

## STEPPED BACK AND LAID BACK



**T**HERE are two reasons for going to Miami Beach, a long, anchovy-fillet-shaped island just off the Florida mainland. The first is the beach. Although only minutes away from the sparkling new towers of downtown Miami, this remains the kind of palm-fringed beach you might dream about—an endless expanse of white sand that, oddly, seems to have hardly anyone on it. There are a few people enjoying the sea, but that is so far away that, hidden by a ridge in the sand, they are invisible from Ocean Drive. Most of the residents of Miami Beach prefer to stay on the porches of their hotels, absorbing the sunshine, the street life and the explosion of colour all around them. For Miami Beach

contains the largest intact body of stylish Art Deco architecture in America.

The scale of it is astonishing. There are over 800 buildings in the Historic District, which runs from 6th Street to 23rd Street, covering a square mile. The area was entirely developed in the 1930s, mostly with hotels and apartment houses for Jewish holidaymakers from New York. The names of the hotels reflect the "New Deal" era: there is a President, a Franklin, a Delano and a Roosevelt. Even the Cardozo, which I had thought might have been named after an exotic fruit, in reality honours Benjamin Cardozo, the supreme court justice, who was a particular hero of the Jewish interest at the time. However, English visitors will also

be pleased to see names such as the Surrey at Haddon Hall, though these have a distinct *déraciné* look on suavely stepped back a streamlined façades.

Evidently, the hotels vied with each other to strike the visitor's eye. They were expensive buildings—the basic material concrete—and the art was to create an aura of glamour at little extra cost. Streamlined curvatures of balconies, hoods to shade windows from the sun: this imagery evoked the luxurious transatlantic liners that could be seen in Miami port, at the south end of the island.

Geometry suggested Cubism. Many buildings have towers, whether a circular glass belvedere as at the Waldorf Towers or, more commonly, a single central mast—sometimes stepped up in wedding-cake layers, sometimes inspired by the Red Indian totem pole. Bands and zigzags and panels of Mayan-influence ornament are picked out in "tropical" colours. For doorways, much use was made of etched glass in which flamingoes and sunsets figure prominently. Occasionally hotel lobbies are decorated with murals: the vision of naked maidens and dreaming poets in a tropical paradise that the artist Ramon Chatoff created for the Plymouth seems to have hit precisely the note that the early promoters of Miami Beach wished to sound.

As well as hotels there were restaurants. Wolfie's on Collins Avenue still survives as a marvellous period piece, though Hoffman Cafeteria has recently, after a number of metamorphoses, been transformed into the dazzling Ovo night club, run with great dash by a group of New Yorkers. Cinemas were of course a prerequisite. Even government institutions succumbed to the Art Deco spell. The United States Post Office on Washington Avenue takes the form of a suave, white, almost unornamented drum, with another cylinder as a cupola on top. The old City Hall on Washington Avenue has recently been restored. Next door, the tradition lives on in the new Police Station, about to be opened. It is not quite Deco but certainly '30s in its look. Corbusier-inspired white walls and curves.

One of the most remarkable aspects of Miami Beach is that it survived. There is scarcely a single modern insertion in an area covering 20 city blocks. The area went out of fashion after the Second World War, and just managed to squeeze through the doldrums of neglect and under-appreciation without redevelopment. It was a near thing. In the 1970s plans were actively made to redevelop the entire waterfront with new high-rise blocks. This partly explains the existence of the gloriously broad beach. The original beach was much thinner, but, to create an appropriate perspective for the new high-rise developer, the Federal Government spent \$60 million dumping new sand. It is unfortunate, to say the least, that the large indigenous elderly community, based on a nucleus of people who have been coming here since the 1930s, are too infirm to cross the new width of sand to the water.

It is not too much to say that Miami Beach was saved by one person—Barbara B. Capitman, who founded the Miami Design Preservation League in 1975. Death there accompanied her early campaigns. But, by a mixture of zeal, charm and doggedness, she managed to browbeat the State Department into declaring it a Historic District—equivalent to a conservation area in Britain. The measure of her achievement can be judged



(Top) 1—"TROPICAL" COLOURS PICK OUT STREAMLINED DETAILS. Note the Indian headdress capitals to the columns on the right. (Far left) 2—THE LESLIE HOTEL. A typical tripartite composition with interlocking verticals and horizontals. (Left) 3—PANELS OF MAYAN-INFLUENCED ORNAMENT ON THE



MIAMI BEACH, FLORIDA By CLIVE ASLET

from the fact that it is not only the largest Historic District in the country, but breaks the prevailing American rule by which buildings less than 50 years old cannot be put on the National Register.

However, that was only the beginning of the battle to resurrect Miami Beach. Only a few years ago it was sleazy and sometimes violent—scarcely the perfect setting for a holiday, but a marvellous background for a thriller. Many episodes of the television programme *Miami Vice* have locations in Miami Beach, helping to give that series its particular style. The novels of Elmore Leonard, who is being hailed as the Raymond Chandler of the 1980s, have revelled in the contrasts of raw street life and faded glamour. In its wisdom, the Carter administration decided to house the Mariel boat people expelled from Cuba in Miami Beach. They included not only legitimate refugees but the dregs of the Cuban jails and lunatic asylums, whom Castro had forced them to take with them. Long-term residents can make an impression on visitors by telling of machine-gun battles on the streets. It took a number of years before the more desperate elements were locked up. Meanwhile, despite the pioneering efforts of a few investors with vision, most of the buildings looked tired and decayed. The City of Miami Beach still nursed its redevelopment plan and resented the preservationists who were killing it.

Suddenly all that has changed. The last year has seen tremendous activity. Led by the entrepreneur Gerry Sanchez, hoteliers have come to see that the jazz modern style still has possibilities—and profitable ones. Within the past 12 months, many buildings have blossomed into colour as façades are repainted in a beguiling (if historically uncertain) sugarcandy palette.

The basic ethnic composition remains Jewish. Indeed, in some hotels you can still come across the remarkable phenomenon of a Hasidic Bible class, with 50 or so men in beaver hats, black gowns and tremendous Old Testament beards, talking in Hebrew and seemingly oblivious to temperatures in the '80s. But, as so often at the beginning of a revival, artists have moved in in search of cheap studio space, lending the area a sense of chic. Hotels such as the Carlyle, the Waldorf Towers and the Edison have good restaurants and a lively atmosphere, sometimes with excellent jazz. With no great pretension to luxury but with a developed sense of style, they attract a young clientele. Property prices have risen. There is every sign that a renaissance is on its way.

But, as with every movement that expands from a few discriminating cognoscenti to take in a whole population, a note of caution must also be urged. Again, Barbara Baer Capitman is there to keep the conscience of the community. She has recently founded the Art Deco Societies of America, a national body to campaign for and to study the architecture of the 20th century in America.

More research still needs to be done into the world of, for example, Henry Hohauser, who designed many of the most eye-catching buildings in Miami Beach. Such scholarship will be encouraged by the ADSA. A start was made at an inaugural conference held at Miami Beach in January. It is hoped that greater historical awareness will prevent the runaway success of Miami Beach from becoming a mindless developers' stampede.

Illustrations: Steven Brooke Studios.

(Top) 4—MAXIMUM STYLE WITH MINIMUM EFFORT. Colour, geometry and shadow. (Middle) 5—THE STRAND: CLASSIC ART DECO LINES. One of over 800 buildings in the Historic District in Miami Beach. (Right) 6—THE TAFT, 1936. (Far right) 7—THE YET-TO-BE-RESTORED TOWER OF THE ESSEX Towers are a

