The Architectural Style of Bay Pines VAMC

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The architectural style of the original buildings at Bay Pines VA Medical Center is most often described as “Mediterranean Revival,” “Neo-Baroque,” or—somewhat rarely—“Churrigueresque.” However, with the shortage of similar buildings in the surrounding area and the chronological distance between the facility’s 1933 construction and Baroque’s popularity in the 17th and 18th centuries, it is often wondered how such a style came to be chosen for Bay Pines. This paper is an attempt to first, briefly explain the Baroque and Churrigueresque styles in Spain and Spanish America, second, outline the renewal of Spanish-inspired architecture in North America during the early 20th century, and finally, indicate some of the characteristics in the original buildings which mark Bay Pines as a Spanish Baroque-inspired building.

The Spanish Baroque and Churrigueresque

The Baroque style can be succinctly defined as “a style of artistic expression prevalent especially in the 17th century that is marked by use of complex forms, bold ornamentation, and the juxtaposition of contrasting elements.” But the beauty of these contrasting elements can be traced over centuries, particularly for the Spanish Baroque, through the evolution of design and the input of various cultures living in and interacting with Spain over that time.

Much of the ornamentation of the Spanish Baroque can be traced as far back as the twelfth century, when Moorish and Arabesque design dominated the architectural scene, often referred to as the Mudéjar style. During the time of relative peace between Muslims, Christians, and Jews in Spain—the Convivencia—these Arabic designs were incorporated into synagogues and cathedrals, along with mosques. In fact, even after the Moors left, Christian monarchs kept Moorish and Mudéjar architects to continue to work on the cathedrals. This style incorporated Arabic design traditions, including elaborate and geometric tile work, and ornamental metalwork, and extensive use of brick and wood carvings. Although Arabic architecture generally tried to be impressive through its “symmetry and exact proportion of all detail” rather than from “vast size or immense solidity,” in Spain there was a greater use of size and “a greater variety and richness of ornamentation and colour than is to be found elsewhere.”

At the end of the Spanish Renaissance, the Spanish Baroque began to take hold in the mid-17th century. Initially, heavy influence still came from the Renaissance’s dominant Spanish architect, Juan de Herrera, but at the end of the 17th century, the Churriguera family inspired a revolt against Herrera’s
classic style, primarily through the heavy ornamentation of their altars. The three, José Benito, generally recognized as the head of the family, Joaquín, and Alberto, were the sons of an altarpiece maker from Barcelona, with whom they often worked. Their version of the Baroque style, ultimately given its own term of “churrigueresque,” involves ornamentation covering nearly every surface, most often incorporating sculptures of vegetation and angels. Most Churrigueresque architects and sculptors, aside from José Benito himself, covered the sculpting with stucco decorations.

Due to the unmatched ornamentation of the Churrigueresque, more than even the Rococo style, Churrigueresque has been the subject of criticism throughout history. The Encyclopedia Britannica says the style is characterized by “a disregard of the canons of classic design and the combination of its features, or members, or fragments of them, in the most incongruous and grotesque assemblages conceivable.” Despite this widespread disapproval—some referring to Churrigueresque as a “debased” style—the Churrigueresque dominated in Spain for forty years and found a renewal in the styles of Spanish America and then again in the Mediterranean Revival movement of America.

Spanish Baroque in New Spain

Owing to Spain’s colonization of the New World during the 17th and 18th centuries, the Baroque style dominated major architectural endeavors in New Spain, what is now the southwest United States and Central America. With several modifications on the original style—more extensive use of stucco and Native American influence intermingled with the pre-existing Moorish influence—American Baroque was used primarily in the new Spanish churches of the Americas. Some recurring characteristics of the American Baroque were two towers on either side of the main entrance façade (seen in this photo of the church of Saints Sebastian and Santa Prisca in Taxco), colorful glazed tiles on the façade, and extensive gold leaf ornamentation in the interiors.

Although the San Xavier Mission del Bac is now considered one of the greatest examples of the Spanish Baroque within America, before it became a part of Tucson, Arizona in the 1854 Gadsden Purchase, it was part of New Spain and then independent Mexico. It was constructed between 1783 and 1797 as a Catholic mission and designed by the architect Ignacio Gaona, who designed a similar church in Caborca—although the church in Caborca is often described as less graceful, due to the shorter façade and towers. The front view of San Xavier incorporates two white towers flanking an intricately carved golden-brown façade. The façade is covered with Churrigueresque details—arabesques, floral designs, a shell, and even the coat of arms of St. Francis. But inside the mission, the Churrigueresque style becomes even more apparent. The altar does not appear to have a spot which is not decorated. A portrait sculpture behind the altar is flanked by columns, each covered in bas-relief sculpting and carvings, and the surrounding walls are covered in similar adornments.
Although 18th century construction in New Spain left several similar, albeit generally less elaborate Spanish Baroque structures in the American Southwest, the style would not emerge in its revival as a source of inspiration in American architecture until the very end of the 19th century, and in most places in the beginning of the 20th century, with the beginning of the Mediterranean Revival.

**The Spanish-Mediterranean Revival in the United States**

The official revival of the Spanish styles—both mission and Churrigueresque—in the United States is often dated to the Panama-California Exposition held in San Diego in 1915. The exposition was intended to be an international affair to celebrate the completion of the Panama Canal. It was later replaced as the official United States exposition by San Francisco, but the exposition was still held despite being barred from inviting foreign countries. The Director-General, Colonel David Collier designated Mission and Pueblo Revival as the official architectural style of the exposition, in the hopes of involving the nearby Latin American countries and of providing “a joyful and bucolic answer to the formal and cold Renaissance and Neo-Classical styles then popular among American architects.” However, the selection of Bertram Goodhue, already renowned for his use of neo-Gothic and Byzantine revival styles, as the head architect shifted the focus to the Spanish Baroque architectural style and Churrigueresque detailing.

Goodhue’s most iconic building at the exposition was the California tower, part of the El Prado. The façade to the façade and arch of the Tucson mission, but goes even beyond San Xavier’s Churrigueresque detailing, using it on the tower, extensively decorated with bas-relief carvings and estipite pilasters, characteristic of Churrigueresque buildings in Spain. Also worth noting are the spiraling Solomonic columns framing the main entrance and the scalloped design of the arch around the door.

Meanwhile the Exposition’s Theosophical Headquarters was the only building at the exposition which used solely the clean, simple lines of the Pueblo mission style. A similar form would be utilized in many of the buildings at the Tucson VA Medical Center complex, a source of inspiration for the Bay Pines original buildings, despite their Baroque details.

The Spanish Revival would not last long as the dominant architectural movement of the United States. By the time the California Pacific International Exposition was held in 1935 in the same Balboa Park, the dominant style was the Vernacular Style with Art Deco details. But in the decades framing the exposition, hundreds of Mediterranean Revival structures, combining the Churrigueresque, Spanish Mission, Moorish, and Italian Renaissance styles were constructed, particularly in coastal communities throughout California and Florida, which fit well with the popular notion that “Mediterranean architecture goes best with palms, bamboos and brilliant sunshine.”
The Florida Mediterranean Revival began on the east coast, particularly in 1888 with Franklin Smith’s Casa Monica Hotel (later renamed the Cordova Hotel) and Smith’s private home, the Villa Zorayada in St. Augustine. Both buildings were Moorish- and Spanish Baroque-inspired, the Villa Zorayada being the first Moorish Revival building in St. Augustine. However, the Mediterranean Revival designs that would become characteristic of the Florida east coast were not Smith’s Moorish designs, but the designs of Addison Mizner in Palm Beach and Boca Raton before his bankruptcy in 1926, such as the Everglades Club and El Mirasol.

The Mediterranean Revival soon found its way to the Gulf Coast with the spread of the Florida land boom of the 1920’s. Thanks largely to publicity from Bertha Palmer, a wealthy landowner, rancher, and developer, Sarasota, Florida became a popular winter destination for the wealthy, including, famously, John Ringling and his family. Real estate development tried to follow the success of the resorts in the area with a constant stream of advertising to attract investment in new communities which sought to evoke “the spirit of a carefree, fanciful place” inspired by the exotic Mediterranean. Many of the developments advertised in these propaganda sketches were never completed due to the early end of the land boom in Sarasota, but the buildings that were completed stand as testament to the influence of the style in the area—buildings such as John Ringling’s Cà d’Zan, the Sarasota County Courthouse, and the El Vernona Hotel and Apartments.

The style finally spread to the St. Petersburg area towards the end of Mizner’s success on the east coast and the end of the Sarasota land boom, beginning with the Vinoy Park Hotel in 1925. Three years later, Thomas Rowe’s famous “Pink Lady,” the Don Ce-Sar, was opened on Pass-a-Grille Beach. The Don, despite opening on the cusp of the Great Depression, stayed in business thanks to the continued patronage of the northern wealthy, including the New York Yankees. After Rowe’s death, the hotel fell into disrepair until World War II, when the U.S. Army purchased both the Don Ce-Sar, to be used as a military hospital, and the Vinoy, to be used as a training school. After the war, the Don Ce-Sar became the site of the VA Regional Office until 1967. Each hotel has gone through major renovation projects and remains a remnant of St. Petersburg’s land boom.
Bay Pines VA Medical Center

By the end of 1931, when construction plans and sketches for the Seminole Point Old Soldiers’ Home were revealed, the real estate boom had already ended in Florida, bringing with it an end to the Mediterranean revival boom. In California, the style had already faded at the end of the 1920’s into the designs of Frank Lloyd Wright. The architects for the Veterans Administration, however, announced that they would design the buildings in the style of “true Spanish architecture to blend in with the natural tropical beauty of the site. The architecture will be similar to that used on the soldier home at Tucson, Arizona.”

The Tucson VA hospital, surrounded by other Spanish-inspired buildings, such as the aforementioned San Xavier del Bac, had been designed in a decidedly Spanish mission style. Although the original buildings at Bay Pines draw more heavily from the Baroque, the similarities are apparent when comparing pictures of the two hospitals. The first picture is a picture of from the back of Tucson VAMC after its initial construction. The second picture is Building 20 at Bay Pines VAMC. The third picture is a present-day photo from the front of Tucson VAMC. The fourth photo is a picture of the back wing of Building 1 after its initial construction.
Building 1

The front façade of Building 1—formerly the Main Hospital building—in particular contains many details reminiscent of the extravagant altarpieces of the Churrigueraesque and Baroque.

The first characteristic is the overall structure of the façade, which emulates the tall, imposing altarpieces used in churches during the Baroque period.

The façade, interestingly, varies the types of columns. The highest tier utilizes elaborate Corinthian capitals and spiral columns, perhaps inspired by Solomonic columns. The spiral design of these columns was thought to be ‘sources of religious and scientific insight’ and were frequently used in church altarpieces during the Baroque period and the Churrigueraesque revival in Latin America. Considering the symbolism associated with the columns, it is possible that the spiral columns are meant—perhaps even unintentionally—as an acknowledgement to both the science utilized in the hospital and the religious roots of the architectural style.

The second tier utilizes Corinthian pilasters, also frequently utilized in Baroque architecture. Pilasters also border the window at the top of the building, but the lines have been changed from vertical stripes to diagonals.

The last tier utilizes heavily ornamented with a repeating design, seemingly of a vase, in the colors of peach, green, and blue. This extensive ornamentation, in the most extreme cases bordering on horror vacui, is the most iconic element of the Churrigueraesque style and often the most criticized—one writer states, “masses of gilding and an incongruous medley of meaningless ornament concealed the blunders in proportion and poverty of idea.” However, not all of the ornamentation on Building 1—nor the other buildings on the Bay Pines ground—can be viewed as “meaningless.” Above the highest pair of windows on the façade, are three sculptures of men, designed in a similar manner to a mantelpiece manufactured by Mizner Industries during the Mediterranean Revival boom. The three men are meant as representations of the three branches of the military at the time of the Soldiers’ Home’s construction—the Army, the Navy, and the Marine Corps.
The rest of Building 1 contains similar ornamentation and symbolism. Underneath many of the windows, there are bas-relief depictions of diving bells, which are likely references to the Tarpon Springs sponge industry at the time of construction. The commercial sponge industry of Tarpon Springs was founded in 1890. With the collapse of the land boom in the late 1920’s and the decrease in tourism due to the Great Depression of the 1930’s, it is highly likely that many sponge divers traveled to Seminole Point to work during the construction of the Old Soldiers’ Home.

Above other windows are depictions of shields, some colored. One shield, placed above another spiral column, which separates a pair of windows, was given an azure and or pally stripes quarterly/cuartelado design. This shield was likely used to reflect the Spanish tradition of sculpting coats of arms in their homes. The use of other shields as decoration is the result of the Moorish influence on the Spanish Baroque style. One of the shields utilizes a scroll form characteristic of Renaissance in their use of purely ornamental shield designs.

The interior of building 1 makes extensive use of Spanish tiles in the entrance. These tiles are decorated with ships, crosses, and other geometric designs, most often in a greenish-blue color. The tiles are in a distinctly pre-17th century Spanish design, which Chambers’ Encyclopaedia characterized as having “designs of a very effective but simple kind painted in enamel glazes of a coppery or dull golden colour, with sometimes a little blue or other tint added.” The heavy wooden doors originally used in the building are also indicative of the Spanish design.

Building 2

Although there is no way to confirm the architect’s intentions, the bas-relief sculptures of a boy on either side of the entrance to Building 2 are likely depictions of Gabriel the Archangel, who is considered the Patron Saint of Communications Workers, including Postal Workers, in the Catholic canon. Although he is characterized in the Bible as a man, he is frequently depicted in art as having a youthful, feminine appearance, at times similar to these sculptures.
Building 20

The tower of Building 20 has become one of the most recognizable symbols for Bay Pines, due to its use in logos and letterhead throughout the facility’s history. The tower is very similar in style to the white towers of San Xavier Mission del Bac and the Theosophical Building at the California-Panama Exposition in San Diego.

The entrance and decorations of Building 20 draw heavily from the Moorish ornamentation, which help inspired Spanish baroque design. Moorish designs incorporated mosaics to create Arabesque geometric designs (as seen in this sketch found in an 1882 book, Spain by Wentworth Webster). Similar designs and entrances could be seen on shrines and cathedrals throughout Spain at this time, including in Toledo, Gerona, and Saragossa.

Also of note is the use of shells in the arch. The Churrigueresque is similar in their use of exaggerated details—although they were certainly more extravagant in the Churrigueresque style—to the French Rococo style around the same time. Shells were frequently used in the French ornamentation—in fact, the word “rococo” is drawn from the French words for rock (“roc”) and shell (“coquille”).
Building 24

The entrance to building 24 uses a simplified design in comparison to the other buildings, but continues to use floral designs and columns in the façade. Above the window, is a sculpted head of a man screaming in pain. This is likely a biblical depiction of either Jesus Christ of Saint Peter, who were both crucified. Although Saint Peter is frequently depicted as elderly, in more youthful depictions he is consistently depicted with a square beard and short hair, similar to the sculpted figure. In contrast, Jesus is often depicted with longer hair and a longer beard.