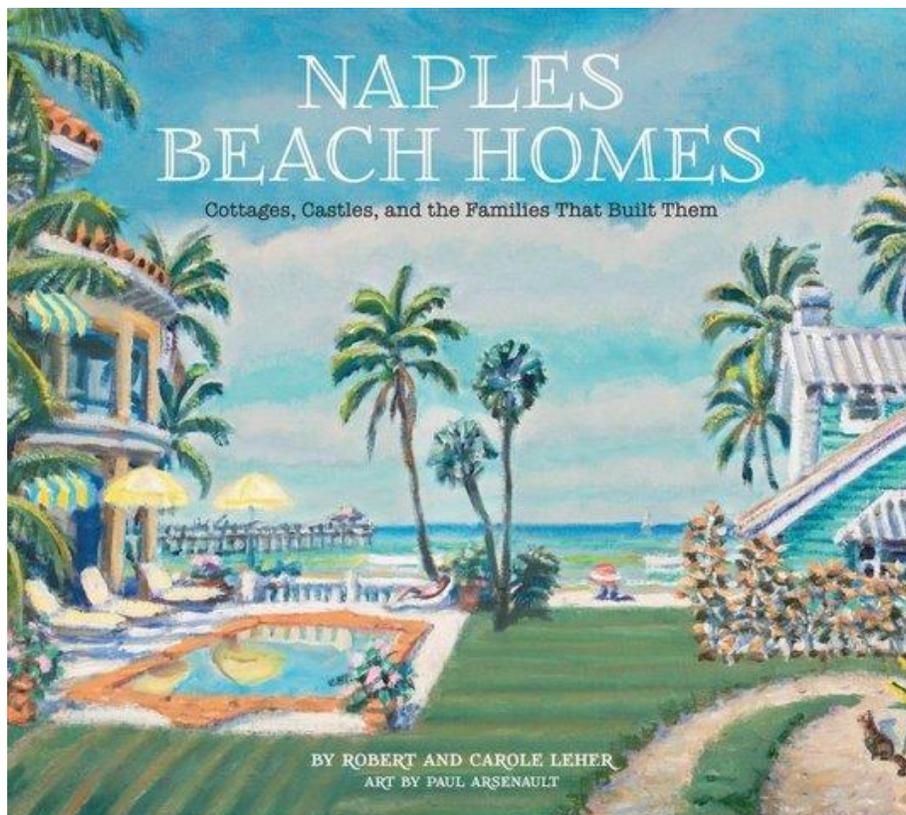
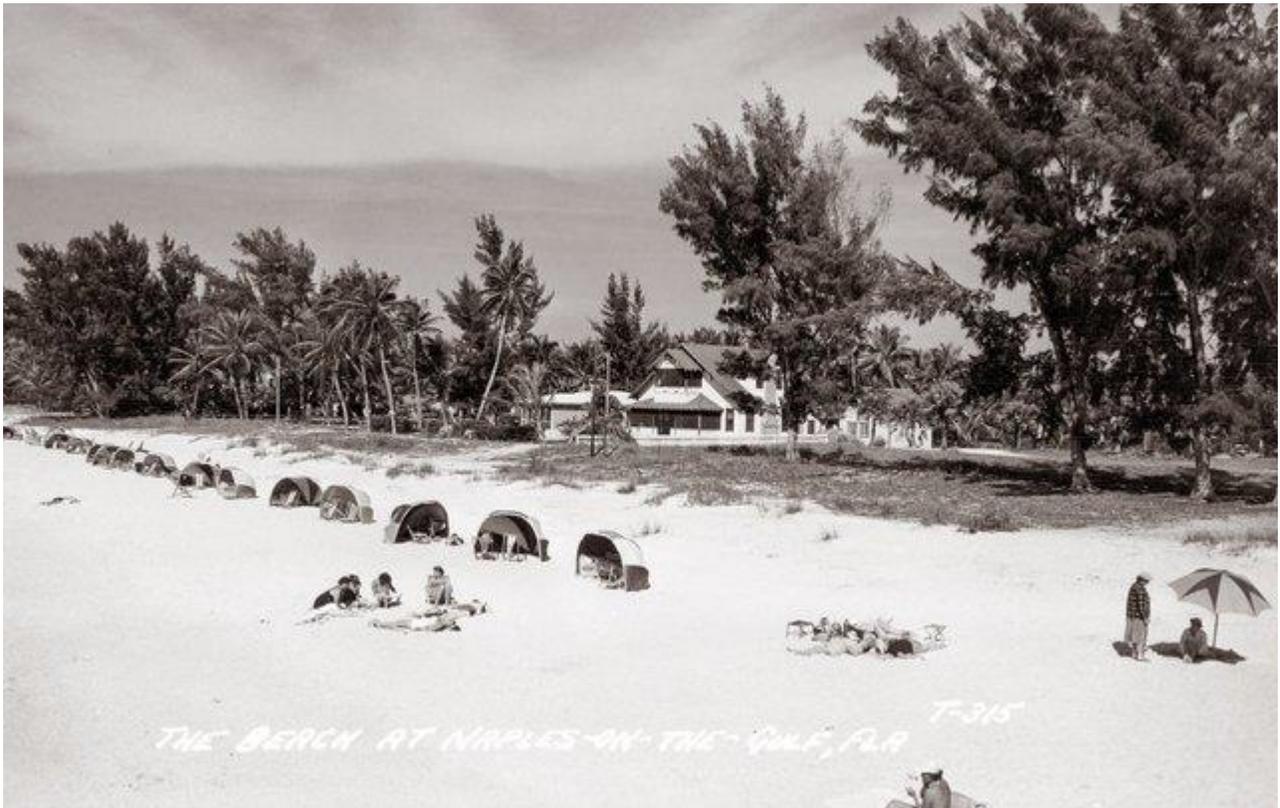


Book on beachfront homeowners brings back an era of elegance, eccentricity

[Harriet Heithaus](#) Feb 28, 2015





THE BEACH AT NIPLES-ON-THE-GULF, FLA T-315



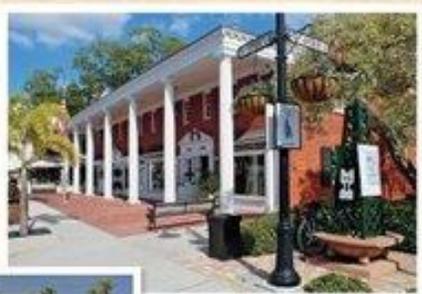
NAPLES BEACH TIMES

NAPLES BEACH, FLORIDA



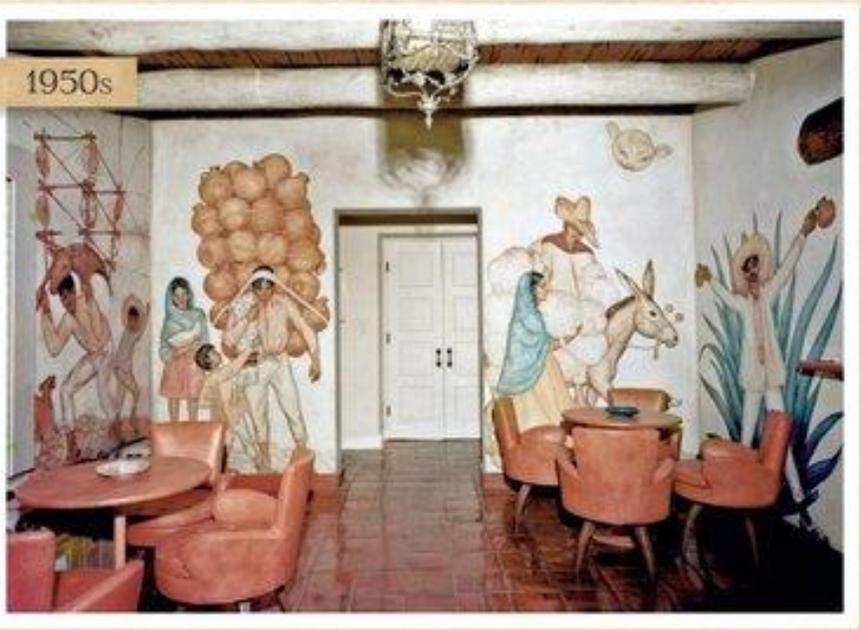
c.1920s

Gartha Davis runs along the beach through water vegetation. It was her grandfather who was the Federal Forestry Relief Administrator during the Great Depression.



1969
Edward and Victoria Okunsky took their Southshore home office across the street to the old brick Okunsky office building, a landmark on Third Street South.

NAPLES BEACH TIMES



1950s

Before elegant restaurants and country clubs were the norm, many Neapolitan created a cocktail lounge at home. The Briggs' Bar Room was decorated with dramatic murals.

(opposite) This is the recipe for Mr. Briggs' special Sunday cocktail, The Rum-Dum. Note his preference for "Santa Cruz from Cuba," a rum that was easy to find in Naples prior to the Cuban embargo of 1960.

NAPLES BEACH TIMES

NAPLES BEACH TIMES

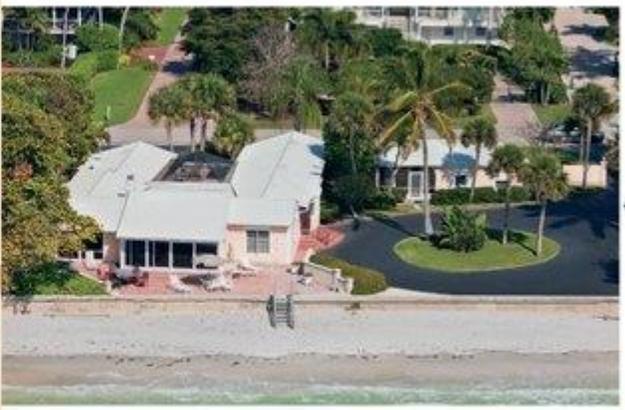


1974

Shown in the 1970s is another shell house but in the same location. Engineers' bridge over houses built on the east side of Double Drive and the shell structure has been replaced with the bridge. Right: Mortimer Chase worked with the house built on the shell in the center before natural preservation.



1960



NAPLES BEACH TIMES



c.1950s

The "Painted Cottage," once the stable for the "Sea Villa" estate, was located on the beach at 13th Avenue South. Its exterior evolved over the years from plain white (above) to a facade of bright multi-colored flowers (right). The loss of this beloved cottage to the wrecking ball in the mid-2000s sparked a renewed interest in historic preservation.

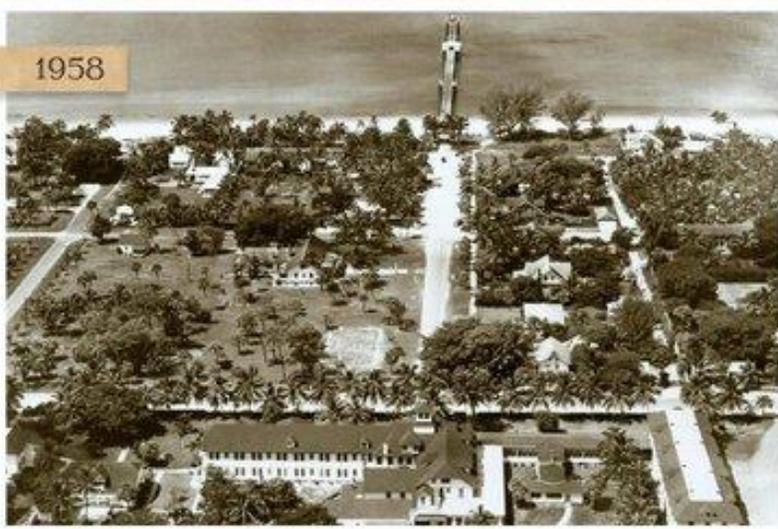




FRONT+PHER.jp141_Aerialshot 20015 3:27 PM Page 18

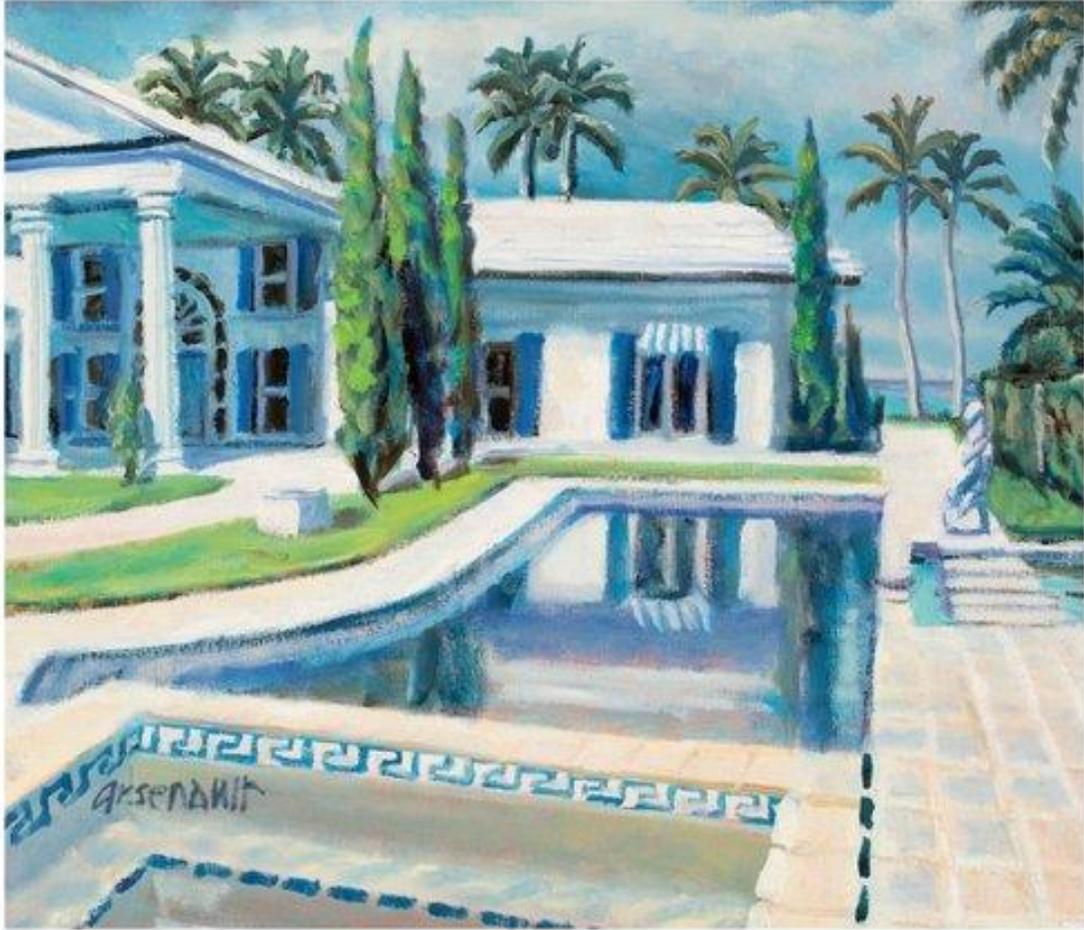
NAPLES BEACH TRIMES

1958



This bird's-eye view of Old Naples, just two years before Hurricane Donna, shows the straight path along what was then called Pier Street from the Pier to the front entrance of the vintage Naples Hotel which officially opened its doors in January, 1889.

At center left is *The Pines*, the beautiful estate of Canadian George M. Hendrie. Directly across from it is *Palm Cottage*, today the home of the Naples Historical Society. Along the beach to the left of the Pier is *The Haldeman House*, while the land to the right is still vacant under shady trees. This photo helps us understand how open and airy the heart of Old Naples used to be. White shell streets, green swaying palms, and turquoise waters gave a sparkle to the little town under a visit of bright blue sky and sunlight.



1961

The original residence was built in the 1920s and was passed down through several generations. The house was a grand example of the style which was in vogue when it was built.



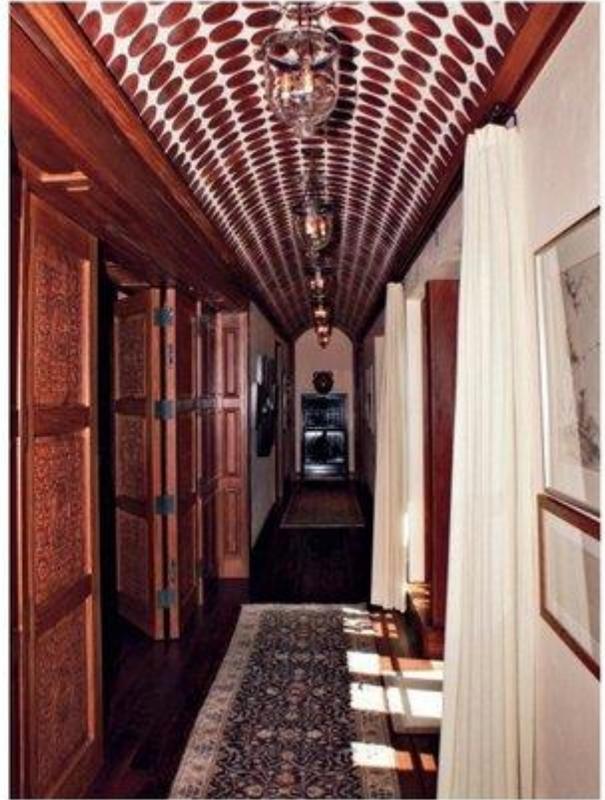
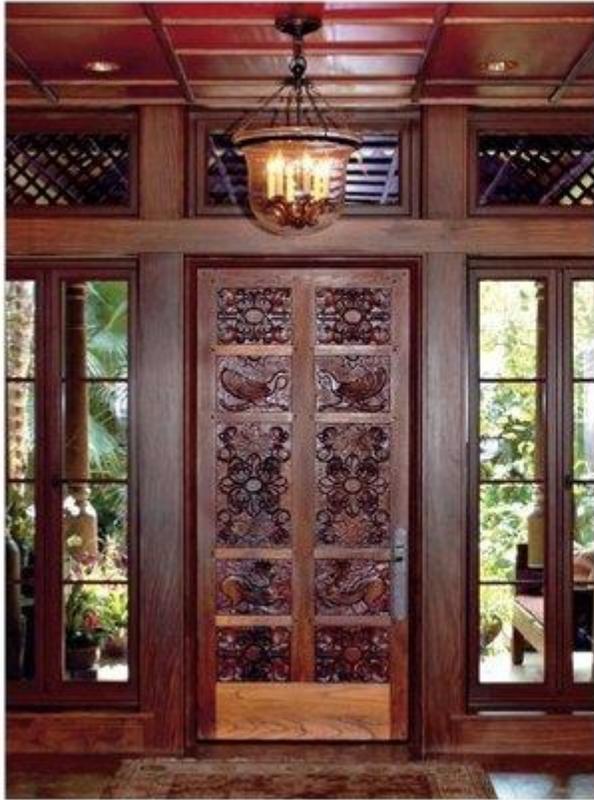
1980

At the time of the renovation, the house was in need of a complete overhaul. The renovation was a major project that took several years to complete.

Today, the house is a beautiful example of the style which was in vogue when it was built. The house is a grand example of the style which was in vogue when it was built.

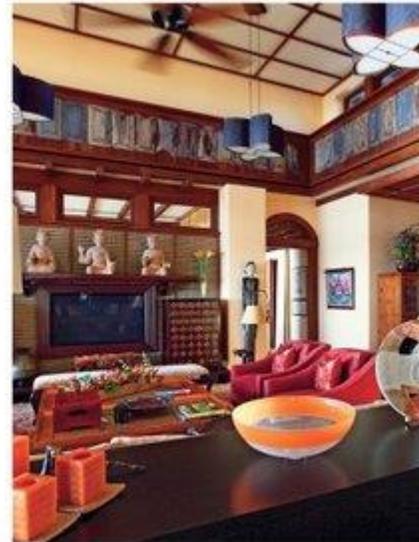


2014





2014
The influence of hotelier Les Leher on home designer Carol Leher can be seen throughout the book. Here are a glimpse of Tropical Modernism.



Vacationers who come to Naples inevitably find themselves on its pearly beach, gazing out at the broad, blue Gulf of Mexico. Robert and Carol Leher dug their toes into that beach and gazed back, admiring the painted patchwork of homes whose owners have the joy of greeting the Gulf every morning.

That ribbon of residences, and the Lehers' curiosity about them, has become "Naples Beachfront Homes: Cottages, Castles and the Families That Built Them." The 252-page, coffee table-heft book peers inside these lucky homes to show not only what they are now, but, in many cases, what they came from, and what happened inside them.

The Lehers live in Naples nine months a year, the legacy of Carole's parents, who brought her south — from New York — as a high school senior to see "this wonderful little town we've discovered." Robert Leher, now a retired attorney, first saw Naples when he came down to meet his future in-laws 31 years ago.

The two remember when the Tamiami Trail's eastward arc flanked a city bank. Fifth Avenue South then was a mother lode of family businesses: a pharmacy; camera shop; hardware, menswear and shoe stores; and the original Wynn's supermarket.

"We would go sightseeing up and down Gordon Drive during our visits and we would always wonder who lived there," Leher recalled.

NO, THEY WON'T

When they retired, the Lehers determined to find out. The first hurdle: Shutting their ears to naysayers. "We were told 'No one will speak to you,'" Robert Leher said. "What we found was that the homeowners would talk to us.

"After a while we talked to so many people our editors told us, 'You've gotta stop. It's too big.' We were getting close to 300 pages. Donna Murphy, our editor, called us and said 'I'm coming over.'" Murphy, who lives in Naples, spent nine months on design, color work and production — and being a traffic cop. Owners who had heard about the book from their friends now wanted to add their own, and some of those already in the book found more old photos as the book was nearly on its way to the press.

YES, THEY DID

How can you stop adding to the stories of such singular people? Among the Gulf's early dwellers, the Lehers learned, were:

Stephen Foster Briggs, who pioneered color film and air-cooled engines that still bear his name, Briggs & Stratton. He filmed documentaries for Walt Disney. But he's remembered here for a potent weekend punch offered to friends and neighbors at the Briggs' Gordon Drive home. His grapefruit juice-and-Santa Cruz cocktail, known as a Rum-Dum, was a Sunday noon tradition (yes, the recipe is in the book).

Peg Bradley, whose art savvy made her Formica-façade home a veritable museum. She brought the first haute couture boutique, Zita's, to town, and championed charitable causes in both her Milwaukee and Naples homes. The Bradley wing at the Milwaukee Art Museum attests to her and her husband's generosity; it received more than 600 of her 20th century paintings.

John Slater, who kept a small zoo of peacocks, cheetahs, seals and deer. Inside his saltwater pool dolphins swam and a ray fluttered. Children loved it; neighbors hated it when flower-loving deer jumped the fence to dine on their roses.

There were the homes of founders who built the city and eccentrics who made it more colorful.

What sets "Naples Beach Homes" apart is its look into their lives as well as their homes. There are photographs, unpublished until now, of interiors from the 1930s and '40s, and of beachfront families at play.

"This is where I and the society became so excited. It's not just a current review, but a history of the homes from the last to the first generations," said Elaine Reed, president and CEO of the Naples Historical Society, who wrote the book's foreword. The society will receive the net proceeds from the book.

Reed said she was impressed with the Lehers' research as well. The couple became fixtures at the society's archival viewing center over the last three years.

"We, by the way, went through every single photo in that archive," Robert Leher said.

The couple will discuss their book March 20 at the Naples Historical Society's Palm Cottage.



(Now: "La Cadeau Sur Le Gulf," which replaced The Painted Cottage on that section of the 13th Avenue South beach property owned by city pioneer Walter N. Haldeman. Then: The Painted Cottage, a local favorite, was actually first a stable for the "Sea Villa" home of the Walter N. Haldeman family along the beach at 13th Avenue South.)





(Now: The homes along Naples beach today. The area is still green, but residences are much larger. From "Naples Beach Homes." In 1958: This page in "Naples Beach Homes" shows the city and beach from the east side in 1958, pre-Hurricane Donna.)

WALKING THE TALK

The couple determined this was a feasible project after seeing how few properties there are along Naples beach.

“There are only about 130 lots on the beach. They go from Gordon Drive to the Naples Beach Club. That’s the only area that has single-family zoning,” Leher pointed out.

To ground their research, they walked the entire beach with Lodge McKee, a local historian and Naples native whose family home was on the Gulf. McKee wrote a prologue for the book. An artist’s statement came from Naples artist Paul Arsenault, whose paintings give it a supernal sheen and open a time-window into homes that have been demolished.

Murphy had worked with Arsenault in designing his own book, “My Journey as a Painter,” and walked with him around the houses that were being profiled.

“With some properties, our goal was to capture key architectural elements. When we could, Paul included specific details that were part of the property’s narrative,” she said via email. “For example, for the chapter, ‘Hill School Haunts,’ Paul deliberately included children playing as a nod to the home’s history.”

“For some properties, we had many more images than we had room for, while for others, it was more of a challenge to come up with what we needed. Paul’s illustrations were key to unifying the book’s design,” she added.

Not every home had a photogenic facade. “On some homes, we focused on the inside, on some it was the garden,” Carole Leher said. But, she added, every one had an appealing aspect in addition to the Gulf view. For a few, the Lehers were unwittingly racing the wrecking ball.

“Since we started this book in 2012, five of the homes have been torn down. ... That’s the message: See what we’ve lost.”

‘Naples Beach Homes’

What: Locally written book on houses along the Gulf of Mexico in Naples; full title, “Naples Beach Homes: Cottages, Castles, and the Families That Built Them”

To buy: Naples Historical Society, 127 12th Ave. S., Naples, napleshistoricalsociety.org or these locations — The Arsenault Gallery, The Conservancy of Southwest Florida, The Naples Art Association at the von Liebig Center, The Paper Merchant, BRuno gifts, Naples Bay Resort, Mel’s Diner

Price: \$65; net proceeds go to Naples Historical Society

Availability: Scheduled for March 11

Something else: Robert and Carole Leher speak at Gardenside Chickee Chat at Palm Cottage, 137 12th St. S., Naples, 11 a.m. March 20, 2015. \$5; free for members. Reservations required, 239-261-8164