

SOUTH BEACH ON THE CUSP

Photographs by David Dunlap
Text by Richard Posner

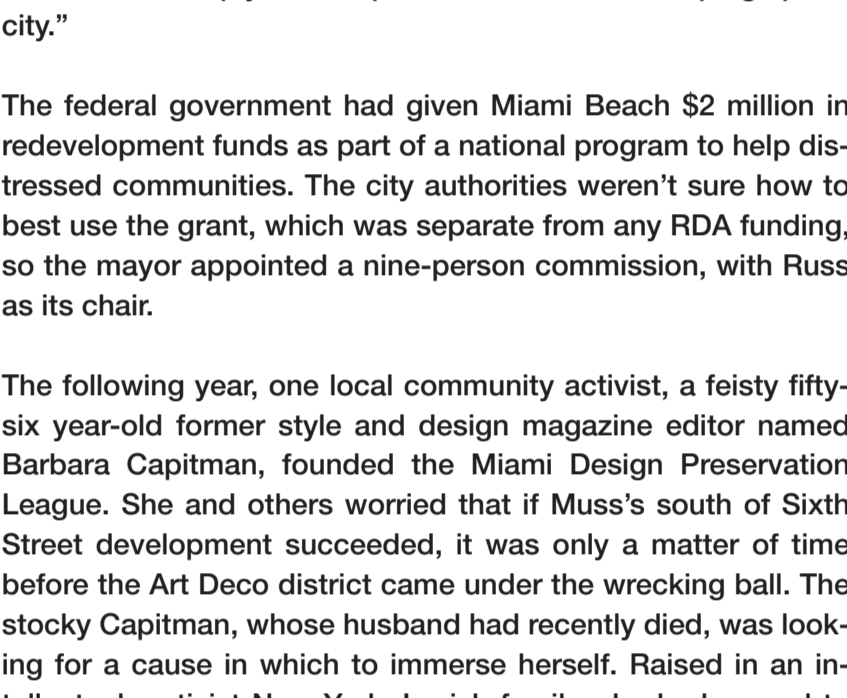
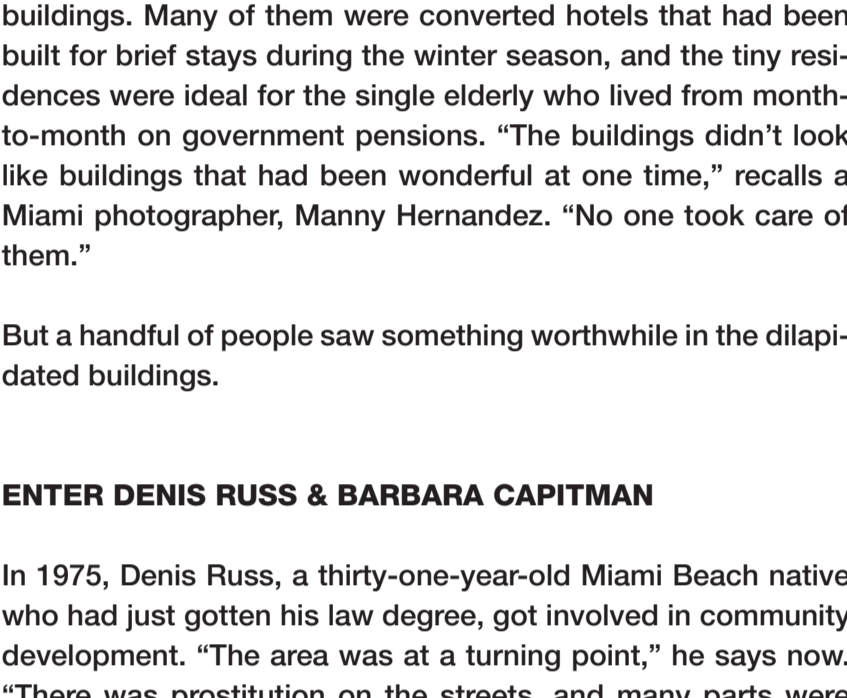
[Editor's Note: David Dunlap (b. 1952) has been with the New York Times since 1975, and his current beat is writing and photographing architecture. I first met David because he was in the midst of an ambitious project—to photograph every single dwelling in Provincetown, Massachusetts (the artist colony at the very tip of Cape Cod), and write about the most interesting people who had ever lived in each house (see www.building-provincetown.com). David used some of my portraits of Provincetown artists and writers (i.e. Pulitzer Prize recipient Stanley Kunitz) in his book and website, so when we started Inspicio, I asked David if he had taken any photographs of Miami architecture, and he immediately sent me 17 beautiful photos shot in the Art Deco District of South Beach in 1989-90.

I first met Gerald Posner (b. 1954) at a Fourth of July Party in Miami Beach in 2015. Gerald, who lives in Miami Beach with his wife, writer Trisha Posner, is the award-winning author of 12 books, including his most recently published and widely acclaimed God's Banker, A History of Money and Power at the Vatican (see www.posner.com). In 2009, Simon & Schuster published Miami Babylon, Posner's page-turning history of Miami. We asked Gerald if we could blend selections of his riveting account of saving the Art Deco District of South Beach with David Dunlap's South Beach photographs, and the following week Gerald sent us a Word file of Chapter 7, The Death of an American City.]

In 1978 developer Steve Muss bought the Fontainebleau Hotel, the grandest hotel on Miami Beach, for \$27 million, claiming he did so "out of civic duty." He spent \$12.5 million in renovations and hired the Hilton group to run it. The six-foot-five, 290-pound Muss could be gruff and overbearing, but he was a relentless town booster. A few years before he bought the Fontainebleau, he had convinced the city to create an independent and powerful Miami Beach Redevelopment Agency (RDA). Muss and other city power brokers were convinced that they could privately create their own renewal in rundown South Beach. Muss was appointed RDA's vice chairman. The RDA's jurisdiction covered 250 acres from the southern tip of the island up to Sixth Street. Originally called South Shore, the city commission changed the name in 1950 to South Shore.

This poverty-stricken neighborhood had 6,000 residents, almost all elderly Jews, with a few Italians. In the eyes of Miami Beach politicians, solving the problems of the poor and elderly crammed into South Beach was less of a priority than restoring the Beach's fading image as a top vacation destination.

In 1973, city government took the first step toward a complete overhaul of the neighborhood when it imposed a building moratorium. In 1975, with the blessing of the state legislature, Miami Beach commissioners declared the area "a special redevelopment district." The idea was to rebuild a resort after allowing the entire neighborhood south of Sixth Street to deteriorate to the point where it would have to be demolished, and then relocating the area's elderly. But to condemn the 372 buildings, the city needed state approval, which could come only if the area was officially declared "blighted."



Since the city had first halted all development in 1973, not a single property owner had spent money on a spare coat of paint, landscaping, building repairs, or upkeep. It was a limbo that spurred an even more pronounced downturn.

But the would-be developers did not take into account the obstinacy of the elderly residents. The debate over whether the best way to improve a neighborhood was to bulldoze it sparked Miami Beach's first community activism movement. Morris Katowitz, who paid \$24 a month in maintenance fees on a coop he shared with his wife, challenged the RDA to prove that its relocation and rent subsidies would offset more expensive rent elsewhere. Mel Mendelson, whose family-run wholesale meatpacking business had been in South Shore for thirty years, knew firsthand that the Beach's politicians made their deals in a small backroom of his business, where they met weekly for steaks and beers. Mendelson vowed to spend his last dollar fighting Muss's plan. Max Silnicki, a Polish immigrant who ran the Washington Avenue Barber Shop, had shaved the heads of Jewish corpses at Auschwitz before they were cremated. His fifteen-year-old, four-chair shop charged \$3 for a haircut and \$1 for a blood pressure check. He told the commission he would never leave it, even if they came to the door with a bulldozer. "I've survived too much, for so long."

The South Shore activism spread to the neighborhood north of Sixth Street. That area, also crammed with retirees, was out of the RDA's jurisdiction. Extending north eleven blocks to Lincoln Road, it was filled with hundreds of Depression-era Art Deco buildings. Many of them were converted hotels that had been built for brief stays during the winter season, and the tiny residences were ideal for the single elderly who lived from month-to-month on government pensions. "The buildings didn't look like buildings that had been wonderful at one time," recalls a Miami photographer, Manny Hernandez. "No one took care of them."

But a handful of people saw something worthwhile in the dilapidated buildings.

ENTER DENIS RUSS & BARBARA CAPITMAN

In 1975, Denis Russ, a thirty-one-year-old Miami Beach native who had just gotten his law degree, got involved in community development. "The area was at a turning point," he says now. "There was prostitution on the streets, and many parts were dangerous, seedy, and crime-ridden. The parks had deteriorated. There simply was no public investment in keeping up the city."

The federal government had given Miami Beach \$2 million in redevelopment funds as part of a national program to help distressed communities. The city authorities weren't sure how to best use the grant, which was separate from any RDA funding, so the mayor appointed a nine-person commission, with Russ as its chair.

The following year, one local community activist, a feisty fifty-six year-old former style and design magazine editor named Barbara Capitman, founded the Miami Design Preservation League. She and others worried that if Muss's south of Sixth Street development succeeded, it was only a matter of time before the Art Deco district came under the wrecking ball. The stocky Capitman, whose husband had recently died, was looking for a cause in which to immerse herself. Raised in an intellectual, activist New York Jewish family, she had moved to Miami Beach in 1973.

"This neighborhood is irreplaceable," said Capitman. "When I first appeared on the scene, they called it garbage." She drove reporters around the neighborhood in her old Dodge, dragging them into welfare hotels and retirement homes to point out the architectural details, making her case that the Deco district was worth saving. She got articles about what she called "Old Miami Beach" into the *Saturday Review*, the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and *Preservation News*.



In 1974, Lynn Bernstein of Philadelphia visited Miami Beach with friends. While buying some Art Deco prints in the lobby of the Miami Design Preservation League, she met Capitman, who told her about the incipient preservation crusade on which she and other concerned residents had embarked. Two hours later, Bernstein informed her friends she would not be returning to Philadelphia. She had decided to move to the Beach and become part of the movement to save the district's buildings. "I was ready just to be a volunteer," recalls Bernstein, "sorting through posters and old clips, filing bills, whatever could help. When I was hired as part of the staff a couple of weeks later, I was over the moon. It really felt as though we were doing something that could have a real impact."

"We were all very early in the formation of government renewal programs," says Russ. "The RDA, headed by Muss, wanted our federal grant. They had all these lawyers and the city backed him. I said, 'No, you really don't need our money.' The powers in the city were not very happy with me."

At one contentious meeting, Capitman grabbed the mike, and in her high-pitched voice said that while she wasn't sure what could be done with the \$2 million, she could use \$10,000 to survey the Art Deco buildings in South Beach. She had learned from the state preservation office that a building-by-building survey was required to start the preservation process.

"She was tough and confrontational when she had to be," recalls Nancy Liebman, another local activist who had met Capitman early on during a protest against demolishing a school. "She was a master of smoke and mirrors. She could make people believe Art Deco was the biggest treasure they'd ever seen. Barbara was authentic and really believed in what she was doing, but she was also all theater. She could turn on the tears at a hearing, and she understood, as I did, that if you got a crowd together, you could move the local politicians. They were spineless then."



Denis Russ pushed. Capitman got her \$10,000. Russ was as committed to urban renewal as Capitman was to preservation. The two became fast friends. He successfully resisted the efforts of City Hall politicians to take away his federal grant and planned his own redevelopment projects. They included a facelift for Washington Avenue and an ambitious plan to redo the city's parks. "By this time I started working closely with Barbara," Russ says. "We knew what we wanted to do, the area we wanted to preserve, but I had to figure out how to work through the bureaucracy to get it done at the state and federal levels. There were so many hurdles, and we had constant resistance from the local chamber of commerce, political officials, and the private developers. They all had a 'tear down and build philosophy.' They just needed a reason to rip down the Miami Modern and Art Deco buildings, and they would have stripped the last remaining character out of the Beach."

[Editor's Note: I stayed with my parents at the Shelborne Hotel in 1952, when it was new.]

