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# THE

Without Teri D'Amico, Miami would have lost many of its mid-20th Century architectural gems. Hell, we wouldn't even know what to call them.

# MODERN WOMAN

BY GASPAR GONZÁLEZ  
PHOTO BY ROBIN HILL

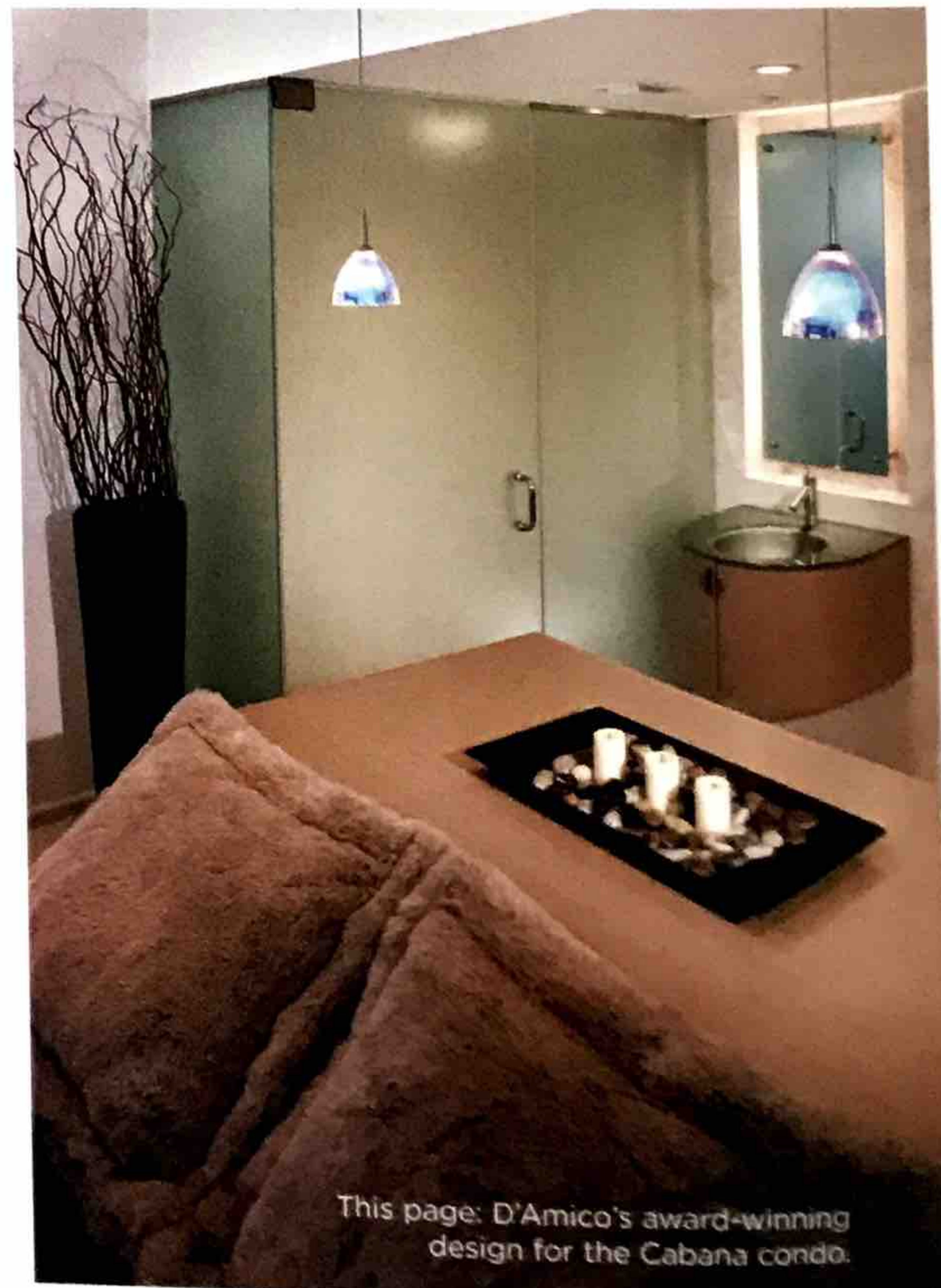
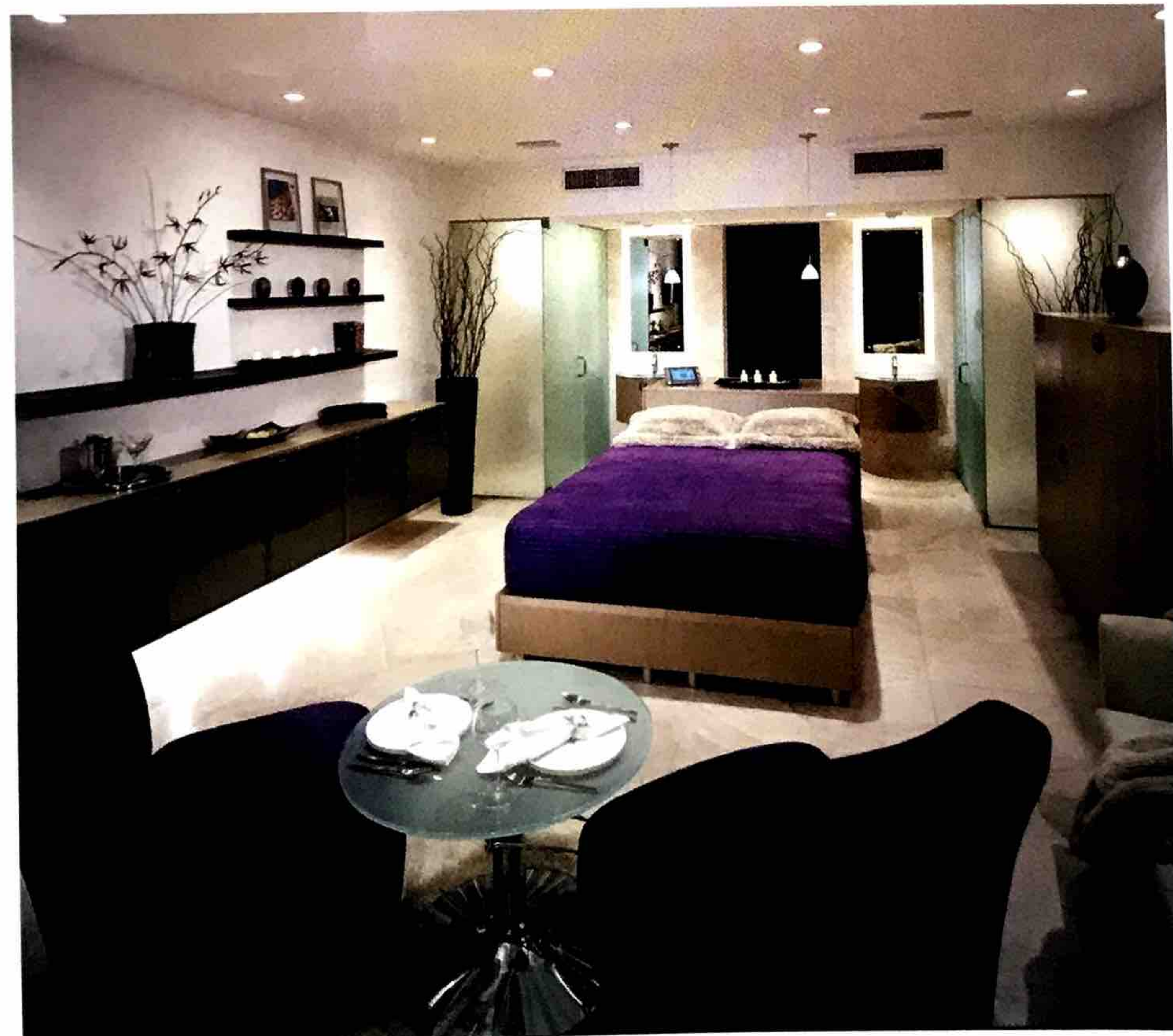
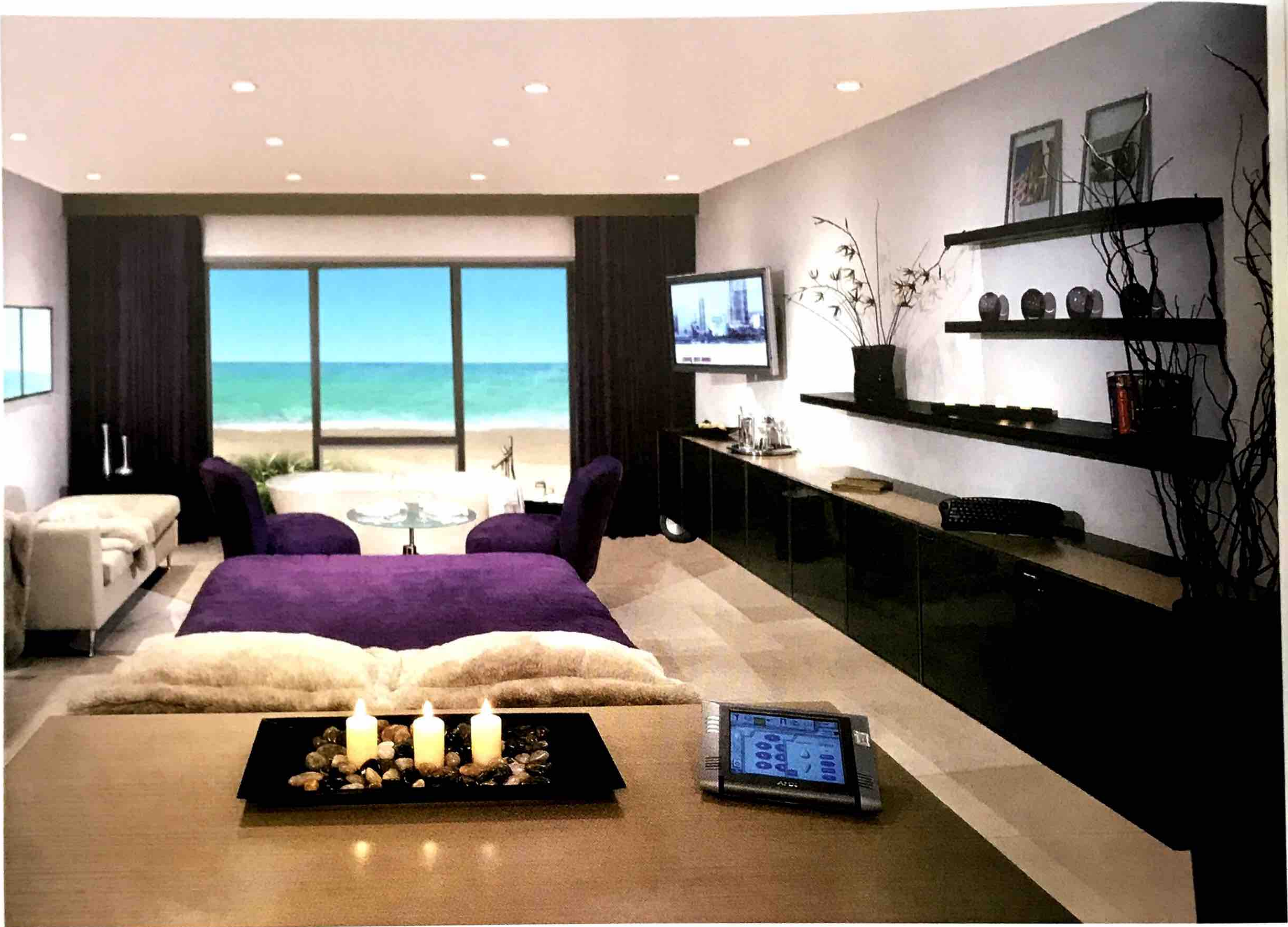
One might expect to find award-winning interior designer Teri D'Amico's office, D'Amico Design Associates ([dadausa.com](http://dadausa.com)), in some fabulous 1950s building just off Collins Avenue or on Biscayne Boulevard. After all, D'Amico (along with Randall Robinson) is one of the driving forces behind the movement to preserve Miami Modernism (MiMo), a campaign that has MiMo-rich Biscayne Boulevard on track to being designated a historic district.

Instead, she and her small staff work out of a nondescript strip mall in North Miami Beach. Nondescript, at least, from the outside. Inside, the place is awash in colors, fabrics, and drawings, a testament to just how in demand D'Amico is these days. Part of the reason for that is undoubtedly her versatility; D'Amico's portfolio features private residences (one for a member of a royal family), Caribbean resorts (too numerous to mention), Miami Beach condos (including the Cabana, a commission for which she was recently honored by *Hospitality Design*), restaurants, stores, and even spas. The main reason is D'Amico herself, who is down-to-earth, funny, and more knowledgeable about design than an army of swatch-toters. (Don't get D'Amico started on certification for interior designers.)

MiMo is both her job and her passion. D'Amico is currently at work on a restoration/redesign of Biscayne's Vagabond Motel and she continues to devote serious time to the MiMo Coalition ([mimo.us](http://mimo.us)), a grassroots organization dedicated to the celebration and preservation of Miami Modernism.

You know, on second thought, the designer's office might just be in the perfect place, down the street from the world-famous Hit Factory. It's hard to find someone who's a bigger hit around Miami these days than D'Amico.





This page: D'Amico's award-winning design for the Cabana condo.





The project that turned D'Amico on to Mid-Century Modernism: the West Broadway Restaurant and Café.

**Where did you grow up?** I was born in Waterbury [Connecticut]. Between four and eight, I lived in Sturbridge, Massachusetts; my mother says that's where I learned to give tours. [Old Sturbridge Village, a historic colonial town, is a popular tourist attraction.] But I grew up in Wayne, New Jersey... [the town that inspired the name for the indie rock band] Fountains of Wayne. [Laughs.] I grew up in suburbia—Willowbrook Mall and all that. So Miami was pretty striking when I got down here. It had what I call “happy architecture.”

**What do you mean by that, exactly?**

I remember sitting at a café in Greenwich Village, one of those places where you can have an espresso and people-watch. And I remember looking this way and seeing nothing but brick, then looking the other way and seeing nothing but brick. You couldn't see the sky—and the Village is not a [built-up] part of the city. I like the fact you can see the sky, and the water, and [so many] great colors in Miami.

**You majored in industrial design and art**

**history at Ohio State University. Did you always know you wanted to gravitate toward interior design or is that something that happened later?** My very first class, I studied the Bauhaus. That grew into a passion to stay on the history side, and the education side. My major was actually “arts advocacy.” [Later] I took one class at Parsons [School of Design in New York City], and it changed my life. The professor knew I wanted to move to Miami and he encouraged me.

**Why did you want to move to Miami?** I had been down here visiting a friend in Hollywood and I took a three-hour tour of the Art Deco District and [after that] I just knew I wanted to move down.

**What was it like working as a tour guide on Miami Beach?** It was 1992, and I had just arrived here. I didn't have an apartment yet, but I joined the Miami Design Preservation League [MDPL]. We developed a bike tour and cruised 15 people around. I wanted them to know the difference between Mediterranean, Deco, and

postwar [architecture]. I approached the tours more from an appreciation standpoint than historical. My thing is to teach people how to look. Once you teach people how to look, they see [these styles] everywhere.

**According to your Website, it was while working with architect Henry Myerberg on the West Broadway Restaurant and Café in Manhattan that you first connected with Mid-Century Modernism. Tell me about that project.** Henry had only 1950s French furniture in the restaurant. I became immersed in it. Henry taught me how to look at furniture design in a certain light. See this? [She holds up a photo of the interior.] I learned that these chair legs were [described as] “splayed.” When I came down here, I saw [that same stylistic feature] in all the [postwar] buildings. Then I found out the buildings weren't protected.

**A lot of your early work in Miami was in the resort sector. How did that prepare you for the future?** Right after college, I took a trip to





A classic MiMo apartment house in Bay Harbor Islands (Don Reiff Associates, 1959). Credit: Thomas Delbeck.

Jamaica and stayed at Trelawny, which is a Morris Lapidus-designed resort, and I fell in love with resorts. When I was a kid, I was a swimmer and I used to love [hotel] pools and lobbies. When you say “resort work,” that usually incorporates recreation. [Working at] LPWK Architects [Lane Pettigrew Wood Karp] introduced me to Caribbean resort design at the highest level. They really sought to create great experiences for travelers.

**When did you strike out on your own and found DADA?** In 1997. I have such strong opinions about design, and I felt I had a strong perspective on the design business. I’m the daughter of a CPA—I approach design like any other business. You have to listen, you have to be cost-effective, and you have to take a tremendous amount of pride in the work you put your name on.

**How did you meet Morris Lapidus?** I was teaching at Florida International University and we had these educational programs. Morris Lapidus was 98 years old and he was talking about donating his dining room to the Bass Museum.

Along with Randall Robinson, [my students and I] worked with Lapidus in his dining room—disassembling it—and heard his entire philosophy on light, space, materials. His work was all about emotion—how to provoke emotions in your clients. I felt so lucky to be a part of that project.

**You and Randall Robinson are credited with coining the term “MiMo” for Miami Modernism. How did that come about?** Randall and I were tour guides at MDPL and nobody really wanted to tackle preservation outside of South Beach. The Carillon [Hotel] was going to be demolished; Randall and I went out there and rallied people. We came up with the term “MiMo” because we wanted to save the Carillon. People were referring to “postwar architecture.” We wanted [a term] more like “Miami Modern Movement” and we [said] no, we need a name for the buildings, and we were, like, “M... M... M...” and it just came out “MiMo.”

**Why do you think it’s been so difficult to get the powers-that-be to recognize the potential**

**of a MiMo District? Isn’t that the same fight we had over Art Deco in the early ’80s?** It hasn’t been difficult, [at least not] compared to getting the Art Deco District recognized. The City of Miami Beach is so great [about] preserving historic architecture, and I think Miami is [headed in that same direction]. We thought we were going to have to convince city officials to [designate the stretch of Biscayne Boulevard between 50th and 77th streets] a historic district—but they wanted it. But I chalk that up to eight years of rallies, and public relations, and giving tours. [After the Miami Heat’s victory in the NBA finals], Pat Riley and Shaq were saying, “We want to get on Biscayne Boulevard!” And I thought, “That’s it. Biscayne Boulevard is back!”

**You recently were recognized for your work on the Cabana condo on Miami Beach. What did that project entail?** Hospitality Design magazine just held their first annual awards and we won [for Best Vacation Ownership Property]. The [winning design] was for a 350-square-foot space. Sieger Suarez were the architects. We broke



the box [by splitting] the toilet and the shower and putting the bed in the middle, so it doesn't feel like a hotel room. It's got a foldout kitchenette—microwave, sink, Sub-Zero freezer. It was designed to feel like the ultimate bachelor's pad, not a condo.

**How do you channel "bachelor" energy?** I have a tendency to do more masculine designs anyway. I'm not overly ornate. I was trained by architects. You don't want to cover up that window—you worked on that, man.

**Your portfolio features showrooms, spas, resorts, and private residences. Do you bring a different sensibility to each of those venues or do you rely on the client to guide you?** The client will either know what they want or you guide them so they can tell you what they want. The longer you stay in the business, you find people want you for your ideas, the work you've done. The goal in [resort design, especially] is to keep yourself fresh.

**Your work is primarily in South Florida and the Caribbean. Is that a philosophical or practical choice?** In the Caribbean, there's a respect for interior design that you don't necessarily find everywhere. You can put out the caliber of work you want to.

**What project are you devoting most of your time to these days?** The Vagabond Motel on Biscayne Boulevard, for Eric Silverman. Allan Shulman is the architect. We're custom designing most of the furniture, which has all been inspired by MiMo buildings, and it'll premiere at the Hospitality Design Miami show this month [September].

We're going to turn the Vagabond [architect Robert Swartburg; 1953] into a condo-motel. Units will be for sale, but they'll be designed for quick stays of a couple of days, almost like cabanas. There's going to be a restaurant-bar open 24 hours a day in the old lobby, and there will be a large club. One of the main attractions will be the pool lounge; we've designed it so you can literally spend all day and all night by the pool. And we'll [also] have retail stores. But one of the most important things about the Vagabond is that it's going to be home to the MiMo Coalition. We're going to have fundraisers and movie nights by the pool. We need somewhere to eat, hang, and drink. ☺

D'Amico and architect Allan Shulman will breathe new life into the Vagabond.

