

OPA-LOCKA

A Feast of Shapes and Colors

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Quite often a photographer feels gifted after a day of making images. That happens because what they end up photographing is, more often than not, a pleasant surprise rather than planned. Most

photographers come to Florida to make images of the wading birds, but if they are open to other kinds of possibilities, a visit to an artistic “find” in northwest Miami-Dade County is in order. It is a small city based on the Arabian Nights theme – Opa-Locka.

Not only has Opa-Locka had an unusually interesting history, but also today it has the largest collection of Moorish architecture in the western hemisphere. The array of domes, minarets, and towers painted in beautiful bright colors provided endless compositions for photographers who love the play of light and shadow on arches, doors, and hallways. Photographers who cannot resist making images of architectural design and who happen to be visiting south Florida should not miss Miami’s beautiful glass buildings, but then they must go to Opa-Locka for an unusual treat.

In 1926 Glenn Curtiss, a famous naval aviator, created the town of Opa-Locka around an airport



Community Building Arch



City Hall Tree Shadow



City Hall Side View

of the same name. He built more than 100 buildings in the 1920s. Many of those Moorish buildings exist today and twenty of them are listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The streets in this city of 15,000 people have names such as Saber Lane, Ali Baba Avenue, or Ahmad Street. The city name is a contraction of the Native American name for the area: Opa-tisha-woka-locka. This word means a dry place with trees in the swamp. Many years ago this area would have been part of the Everglades. Glen Curtiss (1878-1930), a New Yorker, was first famous as a bicycle racer, but then he began to build airplanes. In 1909 he established America's first aircraft manufacturing company and personally flew the first seaplane for the U.S. Navy. He retired in the 1920s to build his Arabian city in Miami-Dade County.

Today Opa-Locka is an industrial community of 4.2 square miles. Ninety five percent of the residents are African American or Latin American. However, Opa-Locka has held an Arabian Nights Fantasy Festival every May since the inception of the city. This urban community is a depressed area with high rates of unemployment, poverty, illiteracy, and crime. Opa-Locka airport has its own claim to fame. Amelia Earhart left from here on her trip around the world. The Graf Zeppelin,

the second largest airship ever built, stopped here on its voyages around the world. Much more recently the 9-11 hijackers are thought to have trained at the airport!

Since 2003 the city has seen some turn around in financial stability, cleanliness, and crime prevention. Despite limited resources the city has been the location for several TV and film shoots, e.g. Texas Justice, Bad Boys II, and the award-winning documentary film, Salesman. The area is clean, the people are friendly and helpful, and the public buildings are well cared for and welcoming. Appearances suggest that residents take pride in the uniqueness of their city and respect the unusual architectural style of their buildings. While a new city hall has been built, the old city hall has been preserved as Opa-Locka's major landmark. It is near a park in the center of town. Residents care well for the gardens and landscaping around this fabulous building of curves and domes and minarets.

A new train station has been built next to and in the same Arabian style as the old train station. Commuter trains take people into Miami. The mosaic artwork on all the buildings, especially the train station, is beautiful. The Community Center, Logan Executive Center, the U.S. Post Office, and several other public buildings currently in use are



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Logan Front—Wide angle office building



Train Station new construction

Arabian in style. The complimentary bright colors, the mosaic trim, and the textures of the stucco surfaces are all wonderful photographic subjects from both close and afar.

Opa-Locka can help everyone see the world artistically—in seductive shapes and curves and brilliant shades of color. It is especially wonderful to visit the city on one of Florida’s typically bright sunny days with deep blue skies and a few puffy white clouds. This creates spectacular shadow and light in the corners of building features and under graceful arches. The palm trees are ever present in reality and in the shadows they create on the buildings, in the courtyards, and on the sidewalks.

Opa-Locka suggests that sometimes the beauty of even a depressed community in a crowded urban area can leave an image-maker breathless. Then besides receiving the surprise of a unique place, this realization, too, is a lovely gift. The artistic images photographers make or simply those left only in their minds can remind that the human spirit is never without possibility, hope, and new beginnings. ■

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Community Building Entrance



Community Building Arch to Courtyard



Logan Door—office building entrance