

# THE RADAR REALTY!

BY SION HARE



## CONSTRUCTING NOSTALGIA

*Are there profits in preservation? A slew of Miami hotels put history to the test*

A 1968 Jag with GPS. A Zac Posen with vintage Pucci pumps. The *Gossip* covering George Michael. Everything is old and new again, and Miami real estate is taking the cue.

Recently, a handful of properties—MiMo to Art Deco, Miami Beach to Biscayne Boulevard—have been revamped into stunning combinations of old and new, a tribute to the past with all the luxuries of today's modern hotels. "People don't want cookie cutter," says Randy Weisburd, property developer of The Crown, Miami Beach's northernmost hotel, of the draw of a property that maintains its historical integrity. "They want to feel like they're in Miami."

Originally built in 1940 and known as the Lord Tarleton, the Crown, at 14 stories, was one of Miami Beach's first skyscrapers. It emulated the Empire State Building by placing a steel pylon atop the building, and that structure was one of the many original touches developers of the Crown recently recreated upon its conversion to condominiums. Among the others: Art Deco reliefs on the exterior of the building and a modern tower that was attached to the original building and one built in the '50s. The pursuit of historical authenticity, however, can drive up the cost of a renovation significantly. Weisburd had to include a mosaic on the side of the property's parking garage across the street to comply with historical code ("We probably have the prettiest parking garage in the whole city," remarks Weisburd). He also had to use terrazzo floors. "It's the new marble," he says. Actually, marble would have been a less expensive

option, but such are the requirements for replicating original flooring. It's an ironic twist, and one that many renovators are experiencing: In the '50s and '60s, terrazzo was considered a cheap alternative to marble. Today, it sells for \$30 a square foot.

Over on Washington Avenue, the historic Anglers hotel, which was built in the 1930s in the same Mediterranean architectural style as the Biltmore Hotel in Coral Gables and Casa Casuarina on Ocean Drive, accomplished the same feat when it too was recently renovated to include two new sections. "Design-wise, the historic preservation board of Miami Beach didn't want the new structures to 'match' identically with the old structures, so it was clear which buildings on the compound were historic versus new," says Anglers co-developer Kevin Venger. "For example, we added balconies to the main 1930 building, and the board required the railing be less historical and slightly more modern, since those elements were not original."

Of course, no other street exemplifies the importance of and dedication to historic preservation more than Ocean **CONTINUED...**

NOW AND THEN From left: The Tides today, and circa 1930s.



**OLD IS NEW** Clockwise from left: The modernized Crown Hotel; the Betsy Ross, circa 1950; inside the Crown lobby.



...CONTINUED Drive. The Betsy Ross, which is scheduled to re-open in late February, is the only hotel along the beach's best-known street that doesn't contribute to the Art Deco skyline. "It was built during World War II, and so it exudes Americana," says the hotel's head of public relations Kathleen Duda, of its colonial style, which includes slatted walls and a plantation-style porch. Duda says that while the Betsy will (and must) retain its original façade, its newest incarnation will include a rooftop solarium, which was part of the original version. The terrazzo floors, of course, will remain.

As they will just down the street at the Tides South Beach. "We couldn't touch the terrazzo floors," explains Tides' director Kathryn Garrett, "or the metal grates with the 'T' on them in the rooms. But it's not just that we had to, we wanted to. It's important to not just renovate, but restore." Designed by the prolific Art Deco architect L. Murray Dixon (who also designed the Betsy Ross), the hotel maintains its original portal windows meant to evoke a ship sailing off, and a replica of the original rooftop stainless steel pyramid was recently put in place. (Though at one point, the crane carrying it broke, causing Ocean Drive to be shut down for hours.) It was the cherry on top of a renovation process that has been two years in the making. "Around the time that the Tides opened," recalls Miami Design Preservation League's Scott Timm, "hotels were opening at a rate of one a week. That gives an idea as to how busy Miami Beach was as a tourist destination. They couldn't build them fast enough. For the first time in history, I think we're now seeing that same demand."

Some hotels are not just adding to or restoring the original structure—some are changing the property's entire function. Such is the case with the Vagabond Motel. Situated along Biscayne Boulevard, the MiMo-style hotel



is one of more than a dozen that have, since their construction in the 1950s, become seedy, dilapidated dwellings associated with prostitutes and drug dealers. Only now with the renaissance of the up-and-coming street are those hotels being primed for a makeover. "My plan is to turn it into a lifestyle center: retail stores, a restaurant, a small spa," says Eric Silverman, owner of

the Vagabond. He enlisted architect Alan Schulman, also responsible for the renovations of the Anglers and other historical properties, to head up the Vagabond update.

Silverman says the historic board, which any developer who purchases a historical building has to go through, has been very supportive. "I think they realize these buildings are going to have to have changed uses, the same way Ocean Drive hotel lobbies were turned into restaurants," Silverman offers. "We're doing what the city wants us to do in these neighborhoods. There are new restaurants, safety has increased, the streets are being improved—it's all very exciting. Some of the best examples of MiMo architecture are right here, so it's important for the city to preserve these buildings. They're the things that make Miami unique." Terrazzo floors and all. ☑