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2008 Palladio Awards

PLUS 18 BUYING GUIDES

*Residential Multi-Unit*Winner: *de la Guardia Victoria Architects & Urbanists, Inc.*

Project: Almeria Row, Coral Gables, FL

Architect: de la Guardia Victoria Architects & Urbanists, Inc., Coral Gables, FL; Teofilo Victoria, principal; María de la Guardia, principal; Elizabeth Pereiro, project manager

General Contractor: Torre Development Group, Inc., Coral Gables, FL

Developer: Fernando Menoyo, Coral Gables, FL

Revisiting Downtown

At the fringe of downtown Coral Gables, FL, just southwest of the city's famed "Miracle Mile," is the intersection of Almeria Avenue and Cardena Street. Stretching 125 ft. east of the intersection along the north side of Almeria is a rare sight so near a U.S. downtown: a row of recently completed townhouses. The five completed units are the first phase of Almeria Row, which will eventually grow to include 10 Classically detailed, four-bedroom, three-and-a-half-bathroom units with central courtyards and two-car garages at the rear. The project, a collaboration between Coral Gables-based de la Guardia Victoria Architects & Urbanists, Inc. (DLGV), and local developer Fernando Menoyo, proves that there is a viable alternative to mid- and high-rise apartment buildings in areas between urban centers and neighborhoods of low-density, single-family residences.

A prime example of the City Beautiful movement, Coral Gables was master-planned by George Merrick and incorporated in 1925. It is best known for its signature Mediterranean Revival architecture; notable landmarks include the Biltmore Hotel, DeSoto Fountain and, just a few blocks from Almeria Row, the Venetian Pool. Townhouses were also a part of Merrick's original plan; its 2,500-sq.-ft. (roughly 25 ft. wide by 100 ft. deep) minimum lot size for single residential units was conducive to the typology. Today, in Coral Gables and throughout the U.S., the minimum lot size for a single residential unit is 5,000 sq.ft. — typically a 50-ft.-wide-by-100-ft.-deep parcel.

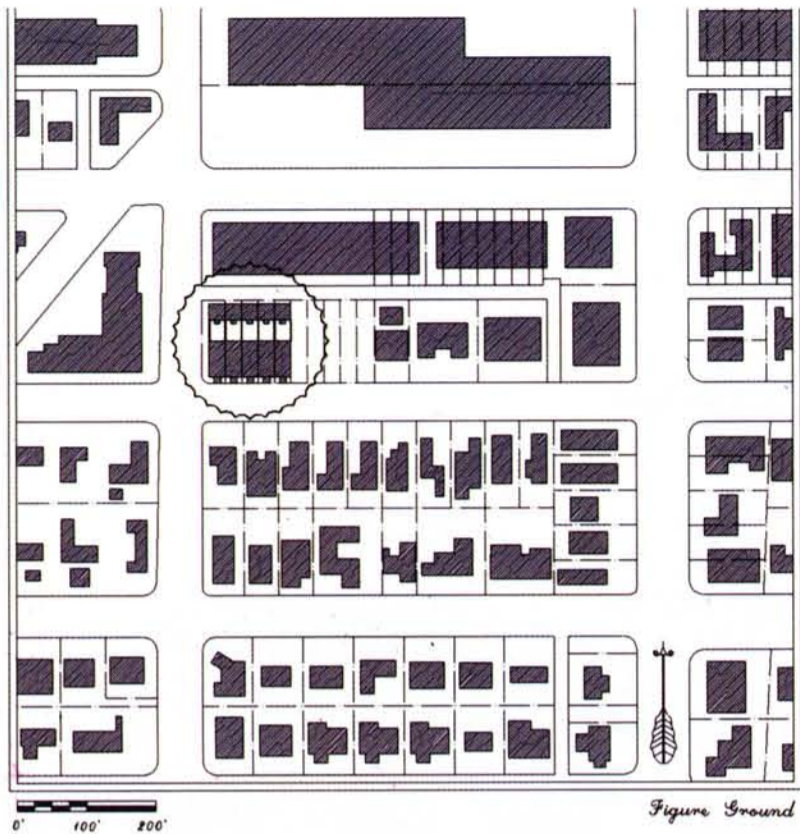
When DLGV and Menoyo discussed options for developing Almeria Avenue in 2004, the townhouse typology kept emerging for several reasons: for the developer, it would be an improvement over the existing two-story apartment buildings on the site and an attractive multi-family housing option close to downtown; in consideration of the homeowners on the south side of Almeria Avenue, it would provide a transition between their single-family residences and the high-rise apartment buildings a block to the north; and for the architects, it would represent a return to a typology that many in the field have been pushing for some time in the hopes of reviving American downtowns and providing a sustainable alternative to suburban living.

At DLGV, the project was orchestrated by principal Teofilo Victoria (also an associate professor and the director of graduate studies at the nearby University of Miami School of Architecture), his wife, principal María de la Guardia, and project manager Elizabeth Pereiro. "We were proposing going back to the original plan and offering another product, which would required half the amount of land," says Victoria. "We believed that we were working with Merrick's original ideas about the city."

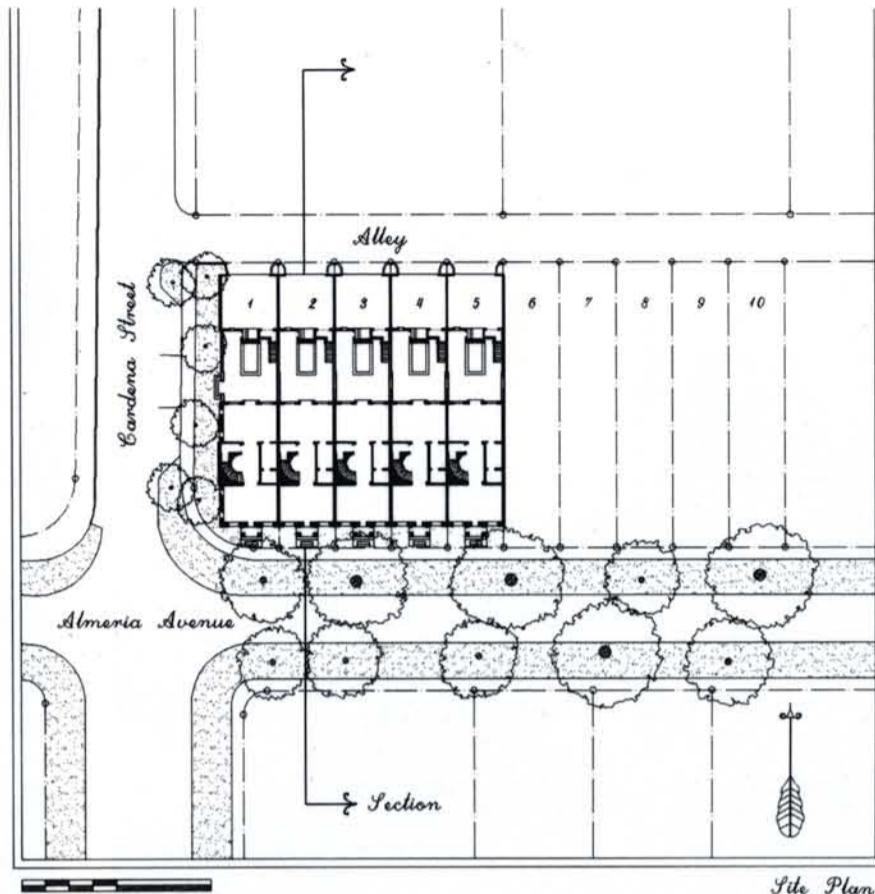
"For years and years, architects in Coral Gables, as well as other American cities, have been trying to recover this building type, which had been prevalent in American cities throughout history, especially in Chicago, New York City and Boston. In this case, because the city wanted to avoid the higher density of high-rise apartment buildings, and because this idea was shared by the developer and the architects, the townhouse typology all of a sudden found favor."



The first phase of Almeria Row, a new townhouse development in Coral Gables, FL, includes five Classically detailed, single-family units designed by Coral Gables-based de la Guardia Victoria Architects & Urbanists, Inc. All photos: Carlos Ignacio Morales



The townhouses of Almeria Row (circled) sit on 23-ft.-wide-by-120-ft.-deep lots between low-density, single-family residences to the south and high-rise apartment buildings to the north; halving the five existing parcels to create 10 townhouse-friendly parcels required the approval of the Coral Gables City Commission. All plans: courtesy of de la Guardia Victoria Architects & Urbanists, Inc.



The five completed townhouse units feature 23-ft.-wide-by-53-ft.-deep main houses along Almeria Avenue, 23x30-ft. central courtyards and 23x23-ft. rear garages opening on a back alley.

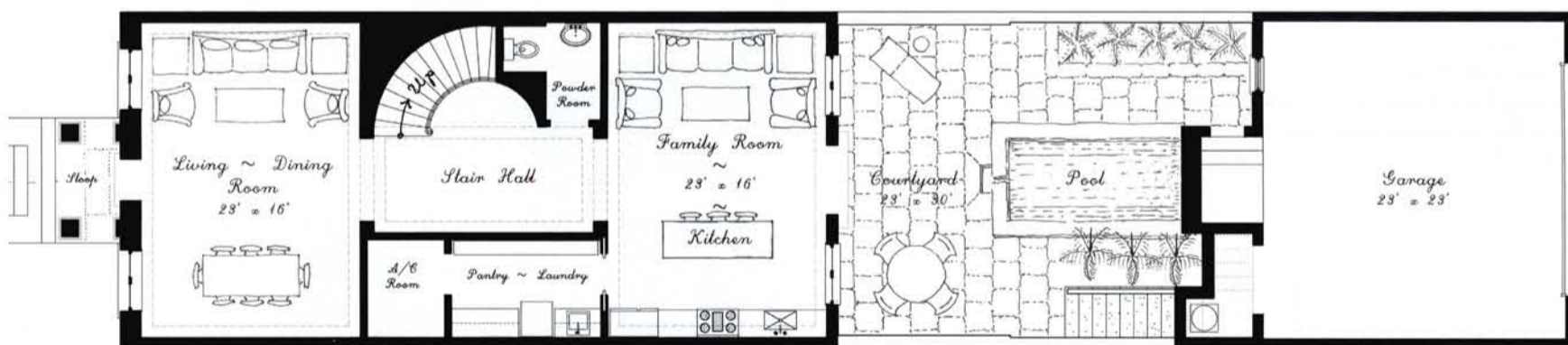
Almeria Row is located in a zoning frontier. According to the City of Coral Gables Planning Department, the site itself is designated for low-density, multi-family residential use; the 5,000-sq.-ft. lots on the south side of the street are designated for low-density, single-family residential use; and the block to the north is designated for medium-density, multi-family residential use. Prior to the development of Almeria Row, the five 5,000-sq.-ft. lots of the site were occupied by three two-story apartment buildings; under the existing land-use regulations in Coral Gables, it could have accommodated an apartment building with up to 17 units. DLGV's proposal, which required a change to the minimum-size-parcel zoning regulation to halve the lots and create ten 23-ft.-wide-by-120-ft.-deep townhouse-friendly parcels, was approved by the Coral Gables City Commission in 2005.

The design of the townhouses themselves drew on a variety of precedents. DLGV studied the work of architects such as Mott B. Schmidt, who designed French Village City, one of the six period-revival villages in Coral Gables, and whose work in New York City included townhouses, apartments and, perhaps most notably, the Wagner Wing at Gracie Mansion.

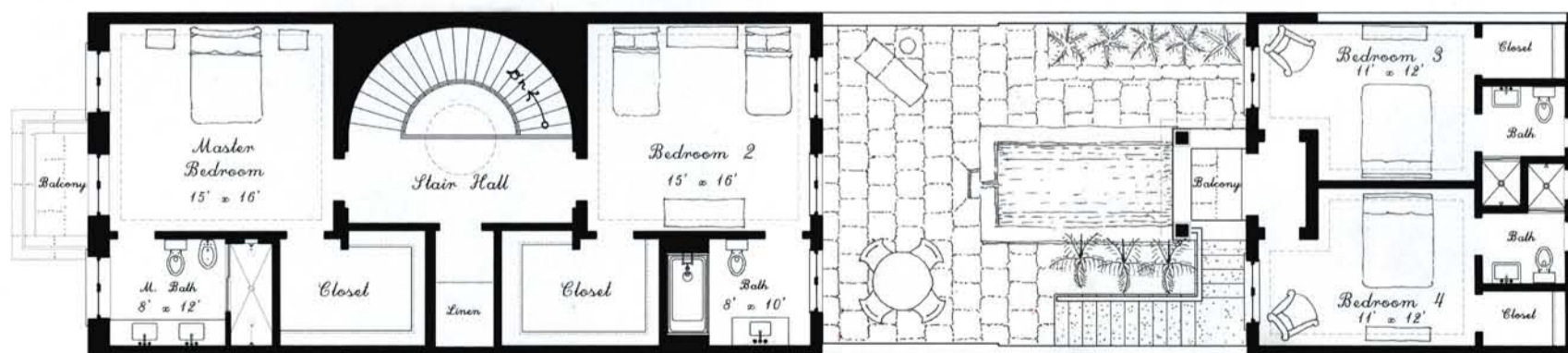
Victoria notes that because of the geography and climate of south Florida, Almeria Row could not be built like the classic townhouses of Chicago, New York City or Boston. "Something had to be different in order for them to work – it's a question of light and ventilation," he says. "So we combined the Anglo-Saxon model that we know from American cities with a Caribbean/Spanish model, which eventually took us to Andalusia, Spain, where there is a townhouse-like house that has a small courtyard. The courtyard makes all the difference for that climate, because it offers ventilation and it allows for light to be introduced to the middle of the building. If the building gets too deep without direct light, it begins to get very dark and uncomfortable."

"We thought that the mixture was very much in keeping with Merrick's own ideas," continues Victoria. "In fact, he was awarded a medal by King Alfonso XIII in Spain for his commitment to the propagation of Spanish architecture."

In each of the five completed units of Almeria Row, central courtyards separate the main houses from the rear garages. The 23x53-ft. main houses feature living/dining rooms separated from family rooms/kitchens by



First Floor Plan



Second Floor Plan

The first floors of the main houses feature living/dining rooms and family rooms/kitchens separated by central stair halls; the family rooms/kitchens open on the courtyards. The second floors of the main houses include two bedrooms; two more bedrooms occupy the second floors of the two-car garages.



Above and right: The central courtyards, which separate the main houses from the rear garage structures, include small pools and provide the houses with light and ventilation.



central stair halls on the first floors and two bedrooms on the second floors. The family rooms/kitchens open on 23x30-ft. courtyards, which include small pools. The 23x23-ft. rear two-car garages include two additional bedrooms and bathrooms on the second floors, which are accessed from the courtyards by sets of stairs. The garages are accessed by a rear alley, which means the front of the townhouses remain free of automobiles. "The units are very open, very bright and very comfortable," says Victoria. "They are very simple, they are sparse and they are not ostentatious. The detailing is very conventional without being cheap or ordinary."

The front façade of Almeria Row features Classical detailing – porticoes, architraves, window surrounds, lintels and sills – realized in Coralina stone from the Dominican Republic that was supplied by the Pan American Marble and Stone Company of Miami. "Geologically, the Florida peninsula shares much in common with the Caribbean, primarily in the oolitic limestone formations," says Victoria. "If you dig a little bit here in Coral Gables, you're going to find this oolitic limestone. But it happens in different densities – it consolidates at different rates in different parts of the Caribbean. So for some time now, we have been importing stone from the Dominican Republic, where you can find the same oolitic limestone as we have here, only denser. So it can be carved much better – in fact it can be machine cut. We were able to cut Classical profiles in the Tuscan order pretty accurately."

Typical of the region vernacular, the structures themselves were constructed of concrete block finished with stucco. At the lower levels, grains of oolitic limestone were mixed with the stucco to give it a different density and a sparkle.

In a city that was designed for the automobile, and works from that point of view exclusively, Victoria notes that the idea of living closer to

downtown is a step toward living more sustainably. "One of the problems that we have in south Florida is that you need a car to go get a gallon of milk – if you don't have a car, you can starve to death," he jokes. "We don't have anything against cars; we just don't think they should overwhelm us. People are fed up with traveling an hour or an hour and a half every day to work. As in so many other American cities, the real estate that has been spared from devaluation is real estate that is close to American downtowns. So we think that people will want this rather than the previous options."

In this sense, Victoria hopes that Almeria Row, and townhouse projects like it, can provide an answer for a nation searching for less wasteful ways of living. While it is the product of a rare instance where a city, its citizens, a developer and an architect were able to find common ground, it soon may not be the only new townhouse in Coral Gables. "The developer has other properties and has plans to build other townhouses, so this is a housing type that we hope to develop further." – Will Holloway



The interior spaces are simply detailed and bright; the open family rooms/kitchens spill out into the courtyards.



Each townhouse unit has four bedrooms and three-and-a-half bathrooms – providing the amount of space normally associated with suburban single-family residences within close proximity to downtown Coral Gables.