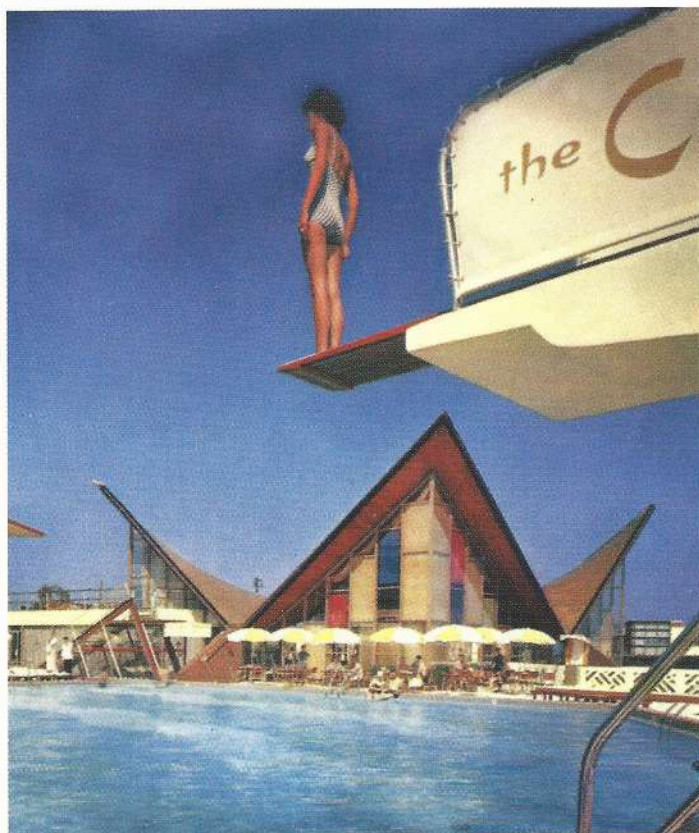


# Made in Miami

By Saxon Henry



Courtesy of Klara Farkas.



Bass Museum of Art. Gift of Morris Lapidus.

Though Miami Modern, or MiMo, has become a popular moniker for a local midcentury architectural style, the curators of an exhibition that opened at the Bass Museum of Art in Miami Beach on December 5th have found that there is much more to this name than bricks and mortar. "The meaning of these mid-century buildings, like the Eden Roc hotel, is not just the building," remarks Thomas Hine, the Bass's Guest Curator of Design, Decorative Arts and Popular Culture. "It's also the Cadillac that sweeps up to the building, the woman in gloves and a mink collar who gets out of the Cadillac and the fanciful environment she walks through."

Hine collaborated with Allan T. Shulman, Guest Curator of Architecture and Urban Planning, and Ruth Grim, Curator of Collections at the Bass, to create "Promises of Paradise: Staging Mid-Century Miami," which will be on view at the museum through April 13, 2008. The 20-year sweep — from 1945 to 1965 — takes in everything from fabrics and furniture to hotels and university campuses.

This exploration of postwar Miami was originally destined for a previous exhibition showcasing the 1930s Miami Beach architecture of Lawrence Murray Dixon. But the more the trio delved into the time span from the 1930s to the 1950s, the more clearly they saw it as a distinct subject. They also realized that in post-war Miami, architecture was only the beginning of the conversation. "Though architecture and urbanism are important," Shulman explains, "we felt that we should also be looking at popular culture, which means everything that was produced in Miami during that period."

Furniture by Morris Lapidus, bequeathed to the museum by the architect upon his death in 2001, became the new exhibition's nucleus. "Lapidus's work tends to be modern on the outside, while on the inside his reference tends to be the luxurious settings seen in the movies," remarks Hine. "The furniture from his apartment that we are showing combines modern materials with fanciful, highly ornamental forms."

A thrust of the exhibition is to reconcile the luxury, indulgence and fantasy of Miami of that time with the International Style that dominated architecture in the U.S. "This was what compelled us to look at the subject of mid-century Miami in a broader sense," Grim remarks.

**Top** George Farkas, Double Gooseneck Lamp, 1947. Metal with parchment shades.

**Above, left** Pool and diving board at the Castaways Hotel, c. 1950, designed by Charles McKirahan. Photograph from *Florida Architecture* magazine, 1958.

**Left** Morris Lapidus, Dining room table and 8 chairs, 1960, from Lapidus's Miami Beach apartment. Glass, Lucite and brass.



"We wanted to show it in a context that takes it seriously."

Lapidus is not the only star of the exhibition, which also includes Alfred Browning Parker, George Farkas, Frederick Rank, Igor Polevitzky, Rufus Nims, Kay Pancoast and Fran Williams, and covers International Modernism, Regional Modernism and Fantasy Modernism. "During the first ten years, between 1945 and 1955, the first two categories were more important," Hine says. "During the second decade, from 1955 on, the idea of glamour and fantasy takes over."

No luminary of the period exemplifies fantasy more than Lapidus, who made his mark with his hotels the Eden Roc, the Fontainebleau and the Americana, the last now threatened with demolition. "How is Morris Lapidus modern?" quips Hine. "That's a complicated question, because the exteriors of his buildings are certainly shaped by European Modernism, Oscar Niemeyer and South American responses to European Modernism. But there is a fantastic element to his interiors: the stairway to nowhere and the dreamlike quality of his environments."

As the curators searched for iconic MiMo finds, naysayers claimed that Miami's Modernism didn't exist outside of ideas imported from Europe and California. But at the very least, the furniture on display, much of it created by artisans in Coconut Grove, reinforces the idea of an indigenous Modernism in Miami, though it is clearly a hybrid style. Key pieces include a shelving unit designed by Rank that morphs into a dining table and Plexiglass dining room furniture by Lapidus. A diving board, designed by Polevitzky, introduces the pool-side lifestyle, which, along with textiles by Farkas, underscores the exhibition's strong regionalist theme. "Even someone like Farkas, who came from Hungary and would clearly fall into the category of International Modernism, was creating fabrics with great floppy leaves and gnarly rooted trees that speak of Miami's tropical environment," Hine remarks.

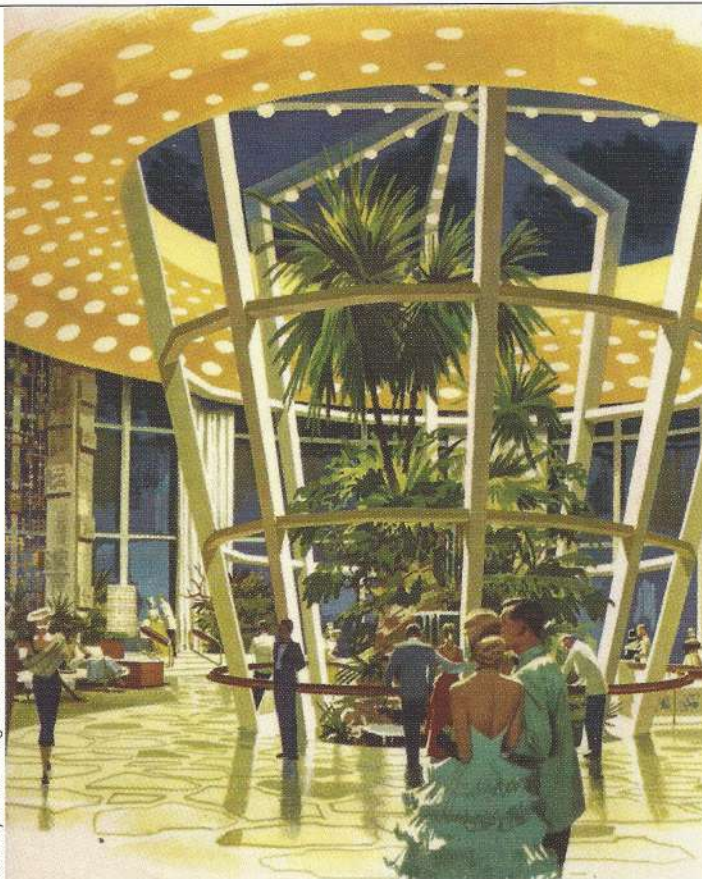
What most fascinates Shulman is the effort, in counterpoint to Miami's image of "Flabbergast" hotels and postcards from paradise, "to develop a tropical architecture and to find some basis of authenticity in the Florida lifestyle," he says. "Modernism is often viewed as a polemical style, but in Miami, it had been de-radicalized, de-polemized, regionalized, and as a result of all that, popularized. It's really difficult to imagine another place in America where Modernism was the de facto style of almost everything that was going on."

The curators hope that the exhibition not only brings new awareness of those who created Miami Modernism, which paradoxically "is most authentic when it is most artificial," says Hines, but spurs efforts to preserve their work. "Unfortunately, we've seen the wholesale demolition of things like Motel Row in Sunny Isles," he says, "and the tearing down of postwar houses in Coconut Grove to be replaced by mini mansions." Some of the designers in the show "are so close to being forgotten," Grim remarks. "In some cases, we have gotten there just in the nick of time."

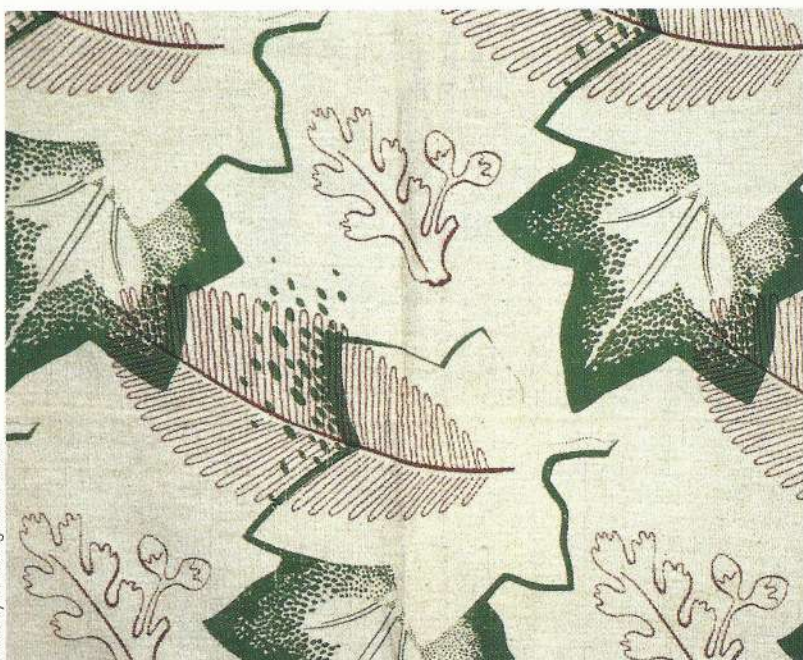
**Saxon Henry** writes about architecture, interior design and art for *The Miami Herald* and other publications, and is the author of *Big Home, Big Challenge: Design Solutions for Larger Spaces*. Her last article for *Modernism* was *City Report: Buenos Aires* (Vol. 10, No. 2).

*"Promises of Paradise"* is accompanied by the book *Miami Modern Metropolis: Architecture & Urbanism in the Tropics 1945–1969*, edited by Allan T. Shulman and published by the Bass Museum of Art. Available at the museum bookstore. [www.bassmuseum.org](http://www.bassmuseum.org)

Courtesy of the Village of Bal Harbour.



Courtesy of Georgette Balance.



**Top** Morris Lapidus, The Terrarium in the Americana Hotel, 1956. Drawing from a City of Bal Harbour promotional brochure.

**Above** George Farkas, Fabric Design (Leaf), c. 1950. Cotton.