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# Paradise imperiled: A proposed development (11 houses on the land next door) raises fears for David Fairchild's Kampong

Posted on Sun, Feb. 17, 2008 email print reprint AIM del.icio.us Digg

BY BETH DUNLOP
SPECIAL TO THE MIAMI HERALD

"Was there anyone who could resist the lure of Paradise?" David Fairchild asked after he first laid eyes on the land that was to become The Kampong. ``And this was a paradise of plants, not one of oriental divans and swimming pools and cushions and dancing girls."

That was 92 years ago, just before the Fairchild family moved to its new home on the ridge in Coconut Grove. Fairchild had come alone to the site where, he wrote, ``I sat for a long time gazing out to sea, and at the beach of coral and limestone and the low land back of it which was just beginning to be covered with all sorts of wild vegetation."

CLAUDIA URIBE TOURI

Architect Max Strang designed the new open-air education pavilion that replaces a former swimming pool and enclosed screened porch.

## STILL PARADISE

The Fairchild family did make this place their tropical paradise, and that description is still true today, with the Kampong part of the National Tropical Botanical Garden. Lovingly tended and carefully cultivated, the estate has a highly regarded new director in botanist David Lee and a still-involved (and highly regarded) former director in Larry Schokman. It also has a terrific new building, architect Max Strang's sensitive and eloquent new open-air education pavilion that replaces a former swimming pool and enclosed screened porch.

Strang's pavilion is at once open and sheltering, spacious and intimate. The structure is Miami oolitic stone and Ipe wood, and the pavilion speaks to the vernacular design of The Kampong (the gate was a great inspiration). The floors are simple, and inspiringly elegant, painted concrete, with keystone as the stage's flooring and backdrop. The ceiling is coffered wood with beams painted red in homage to the Asian-inspired architecture of the house the Fairchilds built in 1928.

Technically the pavilion's roof is a rainwater catchment system that will send 20,000 gallons of water into two enormous tanks buried in the ground. Functionally, it provides a second gathering space, a roof deck with keystone paving and long, grand views over the sloping lawn, rare trees and mangroves out to the bay.

One might think that The Kampong would be sitting secure these days, but that is far from the case. It is threatened by development. The threat is called Grove Estates, and it is headed to the Miami City Commission. It is a proposal for 11 palatial houses. That number is far below what could be built on the site (under the city of Miami's Alice-in-Wonderland zoning of excess), but the current plan calls for the houses to back right into The Kampong.

On the surface, this issue may seem simple, too subtle even. But it is actually no minor threat, rather a proposal that might upset the sanctity of the garden and jeopardize its ecological balance. The land for the future Grove Estates (it is in the ownership of arts patron Ella Cisneros) lies within one of Miami's earliest environmental-protection districts. It is a linear plot running from Main Highway to Biscayne Bay, and, as one might expect, filled with old trees.

The plans that have aired before Miami's Planning Board (where the project was turned down) and Historic and Environmental Protection Board (where the discussion was continued to next month) show a road to the south and houses cheek-on-jowl with The Kampong. Think of it: backyards with green lawns (need chemicals) and swimming pools (need chemicals) and "hardscape terraces" (causing storm water runoff). Think of the poolside parties complete with music while, just feet away, a gathering of horticultural

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**A RATIONAL SOLUTION**

There's an easy, rational solution to this. Switch the plan so that the road runs along The Kampong and creates a buffer (and a greater setback than the 20 feet required by the zoning). Good fences don't always good neighbors make, but sometimes they help.

The current configuration of road and houses, Lee points out, would require "mitigating" (the euphemism for removing big trees and replacing them, generally with smaller ones) 27 trees and moving 37 others -- a dire change to the tree canopy on the site and a shift in the ecological balance of the entire neighborhood, not to forget the more basic issue of the loss of historic tree cover.

A road to the north of the site would require removing just one tree, Lee says, and moving three palms. It would allow for the creation of a good, green buffer between the two sites. It might persuade home buyers to respect the tree canopy and put less than the typical (in the plans) 18,000-square-foot house under roof and instead build something that makes the most of the landscape and the climate, the way The Kampong -- and so many of the early, important houses in the Grove -- did.

The Kampong is really important -- to us in Miami and to the country. As the only mainland member of the congressionally chartered National Tropical Botanical Garden (the other four gardens are in Hawaii), it is a true treasure, a horticultural study center of international importance. It is home to hundreds of rare horticultural species. As the former home of David Fairchild, who as a plant explorer in the early 20th century brought us many of the species we take for granted today, it has a resounding historic role.

The implications of a too-close development are profound, and the ramifications far reaching. The natural world that we so long took for granted is ever-more fragile, and we are learning, if almost too late, of the many complex forces that threaten it. The equation doesn't seem difficult, nor does the solution.

Generations ago, Fairchild wrote that on this early visit to his future home he experienced "a cosmic feeling of happiness." He lived there and enhanced the land, and ultimately it became a botanical preserve that we all can experience and where scholars can continue to learn. Generations hence, we can look back and know that we fulfilled Fairchild's dream and kept it safe. Or we can wonder where we went wrong.



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