# Venice: Exemplar of the American Renaissance

By Dr. Bruce Stephenson

John Nolen's plan for Venice, Florida marks a high point of the American Renaissance, a generational effort to mold an unprecedented prosperity into a new urban civilization. The movement took root in the 1880s and died out with the Depression, "the last full flourish of the Renaissance that had began in Italy in the fifteenth century," Henry Hope Reed writes.[i] Nolen (1869-1937), who earned degrees from the University of Pennsylvania and Harvard, only came to city planning after studying Italian Renaissance painting and "civic art" at Munich University. In 1905 he opened an office in Cambridge, Massachusetts and, in 1925, he stood at the vanguard of the city planning profession. He had a list of prototype projects, but Florida held his focus. With city planning "progress in civic development in Florida will be much more rapid and thorough than in the other commonwealths," he proclaimed. Venice was Nolen's test case and the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers (BLE) was his client.

In Nolen's hands, a city plan was an art form where "nature led the way." Stretching across 22,000 acres, Venice would be a new type of community where a blend of wilderness preserves, agriculture, and urbanism would sustain the landscape. In the hinterland, the Myakka River's floodplains were preserved with higher elevations slated for cultivation. Parkways encased the Myakka's tributaries and ran to the Gulf of Mexico to form the city's boundaries. A boulevard centered the three block commercial core. Where the Gulf of Mexico came into view, the boulevard broadened into a parkway that terminated at a linear beachfront park that preserved the dune system.

Nolen broke new ground improvising classical forms to elevate the modern mind. An amphitheater had the Gulf of Mexico as a backdrop, lush native landscape lined civic spaces, and Mediterranean Revival architecture met the challenge of the hot, humid climate. With their secluded gardens, iron gates and grills, open balconies, and hand painted tiles, the more elaborate homes and hotels recalled the art of a golden past to moderns enjoys leisure on a new scale.

Industry also had a place in Venice. Near the railway terminus land was allocated to process and ship agricultural products grown in the region. The Edgewood District, a working class neighborhood with smaller lots and requisite amenities, was sited nearby. Integrating industrial agriculture, active leisure, and tourism, "Venice would be a place where the ordinary man could have a chance to get all that the rich have ever been able to get out of Florida," the BLE announced in the thousands of brochures given to potential investors.

Ordinary men had a place in Venice, provided they were white. Deed restrictions prevented the sale or renting of property to anyone who was not Caucasian. Given this restriction, Nolen designed Harem Village, a 230-acre neighborhood patterned on Edgewood, for blacks.

A foundation was laid, but the Depression ended the American Renaissance and the hopes Nolen and the BLE had for Venice. In 2015, an urban renaissance is underway. Sustainability and resilience are the new watchwords. Yet, as in Nolen's day, mixed use development, pedestrian orientation, native landscaping, and local agriculture are keys. History may not repeat itself, but its rhythms are replayed and our challenge is to craft the principles of the past into plans for the future.

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[i] Henry Hope Reed, "Forward," in Geoffrey Scott, *The Architecture of Humanism* (New York: W.W. Norton: 1990), xiii.