

Project recaptures uniqueness of Planetary Court – By Catherine Anthony-Ohnemus  
[New Press-Estero Extra – April 3, 2004 ]

AC-0148

---

The Planetary Court, within Koreshan State Historic Site in Estero, was built in 1904 by the Koreshan Unity commune.

In 1961, the last living Koreshans donated the remnants of the commune to the state with a lifetime tenancy agreement.

The last Koreshan member lived in the Planetary Court until her death in 1982. The site became a National Register Historic District on May 4, 1979, and a Lee County Historically Designated Property on July 19, 2000.

The Planetary Court is both architecturally and historically significant. It is an excellent example of vernacular architecture, having been constructed by the community's members using locally available materials.

The building's first and second floor wrap-around porches, as well as the cross-ventilation created by the windows, illustrate the Koreshans' awareness of environmental design and indigenous architecture.

Now, one of the remaining buildings in the settlement complex, the house is unique in that it possesses an architectural refinement that stands out among the surrounding pioneer-style buildings.

The building also occupies a prominent place within the overall landscape that the Koreshans intended to create. A geometric quadrangle of shell paths surrounds the house, part of a reoccurring theme throughout the commune grounds.

The restoration of the Planetary Court returned the building to an opulence that had been lost due to alteration, disregard and natural deterioration.

In 1926, the visual centerpiece of the building — the cupola — was damaged in a hurricane and never rebuilt. Moreover, in

the 1960s, the building's last resident implemented several drastic alterations to the house.

The original 4-bedroom-per floor layout was changed by the with installation of double-size doorways joining the north-side bedrooms on both the first and second floors.

Knotty pine paneling was installed, along with additional electrical outlets and switches, throughout the first and second stories. Homosote board ceilings, with batten strips in some rooms, were also put in. The most drastic alteration was the addition to the east face of the second floor that overtook the balcony and compromised the building's symmetry. This addition accommodated a closet, bathroom, kitchenette and sewing room.

In order to properly plan for the building's restoration, in 1994, Division of Historical Resources grant-in-aid funding was obtained in order to produce the "Restoration Approach and Preservation Plan for the Planetary Court" by Stevenson Architects.

Subsequent funding, to carry out the restoration plan, was obtained by two special category matching grants, Phase I in 1999 and Phase II in 2000, also through the Department of State Division of Historical Resources.

Throughout the project, the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Restoration were utilized, first by the architect in writing the restoration plan, then during the construction process to guide all aspects of the restoration.

In the plan, a restoration date of 1926 was established in order to depict the character of the Planetary Court as it had appeared historically. This required the removal, as well as the reversal, of later alterations and added features. Also included was the reconstruction of missing features that belonged within the restoration

period — the cupola in particular. Justification for reconstructing the cupola was substantiated both by documentary evidence, contained in archival photos and writings, as well as by the physical evidence of partially intact structural framework.

Existing materials and features that fit within the period were retained and preserved, as were any distinctive examples of craftsmanship.

For example, the foyer staircase is, not only an example of talented craftsmanship, but is made of heart pine that is no longer readily available. The overall structural framework of the building was retained, as it was intact, and the original joists, rafters, and wall studs were primarily still in place and in good condition.

Upgrades to the mechanical, electrical, and plumbing systems, and other code-required work, was also carried out in the most historically sensitive manner possible. Moreover, as it was necessary to provide underground water lines to the building for tile fire-suppression system, archaeological test-pits were dug prior to digging trenches for the lines, and the project was archaeologically monitored throughout its process.

Before any construction began, the architect prepared a set of existing conditions drawings, documenting the evolution of the building. Likewise, when the construction was finished, the final work was documented in an as-built set of drawings noting any changes made during construction that varied from the original documents.

The use of the property after the restoration was also consistent with the secretary's standards, as it would be used as a historic house museum depicting the lives of the home's residents during the period of restoration.

When asked to comment on the significance of the site and the importance of the restoration of Planetary Court, Linda Stevenson, the project's architect responded:

"The story of the creation of the site, and the people who inhabited it, is truly fascinating.

This made this work unique — the spirit of the people still resonates on the grounds and in the buildings. "The public is so lucky to have this — and I think it is a great story of an unusual aspect of American history — these Utopian communities of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. "I think Koreshan has significance on a national and even international level, because this is an aspect of American history and culture that transcends national boundaries.

"I sometimes talk to friends and colleagues overseas about the site and they are all fascinated by it. In fact, I would like very much to write some abstracts for various conferences on the work at the site.

"Some aspects that contributed to the success of the project were the archives of historical documentation and resources available to help formulate a restoration approach, establish a period of interpretation, and justify any decisions made, as well as the final product.

"The site has an informed and dedicated staff who is extremely knowledgeable about the site and committed to its preservation and interpretation. The CSO is dedicated to working with DEP to preserve and interpret the site for the public. Lastly, the buildings themselves, despite various levels of intervention over the years, have retained enough of their historic features and fabric so that the physical evidence can aid in support of the documentary evidence, in many cases."

Koreshan State Historic Site has an annual visitation of approximately 50,000. Attendance has risen consistently each year, as Southwest Florida is an increasingly popular destination.

Visitation is not only positive for the site itself, but, through a multiplier effect, provides economic benefits to the County and the State. In 2001, there were an estimated 1.9 million visitors to Lee

County, and their expenditures were estimated at \$1,426,179,100. In Florida as a whole, an estimated \$3.721 billion in expenditures was generated by heritage tourism in the year 2000, according to a study commissioned by the Florida Trust for Historic Preservation.

The study also points out that, of Florida's 18.1 million State Park visitors, in 2000-01, 46.2 percent traveled to a state park that included a historic or archaeological site.

Further, the resident density of Estero and its surrounding area has been increasing dramatically and is expected to keep doing so. As population grows, the preservation of historic venues becomes increasingly vital.

To this end, the Koreshan historic district is embraced wholeheartedly by the surrounding community. The site is utilized regularly by the local historic society, and the Lee County School System conducts a unit of fourth grade Florida history at Koreshan. Also, students from Florida Gulf Coast University conduct historical, architectural and horticultural research on site.

Since the restoration of the Planetary Court, a local historic homeowner, and patron to Koreshan, was inclined to reject a multitude of developers multimillion-dollar offers for her estate, and, instead offer its sale for historic preservation. The local historic society is working toward opening its own museum and often looks to Koreshan for guidance, training, research, and cooperative efforts. Therefore, the restoration of the Planetary Court, as well as the services provided by Koreshan State Historic Site, certainly make a positive contribution to its community.