

JOHN NOLEN GENERAL PLAN FOR THE CITY OF VENICE

The General Plan for Venice, Florida, as drafted by City Planner John Nolen in 1926, shows a community situated on the shores of the Gulf of Mexico in the southern portion of Sarasota County. The northern edge of the planned area was Venice Bay, known today as Roberts Bay. The Plan extended several miles to the east, where agricultural uses dominated. The southern edge of the Plan was where the airport is now located.

The estimated land area of the City Plan encompassed 3.77 square miles. The Venice Plan was comprehensive in scope. Through urban design, it provided for all areas of life, including residential, work, and play areas. Agricultural areas were planned to provide food for the residents. Much of the Plan's original design was built and forms the nucleus of contemporary Venice.

The Plan for Venice was comprehensive, designed for gradual implementation. Local plat books indicate the gradual, phased development. Land uses in the plan were defined in zones. These land uses are consistent with the current land use patterns and probably have been complied with both formally and informally since the beginning of the development.

Urban Design

The unifying component of the Plan is the street system, which shapes the City today. Venice Avenue is the major east-west arterial, extending from the public beach on the Gulf to the eastern extremity of the City. The western portion of this landscaped boulevard is a promenade with a Gulf vista.

According to the April 10, 1926, issue of *This Week in Venice*, Venice Avenue cost \$250,000 to construct. Its park-like median was landscaped by Prentiss French. The boulevard is 120 feet wide in the business section and 200 feet wide in the residential section. At the intersection of Venice Avenue and Park Boulevard, a 50 foot tall fountain was planned.

The eastern portion of Venice Avenue, from Harbor Drive to Tamiami Trail, is the heart of the central business district. Four major hotels were constructed on Venice Avenue near businesses. Three of the hotels have survived, and two have been renovated for new uses.

The western portion of Venice Avenue is primarily residential. It includes three Northern Italian mansions built during the 1926–27 development period at 605, 613, and 625 Venice Avenue West. The location of these elaborate homes indicates the status and prestige conveyed by living on the promenade between the water and downtown. The homes are well maintained and fully intact, including outbuildings.

Venice Avenue terminates at the Esplanade, a broad road paralleling the public beach along the Gulf of Mexico. Today modern highrises line the Esplanade. In the original Plan, this water frontage was reserved for public use rather than residential, showing a preference for constructing dwellings inland.

The major north-south routes of the urban design are The Rialto (part of which is today's Tamiami Trail) and the connector streets of Nokomis, Riviera, Nassau, and Harbor Drive. The southern extent of the planned street system was Canaletto Drive (just north of Deer Town Gully, part of which is today's The Corso), intended to connect the Gulf of Mexico to the Golf Course.

In addition to a street system serving the core of the community, a system of rural roads was planned to provide access to the Venice farms, east of the City. Extensive agricultural production was planned, including a dairy. Portions of the farms were operated during the development period.

Another system of streets was planned for two suburban residential neighborhoods east of the urban core area. Edgewood was one such subdivision that was platted and built. Myrtle and Groveland Streets were the most extensively developed. The other subdivision was the Colored Residential Area which, while planned, never came to fruition.

Public Facilities

The Plan called for public facilities along the beach, including a bathing casino and amphitheater, north of Venice Avenue, a boardwalk, shelters, and automobile parking. The bathing casino was constructed, but was subsequently torn down due to hurricane damage. Today a contemporary structure provides a public beach pavilion at the end of Venice Avenue. The Plan showed a sense of vision by providing for automobile parking at many of the larger public use facilities such as the bathing casino and the country club.

The residential areas north and south of Venice Avenue West are laid out in a dramatic plan of concentric semicircular streets that are the heart of the Gulf View Section, the area with the most intensive residential development under the Plan. The northern portion, including the streets of Apalachicola, Cadiz, Armada, and Narvaezi, were developed to a lesser extent. Larger lot sizes are found in the Gulf View Section than in other residential areas to the south.

The Venice Train Depot provided passenger accommodations in a building with excellent architectural features. The location required the realignment of the older rail system to accommodate the Plan's requirements for locating the Depot in the industrial sector.

Commercial Uses

The commercial portion of Venice Avenue was developed with two-story buildings concentrated in a three- to four-block area. Banks, general merchandise emporia, and fine shops enjoyed prosperous conditions during the development period, especially with the nearby hotels, which were often filled to capacity.

Industrial Uses

The Nolen Plan provided for an industrial section. This section was developed primarily with plants necessary for the construction of the City. The clay tile factory, mill, and other works were located in this section east of the urban area. A freight depot was planned for the area where the Seaboard Air Line terminal was built. The planned section continues to be an industrial area of today's Venice.

Open Spaces and Parks

The Plan also provided for many open spaces and parks along the wide boulevards and in residential areas. The April 10, 1926, issue of *This Week in Venice* reported that 300 to 400 acres of parks were planned for the City. Plantings would be provided by a 25-acre nursery. No home was more than a block or two from a large park, and all lots fronted streets with planned landscaping or landscaped medians. It is the presence of such green spaces, along with Northern Italian style buildings, that distinguish planned Venice from later development.

The Venice Avenue promenade, as has already been noted, is a wide planted park connecting the City's commercial core to the Gulf. It passes through the City's most elaborate residential area and includes the most visually important portions of the planned open space. Park Boulevard and Harbor Drive are north-south routes with wide planted medians.

Large, field-type parks were also provided for in the Plan, including Venezia and John Nolen (formerly Palmetto Court) Parks. Venezia is a trapezoidal-shaped space framed by the intersecting streets of Venezia Parkway, Nassau, Salerno, and Sorrento. It is lined by large Mediterranean Revival residences built during the 1926–27 development period. Today it is forested with mature Australian pine trees. John Nolen Park differs from Venezia Park because it is not at the intersection of several thoroughfares, but is in the midst of the multifamily residential area designated by Nolen's Plan.

Housing

The provision for a variety of housing options lies at the heart of the Nolen Plan for Venice. The Plan addressed lot sizes, density, income of residents, and architectural style, as implemented by the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers.

Each of those elements, as actualized by the developers, remains in the current land use pattern of Venice.

Venice Company, the real estate branch of the BLE established February 27, 1926, set a price schedule that depicted the values placed on various lots and the intensity of development that would be permitted. When this schedule is transposed on actual land use, it is apparent that the developers closely adhered to the requirements. For example, blocks 36, 37, 40, and 41 permitted multifamily dwellings. By 1927, ten eight-unit apartment buildings had been constructed by W. G. Worrell.

The majority of lots and blocks were reserved for single-family dwellings. The development of Venice bears this out, as it is characterized as a low-density residential community. The Venezia Park neighborhood crystallizes the essence of the Plan, in that many lots were developed in the approved architectural style during the 1926–27 development period.

The Edgewood subdivision differs from the urban core residential neighborhoods. The lots are smaller, and homes are more modest. While many of the frame and stucco structures built during the development period are of the approved Mediterranean Revival style, there are examples of bungalows and frame vernacular construction.

In summary, the Venice Avenue West residential area includes elaborate executive housing; Venezia Park residential area includes medium and large homes in a park setting; Armada Road area includes multifamily housing in a park setting; and Edgewood neighborhood includes low- and moderate-income housing. In addition, many fine examples of Mediterranean Revival architecture are not located within any of the above concentrations, but are significant to the overall character of the City of Venice.

Architecture

The establishment of design controls was the responsibility of the architectural firm Walker and Gillette of New York. They were hired by the City's developers, the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, to supervise construction and to "pass on all building plans for Venice in order that this new City may present a harmonious appearance with respect to type of architecture" (*Venice News*, October 29, 1926). The design theme advocated by the developer was referred to in the 1926–27 development period as "Northern Italian" or "Mediterranean Revival" style.

Widely popular to boom-time Florida, this architectural style brought together many elements, including hip and gable rooftops clad in barrel clay tiles, arched openings, smooth- and rough-cast stucco surfaces, and the use of a variety of

ornamentation techniques such as niches, applied concrete relief designs, embedded glazed tile patterns, and balconies—both genuine and imitation.

Despite the use of a limited number of floor plans and basic house designs, each property was individualized through embellishments. Thus, monotony of design is not present. Commercial properties also adhered to the design controls, including the four large hotels constructed.

The Plan contained carefully platted lots of uniform size and shape, providing a pattern of consistently spaced structures and yards. Structures are centered on lots, with garages and servant quarters on the rear lot line. The building to lot ratio for lot coverage tends to be thirty to forty percent. Commercial structures abut one another in the business core and cover the lot completely.

The structures built during the 1926–27 development of the City are largely one and two stories in height, with the exception of the hotels, which are multiple storied. Most of the commercial buildings are two stories, as are the larger residences. Multifamily structures are most often two-story blocks. The majority of the single-family dwellings are one story in height.

The structures have generally retained their basic integrity. Major alterations include new roofs, window replacement, new stucco, and screening of porches. Awnings, a key design element allowing for shade and cooling in the warm Florida climate, have nearly all been removed. Other than the usual tropical storms and maintenance problems, there are no major threats to Venice's historic structures. Zoning intensification is not an overriding concern in this community, nor is the Nolen urban design threatened by public works projects, such as street relocations.

GLOSSARY

Architrave	1. The part of the composition of the Classical Orders where an upright member meets a horizontal, as in a portal. 2. The decorated interior or exterior surrounds of a window or door at the head and jamb. 3. The beam or lowest division of the entablature, which extends from column to column.
Archivolt	An ornamental molding around an arch corresponding to an architrave.
Arcade	A range of arches supported on pier or columns, and attached or detached from the wall.
Bas Relief	Carving raised above a background plane.
Colonnade	A range of columns, whether attached or separated, supporting an entablature.
Concentric	Having a common center or axis.
Coping	A protective cap, top, or cover of a wall, chimney, or pilaster.
Cornice	The crowning or upper portion of the entablature, also used as the term for any crowning projection.
Crenellated	Having an irregularly wavy or serrate outline.
Curvilinear	Consisting of or bounded by curved lines.
Entablature	Beam member carried by columns containing architrave, frieze, and cornice, supported by a colonnade.
Keystone	The wedge-shaped piece at the crown of an arch that locks the other pieces in place.
Loggia	A gallery behind an open arcade or colonnade.
Medallion	A circular tablet, ornamented with embossed or carved figures or patterns.
Molding	The contour given to projecting members to introduce varieties of outlines in edges or surfaces.
Niche	A cavity in a wall, to receive a statue or other ornament.

Palladian Motif	An arched opening flanked by narrow, square head openings on either side.
Parapet	The portion of a wall above the roof of a building.
Pedestal	A support for column, pilaster, statue, or urn.
Porte cochere	A roofed structure extending from the entrance of a building over an adjacent driveway and sheltering those getting in or out of vehicles.
Portico	The space enclosed within columns and forming a covered ambulatory. A colonnade.
Quoins	Cornerstones at the base of a building often distinguished decoratively for adjacent masonry.
Relief	Carving raised above a background plane, as in bas relief.
Scupper	An opening in the wall of a building through which water can drain from a floor or flat roof.
Trapezoidal	A quadrilateral having only two sides parallel.
Vernacular	Relating to or characteristic of a period, place, or group, especially relating to or being the common building style of a period or place.