

**Opa-Locka:
Building One Thousand and One Arabian Nights in South Florida**

My research interests have brought me to focus on American conceptions of the Orient and their manifestation in late nineteenth and early twentieth century architecture. My aim at this juncture in my graduate career is twofold: first, to begin research towards my PhD dissertation, and second, to produce a documentary film on the subject.

In 1927, newspapers advertisements and articles touted Opa-Locka as the ‘Baghdad of South Florida,’ but now the city is a four square mile poverty-stricken community slightly to the northwest of Miami. The city’s inception by developer Glenn Curtiss in collaboration with architect Bernhardt Muller derives, if apocryphally, from an English translation of *The One Thousand and One Tales from the Arabian Nights*. Giving credence to this apocryphal account, the city still contains seventy-five of the original Moorish-style buildings. Given these structures, we must ask where this idea of the Middle Eastern city came from. Apart from its single acknowledged textual source, in the 1920s images of the Middle East had become wildly popular throughout America, largely rooted in filmic representations of the Orient.

While based on a filmic imaginary, Opa-Locka functions simultaneously as theatrical and authentic. The theatricality derives not only from the design’s filmic inspiration, but also from early marketing strategies in which homebuyers were lured to South Florida with parades involving ‘Oriental’ characters and themes – a tradition that continues to the present in the community’s annual spring *Arabian Nights Festival*. The authenticity of the quotidian differentiates Opa-Locka from theme parks; the program of Moorish architecture here is a site within which people live and work. Unlike most suburban development, Opa-Locka dreams not of a safe and secure America, but rather of everyday living in an exotic ‘other’ place.