 and changed from a doctor's office to an art gallery. In 1976, it was altered again and transformed from the Poinciana Art Gallery to the Hibel Art Studio.<sup>10</sup> The building retains its architectural integrity and is compatible with the rest of the site in both scale and form.

### **The Slat House**

The central tower of the building called the Slat House is one of the oldest structures in Palm Beach. Built in approximately 1894, it was originally part of the greenhouse and conservancy for Henry Flagler's Royal Poinciana Hotel. In 1922, it was turned into a Dancing Pavilion by the FEC Hotel Company.<sup>11</sup> When Bessemer Properties, Inc. bought the parcel, the Slat house had already been incorporated as the entryway into a 250 seat theater for the Palm Beach Playhouse which was operated by Messmore Kendall, Jerry Maguire and Mary Howes. This group, which was the predecessor for the Royal Poinciana Theater, occupied the western section of the

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<sup>10</sup>Town of Palm Beach Building Permits # 60968, September 19, 1968, and Permit # B 908, June 14, 1976; on file at the Town of Palm Beach.

<sup>11</sup> Town of Palm Beach Building Permit # 48, November 20, 1922, on file at the Town of Palm Beach.

building. In 1954, WPTV- Channel 5 built its broadcasting station in the east side of the building and remained on site until 1971. Herbert Mathes of Miami Beach was the architect of record for that project.<sup>12</sup> The west section of the building was used for storage. In 1974, John Volk was hired again to renovate the structure and make it more compatible with the rest of the Royal Poinciana Plaza. He accomplished this by adding regency style pediments and a columned portico. Volk left the octagon shaped cupola to remain as a landmark of a bygone era.<sup>13</sup> Later, in 1980, the building was renovated again by architect Christopher M. Jones. In its present condition, the Slat House has little relationship with the rest of the Royal Poinciana Plaza. The central cupola is its one important feature.



### **The Royal Poinciana Plaza and Shopping Center**

Building Permit # 13457 for the Shopping Plaza on the Royal Poinciana site was issued on April 3, 1957. John L. Volk is listed as the architect of record with contractors Wiggs & Maale, and Mack Richie, engineer. The permit estimates that the cost will be \$640,000 for 67, 853 square

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<sup>12</sup> Town of Palm Beach Building Permit # 10954, April 12, 1954, on file at the Town of Palm Beach.

<sup>13</sup>Phil Robertson, "Old Theater to Be Renovated," Palm Beach Daily News, November 3, 1974.

feet of building space.<sup>14</sup> Constructed in a low horizontal form in the Regency style, the shopping plaza was meant to be pedestrian in scale and connected to the Playhouse on a visual east-west axis with central gardens between. Again in John Volk's own words he discusses the importance of a pedestrian friendly atmosphere:

*Covered porticos lead from the perimeter parking areas through the terrace buildings to the Octagonal Garden in the center of the mall where shoppers can dine al fresco at canopied tables. Covered loggias run the full length of the terraces on either side of the mall with octagonal and circular pavilions spaced at intervals, and palatial colonnades terminating the loggias at the east and west ends of the terrace. Patrons can therefore visit the various salons along the mall without concern for inclement weather.*<sup>15</sup>



Polished black and white terrazzo flooring enhances the covered walkways at the Shopping Plaza.

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<sup>14</sup>Town of Palm Beach Building Permit # 13457, April 3, 1957, on file at the Town of Palm Beach.

<sup>15</sup> John L. Volk, "The Royal Poinciana Plaza." Original manuscript on file at the Volk archives, Palm Beach, Florida. See also John L. Volk, John L. Volk, Palm Beach Architect, compiled by Lillian Jane Volk, Lory Armstrong Volk, and William Dale Waters. (Palm Beach: 2001) p.206.