

The recently renovated Betsy caters to a creative-thinking clientele



The Betsy's owners would like the recently renovated hotel to provide an intelligent refuge from the mad Cuban scene on Ocean Drive. AL DIAZ/MIAMI HERALD STAFF

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The Betsy opened last spring with a promise to deliver something different from South Beach's greatest export, excess with an ocean view. In a place that values bronzed bodies, parties and designer cocktails, the hotel was cast by its owners as an intellectual space far more suited to thinking and creativity.

A salon by the sea

Today, the boutique hotel at 1440 Ocean Dr. with its distinct Colonial bones, four-column portico and sweeping front porch, offers ambivalent programming that embraces the notion of public places as cultural parlors where thoughtful South Floridians and travelers can gather to engage in social discourse ranging from poverty to philanthropy.

Floridians and travelers can gather to engage in social discourse ranging from poverty to philanthropy, from the power of the arts to the healing of Haiti.

"We really believe that conversations matter, and we wanted a space in which like-minded people could meet, interact and work toward something good," says owner Jonathan Plutzk, 55, who retired from the investment-banking world in 2003. "We wanted to establish this hotel as a philanthropic, charitable force."

So far, with several cultural partners, The Betsy has hosted art salons and community workshops. It helped lead an oral-history project to capture the stories of World War II soldiers, screened documentaries, even appointed a vice president of philanthropy, whose primary mission is to make the place a conduit for good causes.

Even when its 8 Bar opened in November, the groovy subterranean lounge seemingly released from a 1920s time capsule when speakeasies were all the rage, characterized itself as a "personal retaliation against celebrity-obsessed nightlife."

Crystal Connor, a lawyer who lives in Miami Shores, was drawn into The Betsy by its distinct architecture. "It looked so quaint," Connor says. "I ended up going in and finding out about an African film that was being screened. The event was very pleasant, refreshing from what you normally have on Ocean Drive. I loved it."

The social experiment clearly pays dividends in terms of great marketing.

Hotel analyst Scott Brust says the hotel's commitment to raising social consciousness "is pretty unusual. There really seems to be an ingrained sensibility. And sure, that gets good press, but the mission is ongoing. The Betsy seems to be a real extension of the attitude of the owners."

Over coffee one afternoon at BLT Steak, the hotel's designer restaurant, Plutzk, the son of a poet, says that for as long as he can remember, his family was involved in culture, the arts and philanthropy.

"I learned that philanthropy is not just about writing checks," he says. "When we started making plans for the hotel, we knew we wanted to use the space in a meaningful way."

Plutzk and his investment-banker wife Lesley Goldwasser — The Betsy's principal owners — were already fans of Miami Beach when they decided to buy what was then The Betsy rissos hotel in 2005. It was a rare southern belle.

A WORLD APART

The building's graceful architecture stood apart from the neighborhood of clean-lined Art Deco gems. Its architect had been L. Murray Dixon, the man behind many of the beach's famous hotels, and one of his rare forays outside Miami Beach's signature genre.

Plutzk and Goldwasser also were seduced by the narrative behind the facade. The hotel had opened in 1942 and housed U.S. troops during World War II. In 1970, it was added to the State Registry of Historic Places.

In 2007, the couple launched a \$40 million renovation, reinventing the building and its vibe. Hip never hurts. But loud music does. So there is less boom, boom, boom so visitors can actually hear themselves and perhaps even the person sitting across from them.

The lobby was designed to feel like an oversized living room with sit-and-slay-a-spell wingback chairs, and the overall decor is decidedly low key without being boring, sophisticated yet not fussy. The Betsy's walls, like those of some other Miami Beach luxury hotels, have become a showcase for revolving art exhibitions. Work by rock photographer Jill Furmanovsky and photographer Richard Bluestein have graced the building's public spaces.

GETTING LIT

Plutzk and Goldwasser passed on stocking the 61 guest rooms with the standard glossy mags. Instead, they recruited Mitchell Kaplan, owner of Books & Books, to create a literary playlist.

A dozen or so books are neatly stacked on night stands in each room. Among the titles: *Fire to Fire* by Mark Doty, *Fade Away* by Harlan Coben, *A Man of Deceit* by Elle Wiesel. Oh, and the occasional issue of *Modern Painters* magazine. And authors on promotional tours, including Scott Turow, Debra Dean, Thomas L. Friedman and Isabella Rossellini, have stayed there.

"We took the idea of a mini-bar and said, 'Why not have a mini-library?' We wanted the selection to be both eclectic and substantial," says Kaplan, co-founder of Miami Book Fair International who has also been a partner in events at The Betsy. "People have clichéd notions of what South Beach is, and we wanted to show it off in a more serious way."

About six weeks after its grand opening in April 2009, The Betsy hosted a screening of NBC's *The Philanthropist*, a series loosely based on the life of billionaire Bobby Sager who has traveled the globe for charitable causes. He is also a co-owner of the hotel.

"Nothing happens unless you plant the seeds," Sager told the crowd that night. "I encourage you to go out and help someone. Go plant some seeds."

In the fall, the hotel appointed Deborah Briggs, Plutzk's sister, as philanthropy vice president and announced areas of interest: medical research, nonprofit sustainability, the arts, culture and African relief.

Briggs, who has worked in the nonprofit and marketing sectors for almost three decades, was charged with developing a platform and, equally important, with building good will within the community.

"We wanted to create a partnership with the community and have them tell us what was important to them and how they wanted to engage," Briggs says.

The Betsy brought in Jonelle Procope, CEO of the Apollo Theater in Harlem, to speak at an arts salon about the importance of philanthropy and cultural preservation. It also was a sponsor of the John Lennon Educational Tour Bus, a traveling multimedia recording studio, which invited area veterans to share their memories. The stories will be used to create a digital collection.

And a month after the Jan. 12 earthquake in Haiti, The Betsy hosted a fundraiser for Doctors Without Borders. Later this month, it will screen *Una Mujer Invisible*, a Spanish film, and a salon featuring art historian and biographer Leslie King-Hammond.

"We have tried to do an array of things that would make good use of our physical space," Plutzk says. "In the process, we hope we have also made a difference."



Jonathan Plutzk, one of the principal owners, waits The Betsy to provide an intelligent refuge from the mad Cuban scene on Ocean Drive. AL DIAZ/MIAMI HERALD STAFF



Jonathan Plutzk, with Prudence Mahera at a screening of *Music by Prudence*, the documentary about the disabled 21-year-old Zimbabwean singer and her band that earned an Academy Award. Plutzk and his wife owned its executive producer's of a tour that introduced their music to the United States.



The John Lennon Educational Tour Bus, a traveling multimedia recording studio, worked with The Betsy to capture veteran memories for an oral-history project. MARICE COHR BAND / MIAMI HERALD STAFF