



ON THE STRIP The stretch of beach from 44th to 20th Street is being aggressively redeveloped into a destination of its own.

MID-BEACH MAKEOVER

A new Gold Coast has been discovered BY ERNEST BECK

When Michael Maillis, a Greek real estate developer, saw the run-down Art Deco hotel at 37th and Collins two years ago, rooms were \$50 a night. “I called it a crack house hotel, something out of the movie *Pulp Fiction*,” Maillis said.

Maillis and his luxury real estate company, Group Modus Vivendi, are transforming the property into TEN, an exclusive condo project with 10 units in the renovated building and in an adjoining contemporary tower being designed by Arquitectonica. For \$2.6 million to more than \$6 million, buyers can acquire ocean views and layouts stretching from 2,400 square feet to 4,200 square feet—with a choice of \$800,000 in Fendi Casa furnishings and a Vespa motor scooter thrown in. The \$800,000 figure is based on Fendi Casa’s estimates of everything you might need to furnish a five-bedroom condo, including tableware, lighting, shelves, hand-woven rugs and bedding, a Murano glass chandelier that could cost up to \$40,000, and a custom-made crocodile leather dining table and chairs, for \$25,000.



FAB FURNITURE
Fendi Casa is furnishing the 10 exclusive condo units at TEN, with pieces like this chair.

“If you’re one of the lucky 10, you’ll have the next best thing to a private beach house,” Maillis said, as he gazed from the gutted second floor to the view of the beach. So far, one unit has been sold to a “major Hollywood star with a summer movie coming out,” according to the publicist for the project, who

refused to divulge a name. Other A-list celebrities are expected to sign on, she said.

As the arrival of TEN suggests, the beachfront strip between the über-luxe Setai at 21st and the iconic Fontainebleau at 44th is the latest stretch of oceanfront footage to lure developers looking for the Next Big Thing. Among the other projects planned or underway are the boutique hotels W and Gansevoort, and renovations at the Seville, Saxony and Caribbean hotels, some with attached condo and condo-hotel towers. In addition, the Sovereign, just below the Fontainebleau, will become the clubby Soho House and a classic MiMo motel at 23rd Street is slated to be a luxury complex called the Rivage.

Once overlooked, the area “has gone from a dead standstill to a full boom in a short time,” said William Cary, assistant planning director for the city of Miami Beach.

Several factors are influencing the return of this neighborhood, which doesn’t yet have a designer name like SoFi, or Indian River East—although the area is often called Mid-Beach, or by its official name, as of 2001, the John S. Collins Waterfront Historic District.

While Mid-Beach property prices are rising, they are still generally 10 percent below South Beach rates, according to developers. And unlike the low-rise hotels and small lots found in South Beach’s historic district, which date from the ‘20s and ‘30s, Mid-Beach was developed from the ‘40s onward with buildings that sit on huge parcels of spectacular oceanfront.

The neighborhood contains a range of architecture styles that reflect Miami Beach’s urban history, from Art Deco towers to post-war modernism and concrete 70s condos that resemble airport parking garages.

With larger lots and bigger buildings, developers are gearing design toward exclusivity and privacy. Gone are cookie cutter one-bedroom condos with look-alike layouts, boxy rooms and low ceilings. Instead, real estate marketers are aiming at high-end, design-conscious buyers who already have, say, two other vacation homes and want an equally sophisticated Miami outpost.

At the Saxony at 32nd Street, for example, there are only 55 “sky residences” in the tower, accessible by private elevator and starting at \$2.5 million. At TEN, residents receive “white glove butler service,” a poolside cabana with each unit, and a personal driver to shuttle them around town. (And unlike the South Beach locations, where condo owners and hotel guests share facilities, there are no bars, restaurants or public spaces at TEN, Maillis said.)

Meanwhile the Rivage, a former youth hostel known as the Banana Bungalow (and before that, the Ankara motel), is pitched in a marketing brochure as an ultra-private “sanctuarial” escape. Modeled after a French Riviera coastal resort, Rivage, designed by the architect Allan T. Shulman with interiors by Sam Robin, promises homeowners “more security and luxury than any other property in South Beach.” Units are priced between \$535,000 and \$2.6 million.

Some say the push into Mid-Beach began with the renovation in 2001 of the Cadillac hotel, an Art Deco high-rise, and the first under the historic district designation. Others point to the opening of the Setai last year, with its plush \$900 a night Zen-inspired rooms and lobby floor made of ancient Chinese bricks, as a defining moment. “We felt the area when we bought it wasn’t great, but that a transition was underway,” said Jonathan Breene, a partner in the Setai Group. Back then, Breene said, Mid-Beach was “a desolate area” with an assortment of drunks, prostitutes, a strip club and Wolfie’s restaurant.

But for developers like the Setai group, the choice was either to go off-beach or to head north to the Mid-Beach gateway. “I said to the investors, look at the big picture and the value of real estate,” Breene said. “Things will change, high-end restaurants and shops will come.”

That hasn’t happened just yet. On a walk with Shulman that took in the 20 or so blocks of Mid-Beach, there were few amenities past the Setai border that would enhance the lifestyle of a \$5 million home owner, or please a guest at a five-star hotel, except perhaps the Forge restaurant on 41st Street. There were no sushi hangouts or flashy clubs. Forget Starbucks—although we did spot a forlorn Denny’s in the shuttered Seville Hotel. (The Seville is about to become a new Ritz Carlton Club and Residences.) The Caribbean, at 37th and Collins, is becoming a 100-unit luxury condo project, with apartments starting at \$1 million. Christopher Ciccone (yes, Madonna’s brother) is the designer.

Meanwhile, Collins in the 40s has attracted many Orthodox Jewish families. They can often be found on the boardwalk near the beach, dressed in layers of long clothes and black hats and seemingly oblivious to scantily clad bathers and house music blaring from some of the pool areas.

For the moment, hipsters who are moving into the neighborhood are making do with kosher food, pizza slices, hotel restaurants and takeout. That might improve with completion of the \$23 million cultural arts campus at 21st and 22nd, formerly known as Collins Park, and the Artcity complex of condos. Resident institutions like the Bass Museum, a regional library and the Miami City Ballet are likely to draw an arty crowd and better restaurants.

“Before, South Beach energy never came above Collins Park,” said Shulman, the Miami architect who is also doing the Soho House



SOON TO BE COOL
A rendering of Soho House, designed by the architect Allan T. Shulman.

ILLUSTRATION BY REYNALDO MARTIN

NEWS REPORT

project. “Now, they are playing off culture to attract development.”

Yet like most neighborhoods in transition, the landscape changes street by street. On a recent evening, a well-heeled crowd assembled at the Rivage for a glittery preview sales party, but on the way inside they walked past a burned-out building and empty retail space.

The next day, on a balmy afternoon, Shulman and I strolled along the sidewalks further up Collins and found them empty except for a few tourists at the Days Inn and some Spring Break students, who appeared lost and looking for a wet T-shirt contest. A few shops—luggage repairs, scooter rentals—were open.

On the west side of the street, low-rise commercial buildings mix with offices and a few down-at-the-heels apartment complexes, as well as a prefab parking garage going up near the Fontainebleau. In one crumbling pink Mediterranean revival building at 43rd, a sign in the window announced the arrival of Le Marais, a steakhouse, although the peeling paint and dying palms out front suggested it wouldn't be arriving soon.

Because the area is a historic district, huge buildings like the Triton Towers and the former Roney Plaza hotel (taken over by the Gansevoort and Paradiso condo tower), will remain, along with Art Deco masterpieces. “We don't want to lose that scale and detail and architecture,” said Cary, the assistant planning director, noting that new buildings are limited to 20 stories. “That is the hallmark of the city.”

The challenge for architects like Shulman is to maintain a sense of the architectural past while adding a contemporary look and services to please the new, moneyed owners. For the \$18 million Rivage renovation, he will retain the MiMo-era motel's glass box lobby, the fieldstone and brick towers and the delta-shaped roof. But behind that he has designed a stepped eight-story addition; the existing motel units will become luxury townhouses. “We can't go back, but we must try to preserve the architectural elements layering the city,” Shulman said.

At Soho House, a \$16 million project, the Art Deco Sovereign Hotel will be restored with the addition of a sleek new 14-story tower behind it, featuring wraparound balconies. Spagoers will receive treatments in individual wooden cabins on the roof deck.

As Mid-Beach is transformed, swanky restaurants and designer shops will no doubt follow. Older residents who live in the neighborhood and tourists who frequent its hotels will relocate. But some old-timers wonder whether Mid-Beach will eventually resemble the crowded, honky-tonk patches of lower Collins. Or if some of these projects will fail to be born, the victims of a slowing real estate market.

Cary says the city's goal is to allow and encourage commercial development—within certain limits. “We want to keep it under control,” he insisted. “We don't want to compete with southern Collins. We want to provide convenient and accessible retail for the new hotels and condos and residents.”

That will last until Hugh Grant and Jude Law check into Soho House, and the screening room has its first premiere. Then there will be no keeping that part of Collins under any kind of control. ■



RIVAGE REINVENTED
A kitchen, designed by Sam Robin, in the Rivage sales center, left, a view of the building's delta-shaped car port, below.



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