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Beyond South Beach

MIAMI MODERN

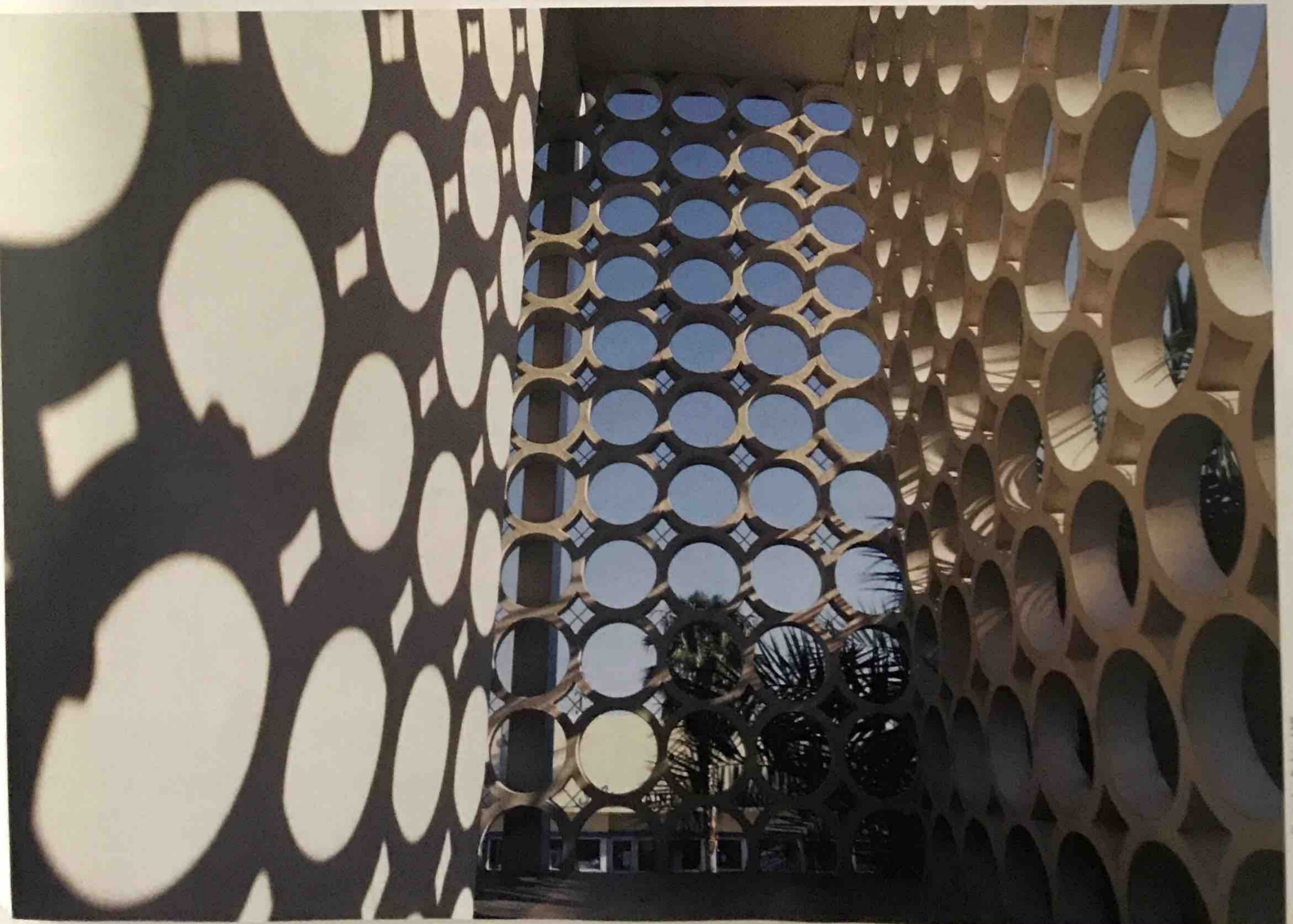
By Juliette Guilbert

Miami's Art Deco architecture, resurrected and increasingly celebrated over the past decade, has come to embody the hip lifestyle of South Beach. But the city also has an important cache of postwar buildings. Long ignored, even reviled, these masterpieces are finally getting their place in the sun. Dubbed MiMo (Miami Modern) by local preservationists, this generation of glamorous beach resorts, kitsch motels, space-age gas stations and "tropical-modernist" commercial and residential buildings grew out of the cultural optimism and explosive metropolitan growth that characterized postwar Miami, much like the Googie architecture of Los Angeles or the decorated sheds of the Vegas Strip. As elsewhere, new construction techniques and materials like aluminum storefront framing, flat-slab construction and sculptured concrete had a role in shaping the best of the era's design. But MiMo architects also

adapted modernist principles — from Frank Lloyd Wright's organic architecture to the International Style — to suit Miami's peculiar conditions: the fierce heat and torrential rains, the availability of local materials like keystone (cut coral quarried in the Florida Keys) and, above all, the special demands of a tourist economy booming as a result of a newly mobile and prosperous American public.

"Miami designed itself around its own branding as an American exotic location," says Allan T. Shulman, a Miami architect and Research Assistant Professor of Architecture at the University of Miami. "You could indulge in fantasies of foreign exoticism, but do it all in a clean, safe, American setting." In Miami, appreciation for the new, combined with the travelers' yen for slightly foreign surroundings, produced some of the mid 20th century's most adventurous design.

Below Union Planters Bank, 1133 Normandy Drive, Miami Beach, by Francis Hoffman, 1958.



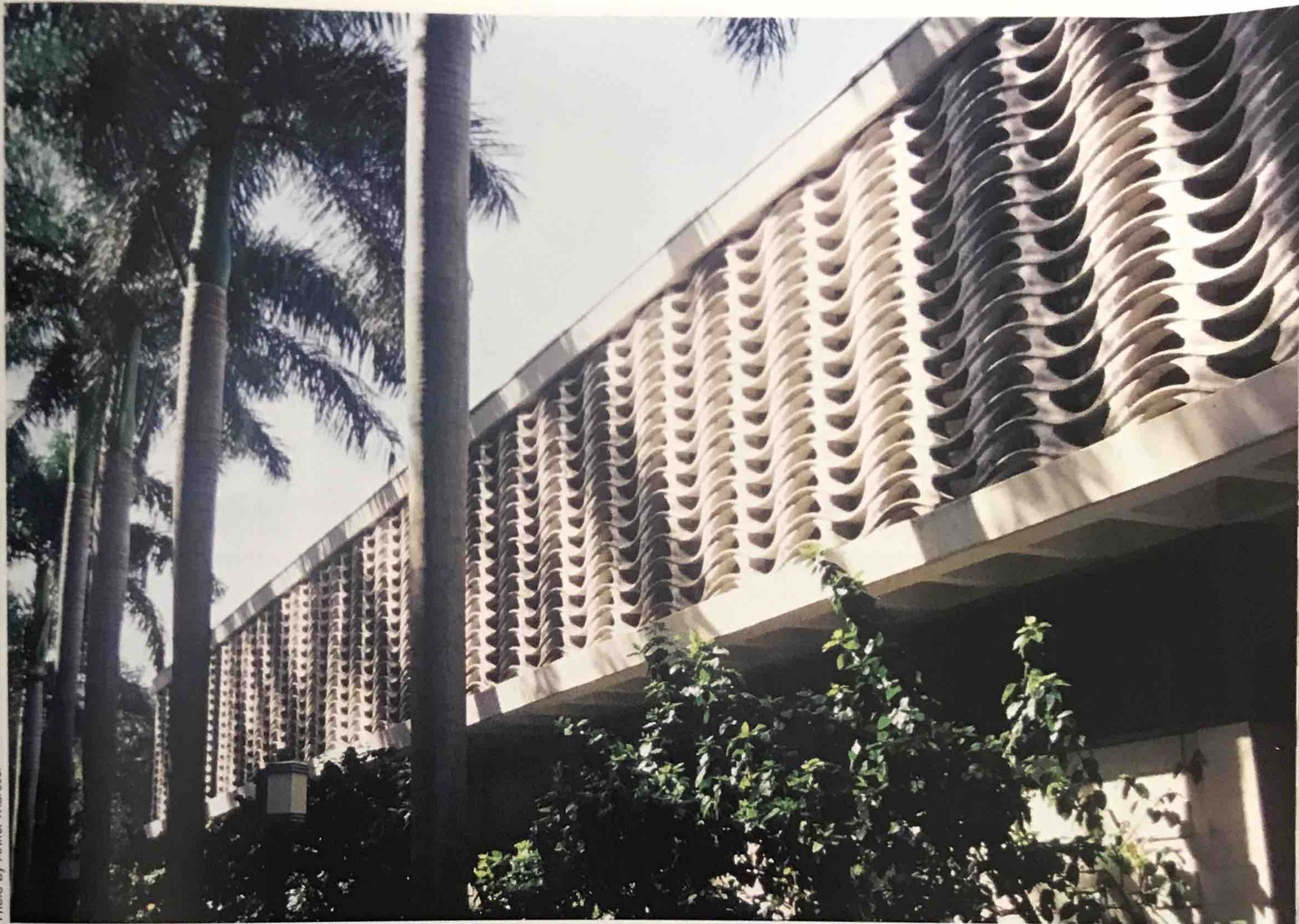


Photo by Arthur Marcus.

Above MacArthur Building, University of Miami, Coral Gables, by Wahl Snyder & Associates, 1959.

Below Detail of the façade of 4685 Ponce de Leon Boulevard, Coral Gables, by Le Roy K. Albert, 1960.

Alfred Browning Parker, one of Florida's most renowned architects and the principal figure of the Wrightian Coconut Grove School, started practicing in the 1950s and is still designing, as well as teaching at the University of Florida. He describes post-war Miami as a time and place of great openness about architecture and design. "The clients came from all parts of the country, and they weren't looking for tradition," he says. "They wanted a new life, so modern buildings appealed to them. When they came to Miami, they didn't want a Greek column. They wanted something new, modern: when you had an exposed lolly column they didn't mind it."

"MiMo is more than one style," says Randall Robinson, executive director of the North Beach Development Corporation and co-author with Eric P. Nash, of *MiMo: Miami Modern Revealed* (Chronicle, 2004), encompassing a number of regional subgenres. "Subtropical Modernism" was practiced by Robert Law Weed, Robert Little and Igor B. Polevitzky, among others, who sought to adapt Miesian principles to the local climate. **The University of Miami**, *Coral Gables*, America's first modernist campus, was planned by local architect Marion Manley, who designed a number

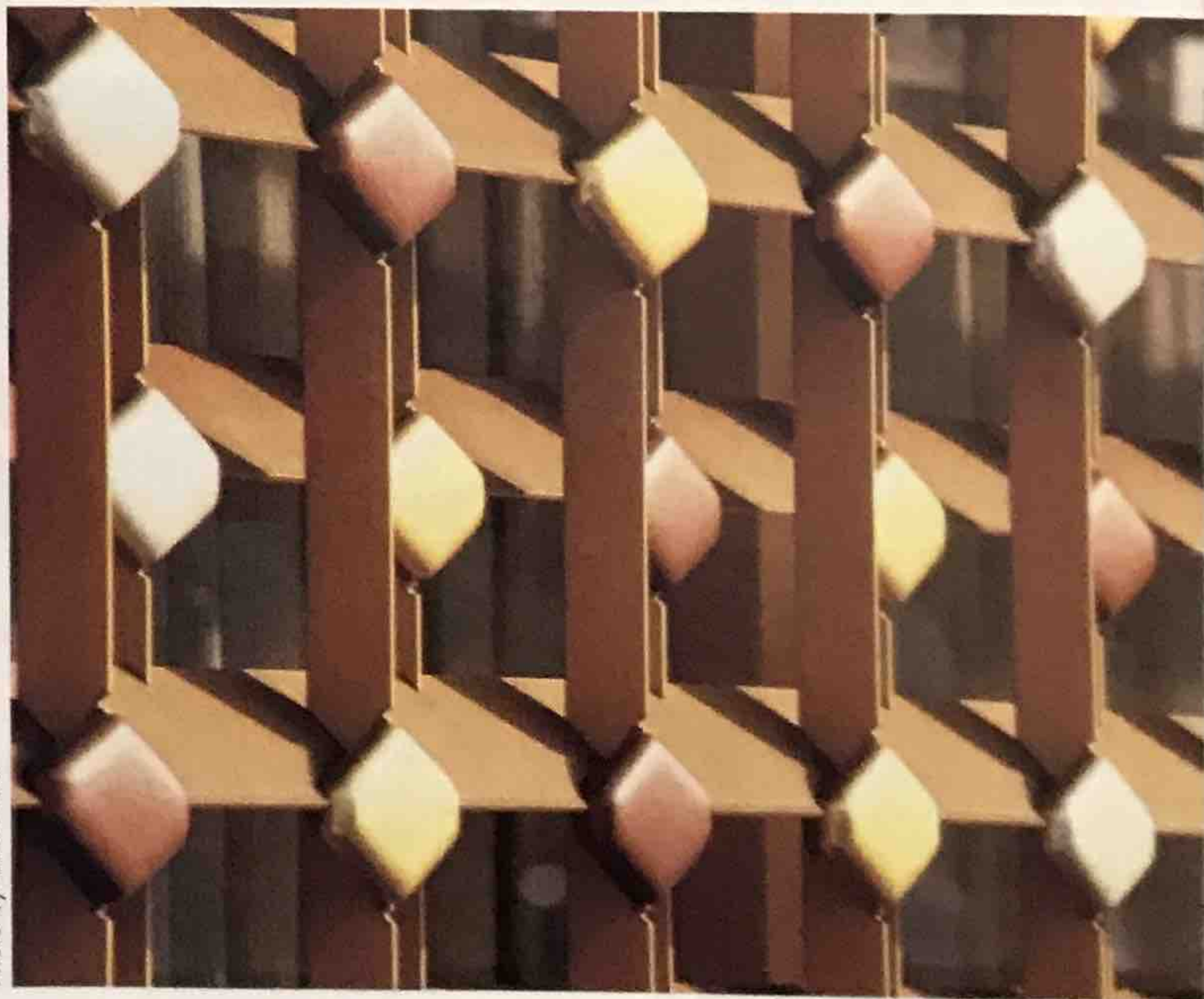


Photo by Robin Hill.



Photo by Thomas Delbeck.

Above Coconut Grove Bank, 2401 S. Bayshore Drive, Miami, by Weed-Johnson, 1959.

of its buildings along with fellow Subtropical Modernists Little, Weed and Wahl Snyder in the late '40s. Robinson cites the use of Tennessee crab orchard stone in large pieces, which gives a warmth to many of the original campus buildings.

"The best-known mid-century style in South Florida is probably the resort style of the big Miami Beach hotel towers, which were very close to the International Style," says Robinson. "But their pedestals and porte-cochères and lobbies were very lavishly decorated and sculptural." Two of the best examples are the **Eden Roc**, 4525 Collins Avenue, designed by Morris Lapidus, the high priest of resort MiMo, in 1955, and the **Deauville**, 6701 Collins Avenue, designed by Melvin Grossman in 1957. (Grossman, a Lapidus protégé, also designed Caesar's Palace in Las Vegas.) Both have voluminous, elaborately designed "movie-set" lobbies, which became Lapidus's much-imitated trademark.

The Eden Roc and Lapidus's 1954 **Fontainebleau**, 4441 Collins Avenue, concealed over-the-top rococo interiors behind sleek modern facades, and embody perfectly

Lapidus's architectural mission: to provide a stage set for the leisure fantasies of America's postwar middle class. Weaned on Hollywood glamour, they were ready, after two decades of hard times, to have fun in style. Lapidus's credo (and the title of his autobiography) was "Too much is never enough," and his excesses were disdained by an architectural establishment enamored of International Style austerity. Still, he created buildings with enormous mass appeal and lasting aesthetic influence, and he popularized a plethora of mid-century design motifs, like the paraboloid kidney-bean shapes he called "woggles," and the round cutouts he termed "cheeseholes."

"In Miami, you have a lyrical and ironic approach to modern architecture that is less theoretical, more pragmatic," says the University of Miami's Shulman. "And it is, of course, detested by the leaders of the modernist movement and ridiculed by the press. But it is a truly original, local invention. When Morris Lapidus separates architecture from interior design, designing state-of-the-art hotels that are literally miracles of modern engineering and functional integrity,

but that are decorated with Italianate statues and mirrors, he writes himself out of the history of mainstream modern architecture. But he creates something that connects with the Miami traditions of Mediterranean revival, Art Deco and with a liberal and eclectic approach to style that flourishes here, probably because it's peripheral to the rest of the nation." It was not until the end of Lapidus's long life in the 1990s and the ascent of postmodernist architecture that his vision came to be appreciated in mainstream design circles.

If the Fontainebleau and Eden Roc, with their clientele of show people and starlets in mink bikinis, defined the top end of Miami's freewheeling, irreverent Modernism, motels were the proletarian version. Lapidus, Norman Giller, Rufus Nims and others transformed the motel — a building form that, before the war, offered no more than a spartan one-night highway rest stop — into a democratic low-cost modern resort: destination architecture for the masses. Nims, known for his prototypical design for the orange-roofed Howard Johnson motel, designed many local modern homes as well. Giller, who at 87 still practices architecture in Miami Beach, designed the first two-story motel (and the first outdoor catwalk hallway) in the U.S., the 1951 **Ocean Palm**, 15795 Collins Avenue, on the beach in Sunny Isles, for what he calls largely pragmatic reasons. The cost of the land per room was half what it would be for a one-story motel, says Giller. "And it was a destination motel: with the Atlantic Ocean as the backyard, people would stay a week, two weeks. That, to me, was one of the beginning points of what we now call MiMo architecture. It was an answer to the question of satisfying the needs of all of these people who had been deprived, during the war, of places to live, places to buy groceries, everything."

But after addressing practical matters like land value ratios and the client's return on investment (in the case of Giller's Ocean Palm, recouped after the first season), Giller and other commercial architects let loose with exuberant decorative flourishes, intended both to entice passing motorists and to provide an experience of exotic glamour after they checked in. These basic postwar boxes were adorned with glass gables, textured stucco, aerodynamic canopies, brise-soleils, hyperparaboloids, cheeseholes, floating staircases, decorative columns, and all manner of kitsch imagery: camels, wagon trains, sphinxes, thunderbirds. People who came to Miami were looking for escape from everyday life, and the architects of the period delivered.

In 1999, Giller's best-known surviving building, the 1957 **Carillon Hotel**, 6801 Collins Avenue, became the cause

Top Bayside Apartments, 910 Bay Drive, Miami Beach, by Robert Swartburg, 1951.

Middle 1155–65 Marseilles Drive, Miami Beach, by E.F. Hauser, 1957.

Right 350 South Shore Drive, Miami Beach, by G.M. Fein and Morton Fellman, 1954.

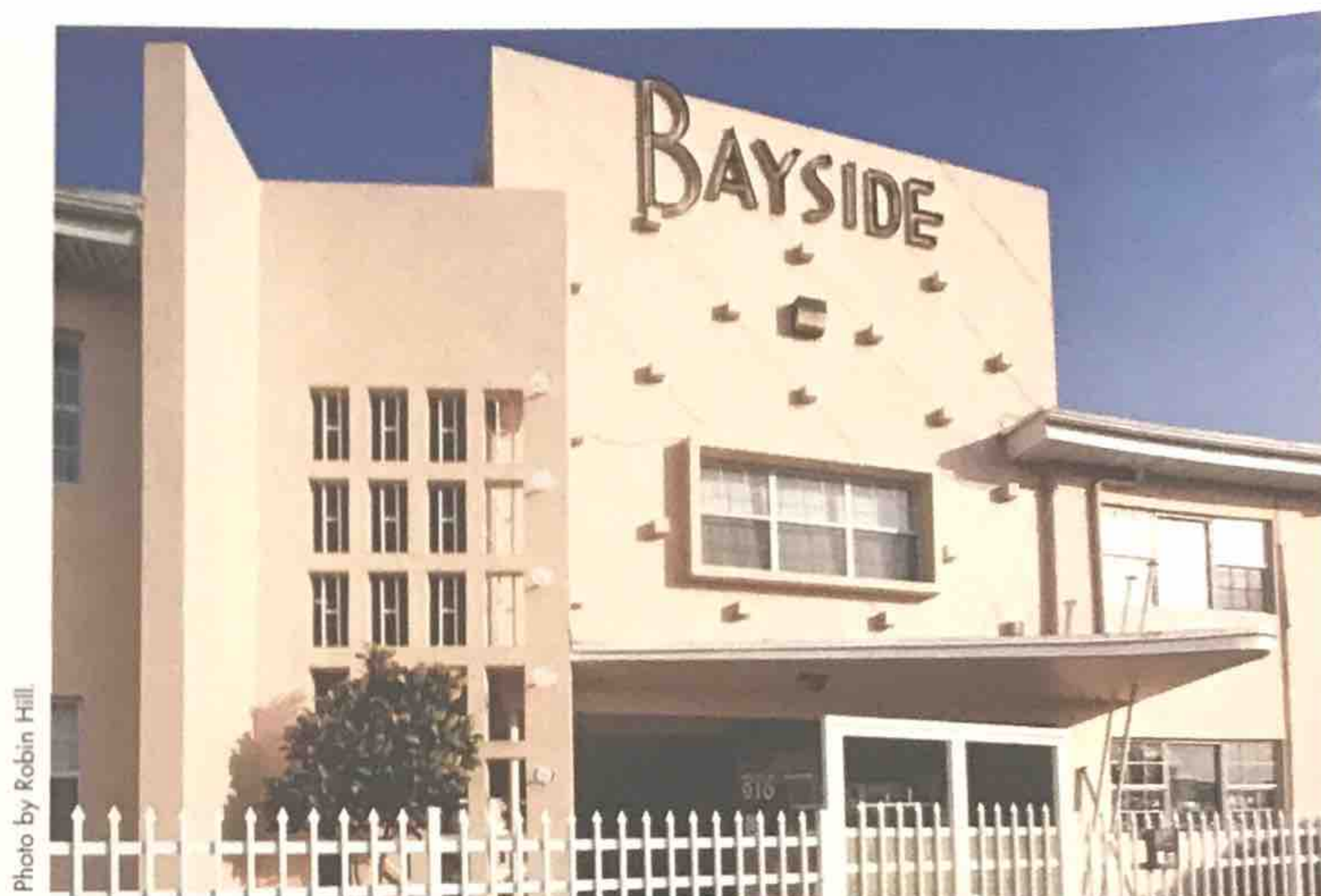


Photo by Robin Hill.



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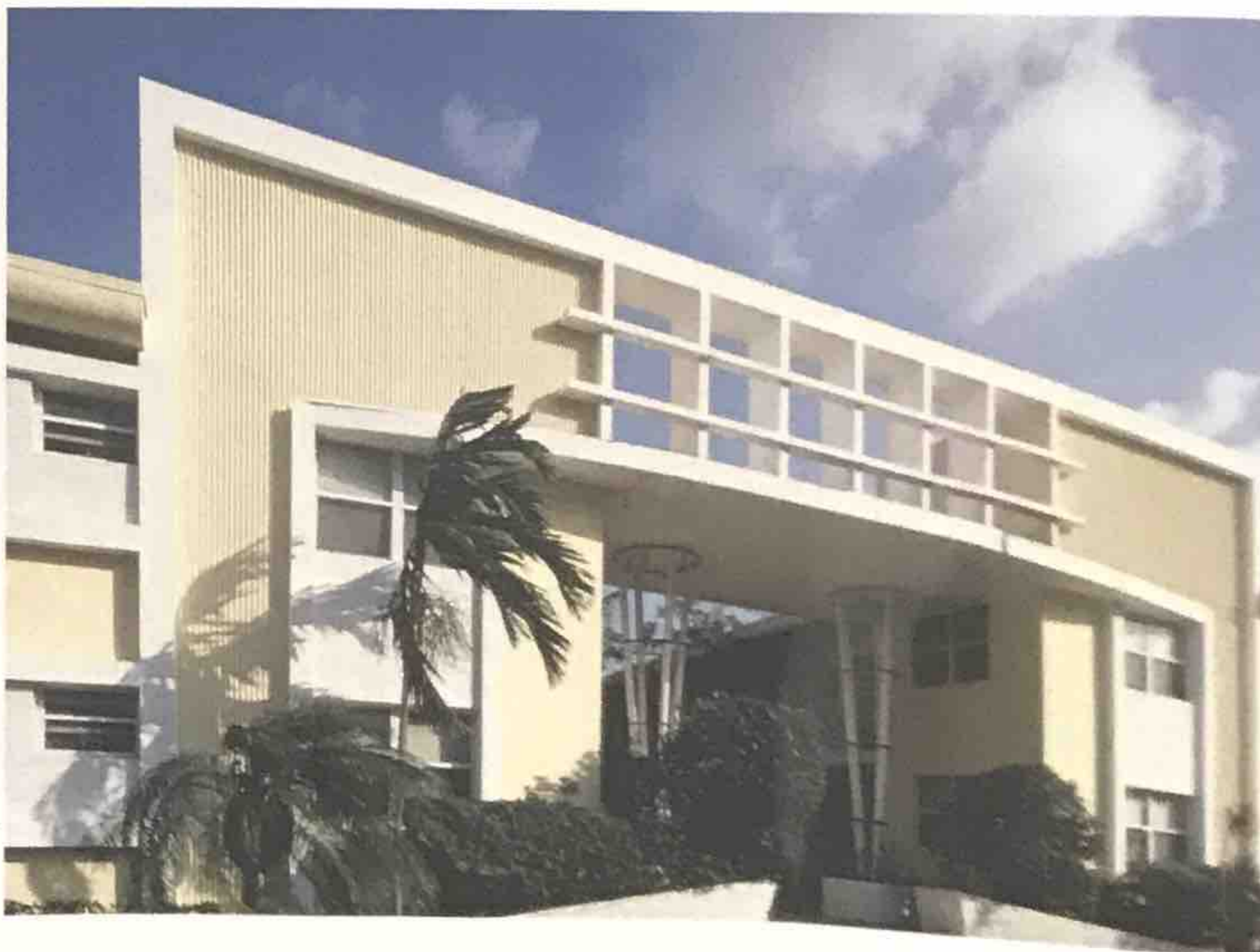


Photo by Robin Hill.

CITY REPORT



Photo by Thomas Delbeck.

Above 1200 Ocean Drive, Miami Beach, by Gilbert Fein, 1958.

Below Pizzeria Andiamo (General Tire), 5600 Biscayne Boulevard, Miami, by Robert Law Weed, 1954.

celebre that gave rise to the MiMo preservation movement. The developers of Canyon Ranch, a luxury resort hotel and condominium owned by the spa chain, slated the Carillon — an innovative structure defined by a soaring glass curtain wall reminiscent of New York's Lever House — for demolition. Suddenly, preservationists who had focused exclusively on the Art Deco streetscape of South Beach awoke to the fact that 25 years' worth of Miami's built environment was being threatened. The North Beach Development Corp.'s Robinson teamed up with local interior designer and preservationist Teri d'Amico to lead the charge to save the Carillon, coining the term MiMo and setting out to landmark the buildings of the Sinatra, JFK, and Jackie Gleason era.

D'Amico says that it was difficult at first to get Deco-minded preservationists to pay attention to Miami's postwar Modernism, but the more she and Robinson explored the city, the more urgent the situation appeared. "Randall and I would get in the car every Saturday and drive around parts of Miami," D'Amico says. "And we realized, MiMo isn't just on the beach, it's everywhere. It defines most of Miami." In order to publicize their efforts, she says, the preservationists held rallies that featured — along with surviving architects of the Giller and Lapidus era — "the gal that had the Beatles swim in her pool for the cover of *Life*, and a booking agent from back then who would talk about the different hotels, and who was in them, and what they were doing: the Rat Pack, Lucille Ball, Arthur Godfrey."

The approach was a success: the Canyon Ranch developers decided to incorporate elements of the Carillon into the new design (now called the Canyon Ranch Carillon Hotel & Spa Club), including the skeleton of the original tower, a recreation of its gridded glass facade, and its jaunty turquoise concrete porte-cochère canopy and white concrete accordion wall, which will form part of the new street-level facade. "It's not a restoration by any stretch," Robinson notes, "but the original building will be treated with respect."

In 2003, the **Vagabond Motel**, 7301 Biscayne Boulevard,

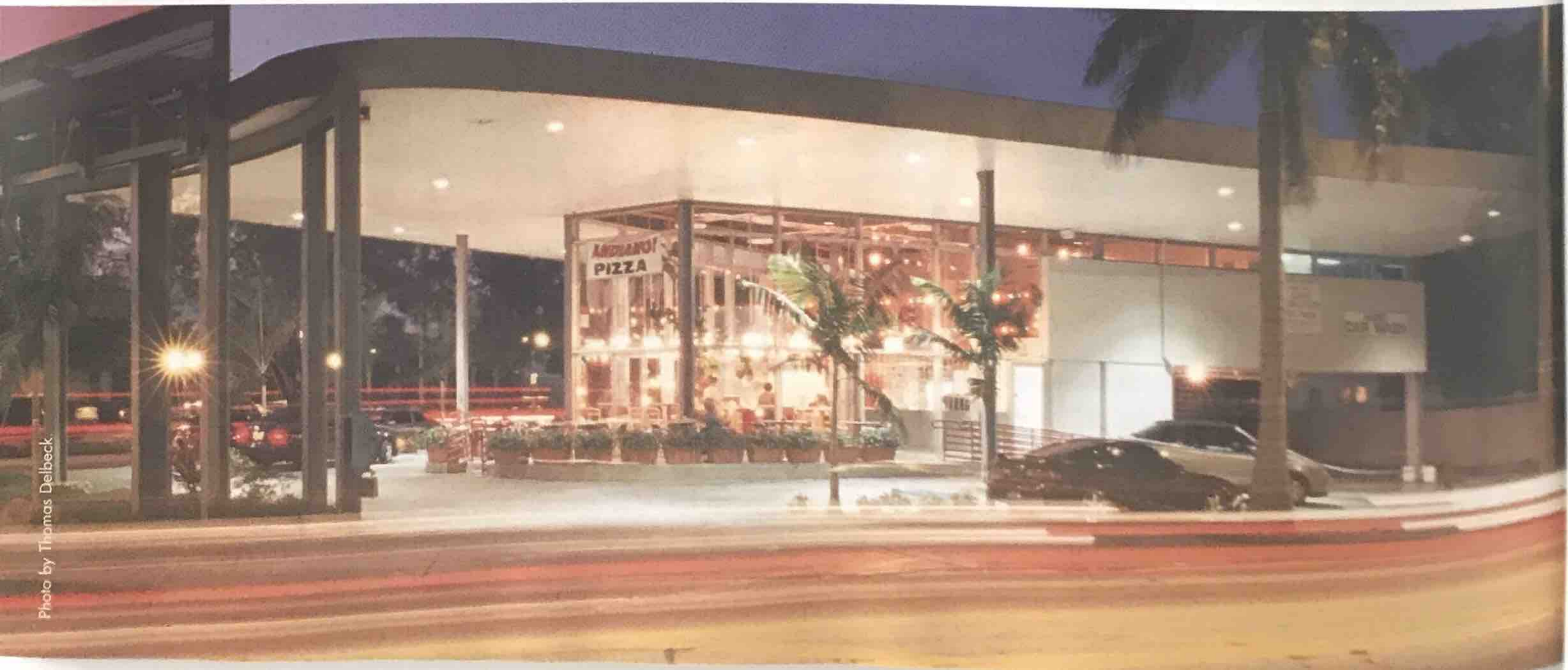
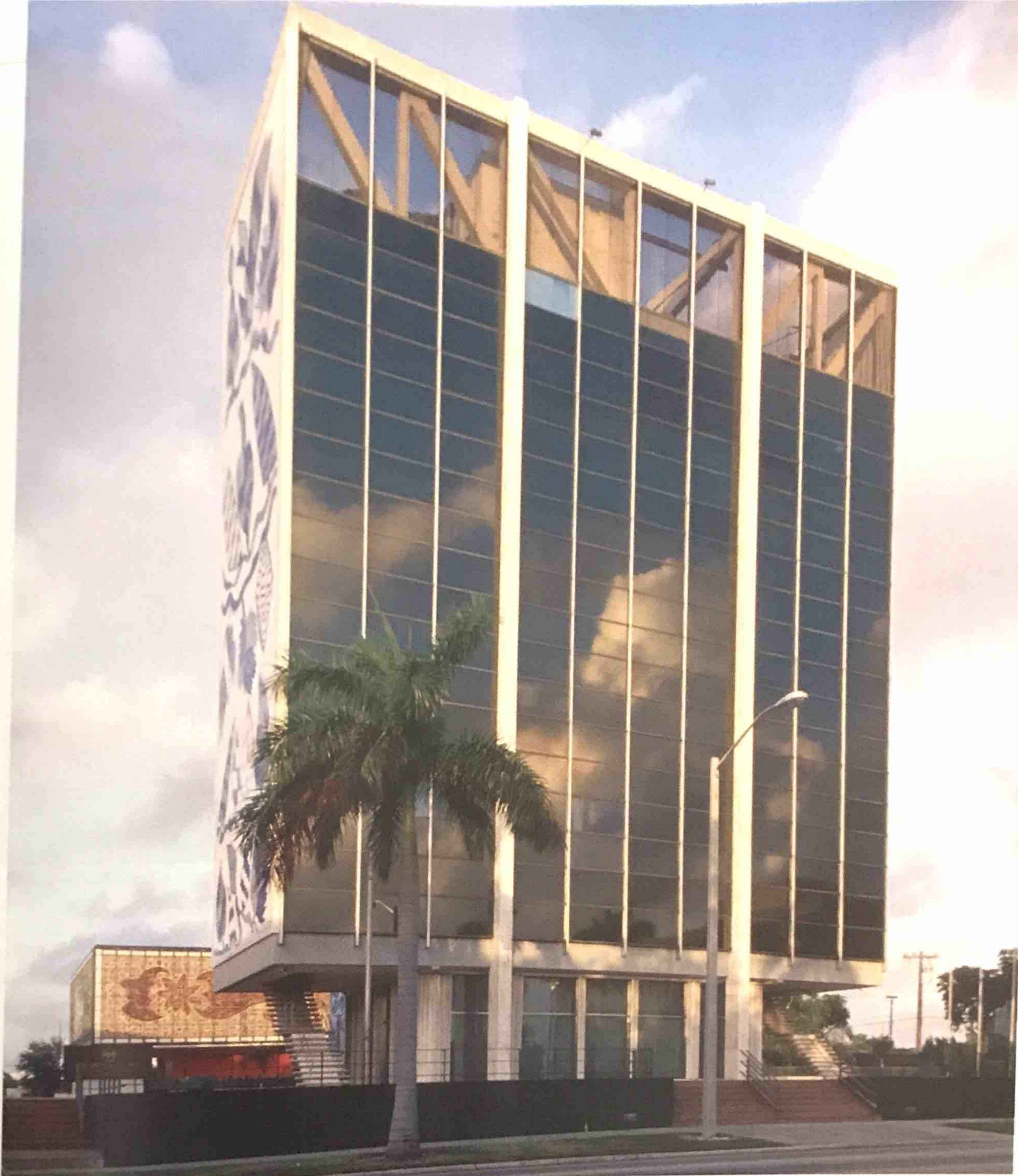


Photo by Thomas Delbeck.



Above Bacardi USA, 2100 Biscayne Boulevard, Miami, by Enrique Gutierrez, 1964.

also received a new lease on life when the city of Miami granted it protected status. Designed in 1953 by Robert M. Swartburg, the same architect who earlier created the famed Delano Hotel in South Beach, the Vagabond was the *demier cri* in "flabbergast" motel architecture, designed to lure travelers off the road and away from the competition.

But by the 1990s, the Vagabond, like the other exotically named motels along its stretch of Biscayne — the Sinbad, the South Pacific, the Shalimar — had slid into decay. Now, thanks to its protected status, it is being restored and will reopen as a chic hotel and nightclub in early 2006. The Vagabond's stretch of **Biscayne Boulevard** between 54th and 81st streets features many other sites still standing:

Robert Law Weed's sublime 1954 **gas station** at 5600 Biscayne (now a pizzeria/carwash); the 1954 eggcrate facade of a **concrete company's former headquarters**, designed by Pancoast, Ferendino, Skeelee & Burnham, at 5220; and Enrique Gutierrez's 1963 **Bacardi USA building** at 2100, which Robinson and Nash call "the Seagram Building of the Southlands."

In 2004, the city of Miami Beach created the **North Beach Resort Historic District**, 6261–6801 Collins Avenue, to protect the modern hotels along the ocean side of Collins, including the **Deauville**, where the Beatles's 1964 Ed Sullivan Show appearance was taped; the **Casablanca**, designed by Roy France in 1949, where massive, bare-chested genies



Photo by Thomas Delbeck.

Above Sherry Frontenac Hotel, 6565 Collins Avenue, Miami Beach, by Henry Hohauser, 1947.

sculpted in concrete support the porte-cochère; the **Sherry Frontenac**, designed by Henry Hohauser in 1946, with its soaring, backlit neon signage; and the **Allison** (now the Cabana), designed by A. Herbert Mathes in 1951. The non-designated side of the street also holds treasures: the mosaic-clad **Publix supermarket** at 6826 and the highway-modern **Ocean Breeze Motel** at 6600.

Despite these successes, the rapaciousness of Miami's real estate market continues to put unprotected MiMo structures in jeopardy. Significant buildings that have already been lost include Giller's Diplomat Hotel — his personal favorite — and Lapidus's Algiers; the Driftwood and Castaways in Sunny Isles; and in nearby Fort Lauderdale, Igor Polevitzky's 550 Breakers and Gold Coast Hotel. The **Americana** (now the **Sheraton Bal Harbor**), 9701 Collins Avenue, a 1956 Lapidus creation which once featured an alligator terrarium in the lobby (Lapidus originally wanted monkeys to swing from its vines) is slated for demolition. MiMo aficionados in Fort Lauderdale are currently fighting to save the **Ireland's Inn**, 2200 North Ocean Boulevard, designed by Charles McKirahan and George Waadey in 1964, a whimsical, curved slab of a building on the beach. Other concentrations of MiMo — motels in Sunny Isles and on Biscayne Boulevard, low-slung office buildings on the outskirts of downtown Miami, multifamily homes in Bay Harbor Islands — will likely face a struggle for survival in the near future. Whether MiMo will find a permanent place alongside Deco in Miami's historic design lexicon — or be largely swept away by the tides of redevelopment — remains to be seen. ■



Photo by Robin Hill.

Above Fontainebleau Hotel, 4441 Collins Avenue, by Morris Lapidus (1953) and A. Herbert Mathes (1959).

Juliette Guilbert lives in Miami and writes about design, food and travel. Her articles have appeared in *Florida InsideOut*, *Child*, *Palm Beach Illustrated* and other magazines.