

Embracing Miami's Past and Future

By LINDA LEEDEC. 11, 2013



Allan Shulman has designed the newly opened 5,000-square-foot Miami Center for Architecture and Design. CreditMoris Moreno for The New York Times
Allan Shulman, the 51-year-old principal of the architectural firm Shulman & Associates in Miami, first became known for historic preservation. He rescued the 1915 Browns

Hotel on lower Ocean Drive, which was built of pine. And he found a way to save much of the Art Deco Lincoln Theater on Lincoln Road, turning it into a stylish glass-walled H & M store. His new, 5,000-square-foot [Miami Center for Architecture and Design](#) (known as MCAD) opened last Friday in part of the 1912 main Miami Post Office, on Northeast First Avenue, in Downtown Miami. Over the years, the building had suffered much indignity, including a spell as an Office Depot. Now, as the new headquarters of the [American Institute of Architects Miami](#) chapter, it will be a place for free community events as well as professional gatherings. Speaking by phone from his office in the Miami Design District, Mr. Shulman, president of the Miami chapter, offered details about MCAD and opinions on the city's building scene. (The interview has been edited and condensed.)

Your office said MCAD cost an impressively low \$60 a square foot. What considerations went into its design?

The center is housed in part of the 1912 main Miami Post Office.

We wanted it to be a contemporary space, because Miami has a contemporary image. So the back half is open-plan, kind of an industrial space, with a floating metal staircase built out of the steel used for street construction. For the large public room, we wanted to imbue what fragments were there with the ghost of memory. We couldn't fully restore the extraordinary brick vaults, because of the budget. The new hanging globe lights are a reflection of the original design. When it was built in 1912, the limestone-and-steel post office was one of the most permanent civic structures in Miami, a city that was largely wood.

Wasn't it nepotism for you as the head of the Miami A.I.A. to hire yourself as the architect?

I can assure you I would never have chosen myself. Even before I became president, there was no time to do a competition. Because of the budget, all the professional work, including mine, had to be donated. Most of the fixtures and furniture were donated. The lighting, glass, carpet, wood floors, even hardware were donated.

With all the new buildings going up in Miami, could there be a new real estate bubble?

No. Although the last recession seemed like a bubble, I think the building was just out ahead of the actual market. Almost everything built has been enthusiastically absorbed. I'm pretty convinced that the new projects have to do with the changes in the city, where urban life has come alive and the neighborhoods have grown into diversified districts. Miami is very much a city of cities, with no strong gravitational center. Probably the most dynamic place now would be Brickell, where development today dwarfs what happened during the previous boom. There are towers going up all over the place.

Mr. Shulman is known for his preservations of historic buildings.

What is the worst building in Miami and Miami Beach?

The worst *structure* is the I-95 highway, especially the I-95 and I-395 interchange. The impact of that structure, and the autos moving at high speed through Overtown and cutting though everything, will take generations to heal, if it will ever heal. Although where I-95 goes through downtown and over the river, it becomes a beautiful experience.

The best new building?

I'm thinking it's more of a trend of buildings. The recent work of [Herzog & de Meuron](#), like the [1111 building](#) on Lincoln Road, with the open parking garage, and the new [Perez Art Museum Miami](#), are notable for the way they have plumbed Miami's tropical identification. Those buildings brought tropicalizing architectural features to contemporary designs. These days no stone is left unturned in making projects into an opportunity to show design. It's proof that an architectural culture is ascendant.

What about the rising sea? Is Miami doomed?

No, I'm an optimist. Miami changes rapidly. It always has. I live in a different city from the one I moved to 22 years ago. People will rise to whatever challenge comes. We will create new environments. Maybe stilts, or the city will reconfigure itself. It will survive.