

Architecture

Naming the Miami Skyline

Today it's practically impossible to name a world-class architect without a presence in the city: Frank Gehry, Zaha Hadid, Rem Koolhaas and Norman Foster are among those behind a building boom that stretchest from Sunny Isles to Coconut Grove.

By Matt Tyrnauer on September 24, 2014

Modern architecture was all about rejecting history and starting with a clean slate. Miami—variously called “the city of the future” *and* “the city without a past”—has for this reason been an ideal proving ground for many a would-be visionary with an edifice complex. In 1896, when Henry Flagler’s Florida East Coast Railway reached the swampy landmass on Biscayne Bay (an area so unexplored the botanist John K. Small called it “the land of the question mark”), the exotic wilderness began its forced transformation into a fantasy of the tropics, fueled by the dreams of speculators, developers, marketers, hucksters, mobsters and a long line of usually unsung architects who have ridden the epic booms that have defined the city, leaving marks as clearly defined as rings on the stump of a sequoia.

The current Miami building boom—a \$92.2 billion spree that started in 2011—is proving to be more frenzied than any of the previous and far more

international, both in terms of the clientele flocking to the city and the architectural talent employed to design it. Star architects, mostly from European firms, are being picked up and flaunted by developers catering to a market of offshore high rollers—South American, Asian and Russian oligarchs, in addition to wolves of Wall Street—who want to park money in a city that year by year seems less like the bottom tip of the American South and more like a sleek, diverse Rio of the north. The city, which not long ago upheld Jackie Gleason and Julio Iglesias as its cultural paragons, has developed a global sophistication, in large part because of the Art Basel Miami Beach fair. “The people who came for the festivities and the commerce that the fair generated became the platform for Miami to mature into a true city of style,” says developer Craig Robins, who in the 1980s led the redevelopment and restoration of the South Beach Art Deco district and is now developing [Miami’s Design District](#) in a formerly downtrodden section of town.

The seeds of this regeneration, evolution and new dramatic chapter for Miami’s invented architectural traditions were without doubt sown with the preservation of South Beach Art Deco. Even though it was one of the most striking and stylistically complete architectural districts anywhere in the world, “by the 1970s it had become a slum,” Robins says. “The conventional wisdom was that it all should be torn down. On one level, today it seems natural because it happened that all of those amazing buildings were saved, but at the time it was a totally contrarian vision. So having lived through it, I can tell you it was a struggle and it was not an obvious phase.” The Art Deco buildings, mostly revived as boutique hotels, became the international symbol of the city. “Everywhere in the world I went in the ’80s, if you said ‘Miami,’ people would say ‘Julio Iglesias,’ because he lived in Miami,” Robins says. “Then later in that decade, people said ‘*Miami Vice!*’ Then in the ’90s, the first thing everyone envisioned was an Art Deco hotel. It was truly remarkable that the basic act of preserving our heritage had such a seismic impact.”

It was architecture, in other words, that saved the city, which like most urban areas in the United States was at its lowest ebb in the ’70s and early ’80s. “So

if you ask, ‘Why is this flight toward quality architecture happening now in Miami and not San Francisco, another great city’—it’s in the DNA of the evolution of our city,” says Robins. “It does make sense that a place that reemerged with Art Deco in South Beach would find this a logical extension. It also shows that the world is getting much more sophisticated and moving away from these eyesores that we got stuck with for 50 or 100 years and showing that great expression is getting validated.”

“Architecture is Miami’s most exalted and defining art form, so it makes sense to have it be the theme of the current boom,” says Allan Shulman, an architect and editor of *Miami Modern Metropolis*, a definitive architectural study of the city. “These boom-bust cycles have shaped the city and ultimately contributed to its design complexity,” Shulman adds. “The boom dynamic here tends to make a lot of things happen very quickly. For example, the South Beach Art Deco district came together in five or six years in the 1930s. The Collins Avenue ‘canyon,’ including the landmark Delano and Raleigh hotels, culminating in Morris Lapidus’s tour de force, the Fontainebleau, happened in about six years after the war. It’s the way our economy is wired. It creates the critical mass for a developer to get their money out before each boom is swept away by each successive bust. We want to believe this time it’s different and it’s a unique phenomenon. The players are different this time, yet what is happening now is happening in a very Miami way—except with higher-stakes players. In the past there was just not that much money here, except for drug money in the ’80s. You can no longer say that.”

At the end of the last boom, two remarkable buildings set the tone for the current era of development. Herzog & de Meuron’s 1111 Lincoln Road, a parking structure of extraordinary architectural sophistication—and public popularity—began a high-design craze for commercial projects. Opening around the same time was Frank Gehry’s New World Symphony. It set a high bar for cultural buildings.

“Good architecture is a logical extension of an evolving city,” says Robert Wennett, developer of 1111 Lincoln Road. “Miami is becoming a world-class

city barely resembling itself 10 or 15 years ago. Architecture possesses a unique transformative power.”

“Eleven-eleven got so much press attention that I think developers got a strong message that elite architects doing high-quality buildings was good marketing,” says Sean McCaughan, editor of *Curbed Miami*, which is the irreverent bible for all building and real estate matters in the city. To have a Gehry concert hall or museum is a feather in the cap of any city, given the galvanizing successes of the Guggenheim Bilbao and Disney Hall in Los Angeles. A public building by Gehry has the stamp of civic glory that a library by McKim, Mead and White or a park by Frederick Law Olmsted had in the late-19th and early-20th centuries. (Currently, Gehry is designing a new arts campus to be built around the historic Bacardi Building, a classic of Pan-American modernism from 1963, designed by Enrique Guiterrez, a protégé of Mies van der Rohe.)

As the local economy started to rev up after the global financial crisis—which virtually stopped all new development in 2008 and 2009—the next wave of projects echoed 1111 Lincoln Road and the New World Symphony concert hall. [Zaha Hadid](#) was hired by the city of Miami Beach to design a landmark parking structure smack in the middle of the hotel strip on Collins Avenue. The swooping, hive-like building, for which ground has yet to be broken, looks in renderings like Frank Lloyd Wright’s Guggenheim Museum in the process of unraveling. Meanwhile, across Biscayne Bay, Hadid is making her actual Miami debut with 1000 Museum Tower, a 706-foot-tall skyscraper condo, which broke ground in June after having to get FAA approval to ensure its \$45 million penthouse will not be in the way of any low-flying aircraft. The building’s curvaceous white exoskeleton (some call it Gaudi meets bacteriophage) will eliminate load-bearing pillars, affording residents unobstructed views through acres of sheet-glass windows.

Herzog & de Meuron made the quantum leap from high-style car housing, drawing the major cultural commission of the current period: The Pérez Art Museum Miami, or PAMM, a retro-brutalist massing of concrete and glass

boxes, festooned with hanging gardens, all under a massive pavilion roof. The building recalls Miami's period of bunker-like reinforced concrete structures, made fashionable in the early '60s by proto-architect Paul Rudolph. Heavy, blocky buildings may seem counterintuitive at this warm latitude, but the fortified style was in keeping with the years of riots, drug wars and racial unrest in the city—the era of Miami noir that Carl Hiaasen depicts so vividly in his novels. Herzog & de Meuron also have a skyscraping condo building going up among the banal rows of beachfront towers in Sunny Isles, near Bal Harbour. The awkwardly named Jade Signature fuses design motifs from the 1111 Lincoln Road garage—sculptural buttresses up and down the façade—with a midcentury-Miami design motif, allusive to Morris Lapidus's version of modernism that defined Miami in the [Mad Men](#) era.

“The two new Herzog & de Meuron buildings draw on things that happened here in the '50s and '60s—forms pioneered by Lapidus that many had ignored for years,” says Shulman. “Somehow these guys in Basel, Switzerland, got it; maybe because they did the research.”

In many ways today's orgy of architecture in Miami is built on the shoulders of Lapidus's populist genius. “He was transformative,” says Shulman, “and he was the vehicle to getting so many ideas into Miami and having them thrive in this environment. Some of the Europeans who are working here now are responsible for rehabilitating him. He was not rehabilitated or appreciated locally. It took the eyes of foreigners to appreciate what he had accomplished.” (In 1970 critic Ada Louise Huxtable wrote that arriving at one of Lapidus's hotels was “like being hit by an exploding gilded eggplant.”)

Lapidus started as a retail-store designer in Manhattan; after a few minor Miami Beach hotel commissions in the '40s, he burst onto the scene with the Fontainebleau in 1952. He had a stunning lack of reverence for the doctrines of high modernism at a time when most architects worshiped at the altar of Mies and Le Corbusier. “[He] formulated his own vocabulary: woggles, bean-poles and cheese holes,” wrote critic Thomas Hine in *Miami Modern Metropolis*. “These playful features...created a citywide architectural narrative

so legible that a visitor could easily divine its meanings. America's architectural establishment decried this riot of kitsch and pastiche. *Architectural Forum* called Miami Beach the 'final dumping ground'—an unconsciously cruel parody of modern architecture in our day, a riot of hyperbolic paraboloids, of convoluted shells, or tall slabs and flat slabs, of Japanese tricks and Turkish tricks and Aztec tricks, of sculptural 'accents' to everybody's taste."

Lapidus's interiors were collisions of French Regency and stylized ethnic motifs. The exteriors had a Pan-American, Oscar Niemeyer-like sleekness. Indeed, he had traveled to Brazil and soaked up the modernism of the Southern Hemisphere, then blithely repotted it like a palm, finding that it clicked with the landscape and water-reflected light. Lapidus may have predicted—or even invented—the pastiche style that came, a generation later, to be called postmodernism. And in a way, he set the tone for the look of the current phase of tower construction. Today's major projects—almost all in the hands of sophisticated European firms with very distinct house styles—are remarkably similar to the curvaceous, strip-window-modern style and scale set by Lapidus 70 years ago. It seems as if the silhouette of the Fontainebleau has become almost as canonical as New York's Seagram Building—which is fitting, as Lapidus's motto, "Too much is never enough," was a play on Mies's "Less is more."

Now it's approaching the point where any European starchitect who does not have a building on the boards for Miami has to hang his head in shame," says McCaughan. In addition to Hadid and Herzog & de Meuron, Rem Koolhaas, Bjarke Ingels, Sir Norman Foster and John Pawson all have buildings under construction. One of the few Americans to land a high-profile commission is Richard Meier, who designed an expansion of the historic 1930 Spanish Colonial Surf Club, once a members-only playground for luminaries such as Frank Sinatra, Winston Churchill and John F. Kennedy. Meier's Lapidusian curving-glass façade hovers over Russell Pancoast's original building and will house a Four Seasons Hotel in addition to condos. Also adding to the luxury-hotel roster is Ian Schrager's Miami Edition hotel and condo, designed by the

British master minimalist Pawson. This is Schrager's first project in Miami since 1994, when he revolutionized the luxury-boutique-hotel concept with his Philippe Starck–designed reimagining of the Delano in Miami Beach.

Because of the strict historic-preservation rules applied to the modernist landmarks on Miami Beach, very few of the new building sites being tackled by this murderers' row of architects—there are six Pritzker Architecture Prize winners in the lot—afford a clean slate with which to work. The original midcentury hotels often need to be built around or incorporated into the designs, as is the case with the so-called Faena District: an ambitious campus of hotels, condos and cultural buildings developed by Argentine Alan Faena. “Everyone has practically lost count of the number of structures on this project and the big names designing them,” says McCaughan. “The first to top off was Norman Foster's Faena House tower”—where one of the two penthouses has reportedly been snapped up for \$50 million by Goldman Sachs CEO Lloyd Blankfein, one of the largest sales in Miami history. (Larry Gagorian is rumored to have bought the other.) Rem Koolhaas's Faena Bazaar and arts center, which include a floating cylindrical building and a historic structure with modern interventions, as well as his mechanical parking garage, are all currently under way. Film director Baz Luhrmann and his wife, costume designer Catherine Martin, are currently working on a revamp of the landmark 1948 Saxony hotel on the Faena campus. Landscape architect Raymond Jungles will be doing the gardens.

In scale and ambition, the only project in the city that can top Faena's mini-town is in Coconut Grove, where the ubiquitous Koolhaas and his former employee, Ingels, are building side-by-side megaprojects for the same developers. Ingels's twisting twin towers at The Grove at Grand Bay will be completed far ahead of his old boss's competing towers, called Park Grove, just a few hundred feet to the south. The Grove at Grand Bay project will be the 40-year-old Danish phenom Ingels's first complete project in the States.

The Koolhaas buildings, which will begin construction in late 2014, feature gardens by Enzo Enea and were created in consultation with Arquitectonica,

one of Miami's most venerable hometown firms, led by Bernardo Fort-Brescia and Laurinda Spear, who built the most iconic Miami building of the '80s, the Atlantis—a glass slab with a square hole punched out of its middle, made famous in the opening credits of *Miami Vice*. Fort-Brescia and Spear have been hired to do the master plan for the proposed Resorts World Miami (by the Genting Group), which would put a 1.15 million-square-foot hotel and casino complex on the site of the former *Miami Herald* building—if gambling is ever legalized in the city.

It is very rare, especially in an American city, to have so much high-quality architecture go up in such close proximity and all at the same moment. Usually when things grow fast, they grow in a cheap way. The looming, open question for Miami, however, is what lies beyond the era of the starchitect. “The city is increasingly a palimpsest, where layer upon layer of development and civilization can be read,” Shulman notes in his introduction to *Miami Architecture*. But scattered high-profile oligarch tower blocks cannot be a sustainable development pattern for a city of 2.5 million (including greater Miami-Dade County) that has one of the highest poverty rates per capita of any city in the United States.

Starchitecture driven by a bunch of developers gets press attention, but efforts to renew and develop the long-decayed and neglected urban fabric in between all of these gleaming pleasure domes need to continue and increase. “Just as the Art Deco district restoration of 30 years ago seemed at the time like a risky, unglamorous slog, and over years yielded immeasurable rewards, the real—and truly valuable—work of investing in and redeveloping Miami will come by exploiting the charms of the older, close-in neighborhoods such as Edgewater, Wynwood and Buena Vista,” notes Shulman. “They don't have the cachet and international name recognition of South Beach, Coconut Grove or Coral Gables—yet—but they are currently being revived by a vibrant mix of immigrants and a generation of Miamians that is returning from the suburbs.” The Design District, which is adjacent to Wynwood and Little Haiti, is leading the way in creating a fine-grained, smaller-scale neighborhood development that is a piece of a larger puzzle, and an alternative to the isolated,

monumental tower-in-the-park approach to design, which has made the city a renowned architectural work of art-in-progress but has prevented it from being cohesive and human-scaled.