“A work of architecture is first of all an instrument of living.”

– William H. Pierson Jr.

“AN ENCHANTED CASTLE” is Francois Mignon’s childhood remembrance of Casa Feliz, the 1933 architectural masterwork of James Gamble Rogers II. Growing up in Winter Park, Mignon wished to play in the castle and as a grown man he wanted to live in his childhood dream – and in a way he does. Mignon is a volunteer guide at the restored Mediterranean Revival house on Sunday afternoons when it’s open to the public. Knowledgeable and passionate, he tells visitors how, in 2001 – with the house just hours from annihilation – the citizens of Winter Park rose in a communal chorus raising $1.2 million to complete a heroic architectural rescue. The house was moved to its present location and restored its 20th-century splendor. Why the uprising? Simply put, its designer, James Gamble Rogers II, was more than any other single person, he was the man who made Winter Park. Rogers created the city’s unique visual style, and the enchanting house is emblematic of the stewardship of Winter Park’s citizens and their high regard for his work. • James Gamble Rogers II and Winter Park were well suited for one another. Unlike George Merrick of Coral Gables or Addison Mizner of Palm Beach, Rogers never aspired to build an entire city. He understood the tenor of Winter Park and added, house by house, to the richness of the community. The consummate architect, never self-indulgent, his work brimmed with verve as he labored to build elegant and enduring homes. • The architecture Gamble Rogers created during his 60-year career defined the city’s style and added materially to its charm.
Founding of a City

Winter Park, in the good company of Key West, St. Augustine, Palm Beach and Miami Beach, is esteemed as a place of charm, a "real city" where architectural layers subtly reveal past history. But how did this "wilderness of pines," bereft of seashore, take its place alongside the seaside resort cities? Winter Park is the self-proclaimed "city of homes." It is also a city of good design.

The city came of age at the apex of the City Beautiful movement that swept the nation in the first quarter of the 20th century. But the city's nexus occurred decades earlier with the arrival of developers Oliver Chapman and Loring Chase, who received their first land deed in July of 1881. They immediately surveyed and plotted the town they named Winter Park. They understood the makings of a city. Chase, a realtor from Chicago, had watched the planning and building of Riverside, Illinois, in 1868 by a group of Chicago investors. The Riverside Development Company hired Frederick Law Olmstead and Cal- vin Vaux, designers of New York's Central Park, to plan a city in a park-like setting on the banks of the Des Plaines River. The success of Riverside was not lost on Chase, who believed that Winter Park, whose design is strikingly similar to Riverside's in philosophy and plan, would succeed.

The establishment of Rollins College proved to be an incalculable boost for the town and laid the foundation for educational opportunities and a cultural base for the community.

Gamble Rogers arrives in Winter Park

Gamble Rogers II (1901-1990) came to Winter Park by way of Chicago, the city of his birth and Daytona Beach, the city of his adolescence. His namesake and uncle, James Gamble Rogers, was a noted architect who designed many landmark buildings, including Sloan-Kettering hospital in New York, the Butler Library for Columbia University and more than a dozen buildings at Yale. Rogers' father, John, also an architect, moved the family to Florida from Chicago when Rogers was 15. After graduating from Daytona Beach High School, he enrolled at Dartmouth College, but withdrew in 1924 to enter the family business as his father's health deteriorated. Gamble Rogers completed a two-year apprenticeship in his father's architectural office in 1926. Between the time he left Daytona Beach and his tenure in Winter Park, he purchased designed and built a house with his own hands in Allendale, a
CASA FELIZ
The heritage of the Mediterranean Revival is evident in the courtyard at Casa Feliz, with its colorful, patterned wall reminiscent of Moorish style and the terracotta brick walls.

BARBOUR APARTMENTS
One of the hallmarks of Roy Barbour’s style was the deliberate aging of the structure, such as the “snack” in this courtyard revealing brickwork beneath smooth plaster. Rogers may have been influenced by his uncle and mentor, who was known to throw acid on the sides of his buildings to make them look old and weathered.
small community in Volusia County. His son, architect Jack Rogers, principal of Rogers, Lovelock and Fritz (RLF) Architects, Winter Park, explained that his father didn’t want to open the Winter Park office until he had accomplished a “design and build.” Gamble Rogers, age 27, relocated to Winter Park in 1928 to open a branch of his father’s architectural office. Undoubtedly, the city was chosen because they felt there was architectural work available and because Gamble Rogers thought it would be “an awfully nice place to live,” with professional, cultural and personal possibilities for a young, ambitious man.

THE HOUSES OF WINTER PARK

Although Gamble Rogers was an accomplished architect and builder, he did not have formal architectural training at a university. In 1933, he passed the Florida licensing exam, but he would design and have architects in the office sign off on his blueprints. His first projects were cottages, many in the style he considered most romantic, French Provincial.

In 1939, he built a cottage for his wife, Evelyn, and himself on the newly platted Isle of Sicily. Named “Four Winds,” the house (since demolished) showcased his skills in design, craftsmanship and construction and led to the commission of the Barbour House, Casa Feliz, is Rogers’ masterpiece, but he built elegant Winter Park homes in the style for the Plant, Noyes, Shippen, Holt and McBlaster families.

Historians recognize 1917’s El Jardín (now Carrollton School) in Miami, by architect Richard Kiehnel, as the first Mediterranean Revival building in Florida, followed by Addison Mizner’s Palm Beach Everglades Club in 1918. Clinging tenuously to its St. Augustine Spanish roots, the style is an inventive mixture of Spanish, Venetian and Moorish with an occasional injection of Renaissance and Gothic thrown in, according to Beth Dunlop, architectural writer and critic. It imparted a sense of place, past history, graciousness and civilization in the still relatively new Florida frontier. Evocative and Old Worldly, it effortlessly merges with the Florida landscape of palms and tropical vegetation. The word “revival” is a misnomer, since the style doesn’t exist as such in the Mediterranean region; it was wholly invented in Florida. Dunlop considers the style the only architecture that truly belongs to the state.

Gamble Rogers made his new homes look old by coloring and cracking plaster and by creating sags in the rooflines of the houses, to make them appear as if centuries had settled them into the earth and they were now immovable. Unfortunately that sense of permanence proved illusory since many Gamble Rogers houses have been torn down.

DISAPPEARING LEGACY

Winter Park recently earned a dubious honor: The National Trust for Historic Preservation placed the city on its 2008 list of the 50 Most Endangered Communities in the United States due to teardowns—the practice of purchasing and demolishing existing houses to replace them with newer, much larger houses. Large, out-of-scale designs replacing historic or modest houses have become all too frequent in places such as Winter Park as new construction of “suburban” scale is placed on urban lots in intimate neighborhoods. Often built in the Mediterranean Revival style, “mini-castles” are wedged into communities of homes, altering their character. The Neo-Mediterranean Revival trend may or may not be sustainable in a world of energy challenges, but these homes have already damaged Winter Park neighborhoods.

A good neighborhood is a dialogue, and in Winter Park, it has traditionally been about scale and community. The dialogue is rougher today, much more contentious.

Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, co-founder of New Urbanism, once remarked: “With every building you build, you build a city.” Change in architectural scale is often inestimable, one building at a time, eroding the traditional proportions of the city. Cities are complex organisms, but they are also fragile. Winter Park is a resilient city, one that has faced housing booms and busts, citrus freezes and economic downturns, but the good bones of the city have held steadfast. One can only hope that the 2013 National Trust survey will be missing at least one name—the City of Winter Park.
Hamilton Holt, the newly inaugurated President of Rollins College, chose Mediterranean Revival as the signature style for the campus, and he initiated a building campaign in 1927. The College hired Richard Kiehnel, the acknowledged expert in this style. Kiehnel was in Winter Park as early as 1929, having been given the commission for Rollins Hall and again in 1931 to design the Annie Russell Theatre.

Gamble Rogers’ architectural firm was hired by the Miami architect to provide on-site services for the theater at about the same time work was beginning on Casa Feliz. It was an association of trust: Gamble Rogers was the professional on the ground for Kiehnel who was 250 miles away in Miami. Although the relationship between Kiehnel and Gamble Rogers has not been thoroughly documented, it’s quite possible that Kiehnel, 31 years senior to Gamble Rogers and master of the Mediterranean Revival, may have been a mentor. There was certainly a sharing of ideas and techniques, strengthening the vocabulary of the style and cementing Gamble Rogers’ reputation as the premier architect of Mediterranean Revival houses in Central Florida.

Celebration architect Geoffrey Mouen was guest lecturer recently at a Winter Park symposium: “Florida’s Mediterranean Revival & The Architecture of James Gamble Rogers II.” Mouen describes Gamble Rogers as a classicist, using time-tested architectural styles. According to Mouen, “Rogers evokes a rich Mediterranean background and evokes the house equal weight and attention. An intimate understanding of the site and architectural style coupled with the highest standards of craftsmanship made for houses that have endured the test of time.”

Although he was partial to the French Provincial style – the architecture that he chose for his house of Sicily home – he built in many styles: Modern, International, Colonial Revival, Tudor and wood-frame shingle cottages were built by Rogers throughout Central Florida and in other states from 1929-1942. But it is the Mediterranean Revival homes that are the most acclaimed.

Rogers suspended his architectural practice in 1942, accepting a Civil Service position as a project design-control engineer during World War II. Upon his return, financial necessity turned his attention to the design of commercial and civic buildings, including the Florida Supreme Court building in Tallahassee and the Ohlin Library, Rollins College. The prolific era of design and home construction was over.

Jack Rogers relates that his father enjoyed most the work he did during the Depression. He took one or two projects at a time so he could concentrate and spend time on each house. His son estimates that Gamble Rogers worked on some 250 residential projects in his career.

But like clockwork, no matter how busy he was professionally, every Wednesday afternoon he would race sailboats on Lake Maitland.

James Gamble Rogers II bequeathed an extraordinary architectural legacy to the City of Winter Park – houses of superb design completed with expert craftsmanship. Understanding the relationship between man and building, he created a body of vital architecture that is relevant today: James Gamble Rogers II defined an era of home building and in doing so left an indelible imprint on Winter Park.

Memorable architecture has the power to become a marker in our lives. How often have we anticipated seeing a certain building that evokes personal, intimate memories? Architecture that is part of our everyday life has the ability to inspire, exalt and, when endangered, to cause anguish. Hopefully, Casa Feliz will continue be of value to, and valued by, the community that saved it and will inspire generations of children to dream of Enchanted Castles.

For more information on the work of Gamble Rogers, check out The Architecture of James Gamble Rogers II and Winter Park, Patrick W. McClane and Debra A. McClane, University Press of Florida, 2004; or visit the Casa Feliz website, casafeliz.us.

Winter Park Topics was published seasonally from 1934 to 1954 and is an excellent and interesting source about the social and cultural life of Winter Park.