



VISUAL ARTS

Through the Orb: Ocean Drive's culture-centric Betsy Hotel takes over historic Carlton Hotel

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Looking to expand, the owners of the Betsy Hotel, a stately, sedate Colonial-style anomaly on the funhouse strip of Ocean Drive, reached across the alley at the back and bought the Carlton, a '30s Collins Avenue hotel by an Art Deco master that had gone to seed.

Then, after a gut renovation of the Carlton and a congruously up-to-date extension, they joined the two hotels' dissimilar styles with an architectural *pièce de résistance* that's already stopping people in their tracks.

They call it The Orb.

Wedged between the two buildings like a giant white beach ball, four stories up in the air, The Orb conceals a passageway that seamlessly connects the Betsy with the revitalized Carlton, which opened this month.

The Orb is hardly the only extravagant public gesture undertaken for the project by its architect, Allan Shulman, and the Betsy's principal owner, Jonathan

Plutzik, who six years ago put the old Betsy Ross on the map by turning it into a luxury boutique hotel with an overt literary bent. The Betsy hosts, among other cultural endeavors, regular [poetry readings and literary seminars](#) and [has a writer in residence](#) at all times.

Determined to do things distinctively, Plutzik and Shulman may have set a new bar for renovations and additions in South Beach's Art Deco historic district, lately subsumed by what critics deride as tourist tacky-tack. They say they have tried to reimagine the South Beach hotel as a place for — yes, of course — sun and fun, but also much more, maximizing use of tight lots and recondite spaces to create a place that pops in interesting ways while reinforcing the district's welcoming, sophisticated aesthetic.

“What brings people to Miami Beach is urban life. You have the beach, but also culture,” Shulman said. “We've tried to make the hotel a microcosm of the Beach and the easygoing, good-neighborliness of the buildings. What's different here is we have spanned the alley.”

That determination extended to a neglected side alley they have effectively reclaimed for the public as a pedestrian passageway. Doing so required removing an FPL pole, burying power lines and repaving the public right of way at Plutzik's considerable expense.

The side alley runs from Collins to Ocean along the north flank of the two buildings and intersects with the back alley that's spanned by the Orb. Plutzik and Shulman took a wedge of dirt that was part of the Carlton property and attached a cafe to the side of the old hotel. No ordinary beach cafe, Poeti — “poets” in Italian — will be food not just for stomachs, but for thought, too.

The parabola-shaped roof is topped with an herb garden and a compact amphitheater for readings and performance. The roof is wrapped in a metal screen inscribed with the laser-cut words to compositions by 13 poets with Miami connections, including [Donald Justice](#), [Richard Blanco](#), rhyming boxer [Muhammad Ali](#) and Plutzik's father, three-time Pulitzer poetry finalist [Hyam Plutzik](#).

The cafe, which is set to open soon, also incorporates a quintessential Miami *latino* feature and adds a European touch — a *ventanita*, or window, serving not just *cafecitos* but gelato and crepes as well.

Plutzik and Shulman also made lots of room in the Carlton's enlargement for gatherings, events and performances that will allow the Betsy, at 1440 Ocean Dr., to expand its Philanthropy, Arts, Culture and Education, or PACE, programs. Those range from the poetry readings and a monthly Yiddish bagels-and-lox breakfast program to jazz, operatic and string-quartet concerts.

Some of the expanded Betsy's cultural amenities will be available only to those lucky enough to afford its luxury-level rates, which start at \$266 mid-week in January. The Carlton extension, which like the Betsy stocks a small select library of books in each guest room, adds a new wrinkle: an actual library for guest use.

But others will be available to both guests and visitors.

An addition on Collins that opens directly to the sidewalk and occupies what was once a parking lot contains an expansive, gallery-like public space, lit for exhibitions and wired for sound and projection. Next to it, the Carlton's terrazzo-floored Deco lobby has been converted with historically appropriate restraint into The Conservatory, an espresso, reading and web-browsing lounge for hotel guests. The new event space opens at the rear to a broad courtyard that Plutzik and Shulman say will function much like a town square for guests and visitors.

The courtyard's uninterrupted spread is made possible by yet another architectural leap: Instead of putting the hotel swimming pool at ground level, it's suspended 50 feet in the air. The pool sits in a shelf that spans the courtyard without columns, resting at each end atop the tips of the U-shaped Carlton building.

"Structurally, it was incredibly challenging," Shulman said with a grin.

Connecting the two historic hotels across the alley, while also maintaining its role as a service access, presented another sort of challenge, and not just a practical one, Shulman said. Each building was designed by a star of the day — the 1941 Betsy Ross was a one-off in American Georgian style by L. Murray Dixon, a prolific Beach Deco architect, and the 1937 Carlton a more typical Streamline Moderne exemplar by Henry Hohauser, another Beach stalwart.

Plutzik wanted a "gentle transition" between the two, with the Carlton interior design recalling the Betsy's Southern-plantation style without aping it. But a humdrum skybridge would be not just abrupt, but unequal to the architectural gems it would join.

"A plain bridge," Shulman said, "seemed inadequate."

Thus the idea of turning a necessity into a statement by wrapping it in a bubble of rounded fiberglass panels made for radomes, the round enclosures that protect radars and antennae. Inside, the passageway looks like a regular hotel hallway, with no sign it's a bridge.

Outside, Shulman said, the squashed orb can be seen, if you're so inclined, as "a kiss" between the two buildings.

The Betsy expansion is not the only Ocean Drive project that will span the alley. An addition behind The Tides, a project Shulman is also working on, features a connecting bridge as well, but a plain-vanilla one, said the architect, who did not design that one.

Given the demand for upscale hotel rooms and expanded amenities, Shulman expects other Ocean Drive hotels to look for creative ways to expand their footprints across the alley.

“It’s a new challenge for the Beach,” he said. “There will be more of that, I think.”

For Plutzik, the expansion was not just a response to commercial demands but a chance to build on the Betsy’s distinctive cultural identity and raise its profile even higher.

A hotel’s function, he said, is not just to pamper its guests in seclusion, but to serve as a public hub. In the case of the Betsy, now expanded to 130 rooms, that not incidentally means cementing in the minds of guests and other visitors the idea of Miami Beach as a significant center of culture.

“Everyone thinks of Miami Beach as hard bodies, beaches, shiny-sparkly stuff, and it turns out that’s all true,” Plutzik said. “But it’s just 50 percent. This is one of the ways in which we sell ourselves short. Miami is an unbelievable town. We’ve become one of the cultural centers of the Americas.

“We’re doing opera on Ocean Drive, and it’s standing-room-only.”

Which, the way, turns out also to be a good business model as travelers increasingly look for experiences that feel authentic, stimulating and connected to place, he said.

“Everybody’s trying to go beyond the typical, superficial travel thing,” Plutzik said. “People want to be engaged. Sitting with a writer, listening to real opera, being in a place that stimulates visually — people really want it, and they’re prepared to pay more for it.”

In the end, Plutzik said, the way to get his guests to enjoy their stay, and come back again, is to show them just how much Miami has to offer beyond azure skies and a good time.

Even if it takes The Orb to do it.

“We want to surprise them,” Plutzik said, meaning his guests, but he might well have been speaking about Miamians.