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Bernard Arnault

Is the luxury
goods guru
recession proof?

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MARIO TESTINO





SUNSHINE STATUS

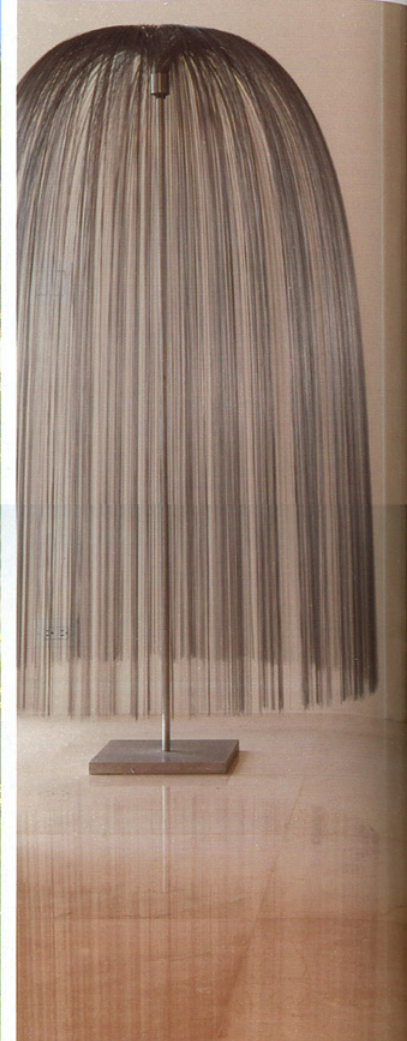
Architect Morris Lapidus refused to design houses. His forte lay in the larger-than-life productions that were Miami's opulent luxury hotels. With the reopening of two of his masterpieces—the Fontainebleau and the Eden Roc—another gem has emerged: a house on Biscayne Bay Lapidus's dentist persuaded him to create while he was under the effects of Novocain

BY ALASTAIR GORDON PHOTOGRAPHS BY TODD EBERLE STYLING BY MICHAEL REYNOLDS

Opposite: It was always about big entrances. Arrival at the house Morris Lapidus designed for his dentist in 1958 is accompanied by deep overhangs.

Lapidus, then 88, dressed as Bond villain Goldfinger in gold-rimmed sunglasses, gazing at a model in the Fontainebleau hotel, where the opening scene of "Goldfinger" takes place.





GIVEN HIS PENCHANT FOR BAROQUE-MODERN EXCESS, FAUX CLASSICAL COLUMNS AND SWOOPING

THE TITLE OF HIS AUTOBIOGRAPHY, “Too Much is Never Enough,” says it all. Morris Lapidus believed in the breathtaking moment of arrival, in crossing the glittering threshold into a world of make-believe: “I finally realized that American taste was being influenced by the greatest mass-media entertainment of that time, the movies,” he said—and he went on to design resort hotels disguised as movie sets. The surprise is that he also distilled that urge into an almost completely forgotten little house on Biscayne Bay.

It is still hard to get a handle on the man and his buildings. His place in architectural history wavers somewhere between outright canonization and bemused mockery. Much of his work has been shadowed by speculative mythology (often of his own making). But Lapidus remains the reigning deity of Miami Beach development—he did as much as anyone to shape its modern image with his string of hotel extravaganzas: the Sans Souci (1949), the Algiers (1951) and his masterpiece, the Fontainebleau (1954). And his name continues to carry remarkable cachet with both developers and tourists—even after the recent wave of trendy boutique hotels by

Ian Schrager, André Balazs, Philippe Starck and others.

After a \$500 million face-lift, the towering white bend of the Fontainebleau reopened last November with celebrity-studded fanfare and a Victoria’s Secret fashion show. Original Lapidus elements—such as his signature bow-tie-patterned floors and hovering neo-classical columns in the lobby—were lovingly re-created while new features, including a 40,000-square-foot spa, were added. The equally renowned Eden Roc reopened in October after a lavish, \$180 million, 18-month renovation by architect John Nichols.

Given his penchant for baroque-modern excess, curving façades, faux classical columns and swooping staircases that lead nowhere, it’s hard to imagine Lapidus as a less-is-more sort of architect. “This house is only 3,500 square feet, but it lives like it’s a 6,000-square-foot home,” says Deborah Desilets, a Miami-based architect and keeper of the Lapidus archives. “He was a master of making the small seem expansive, the way he integrated interior and exterior spaces.”

“My mouth dropped when I first saw it, even though it was in total disrepair,” says the Miami-based radiologist who bought the property in 1991 without even bothering to look at any other houses. (He and his wife

had just relocated from Cincinnati.) “We could see that it had good bones, like the Neutra and Lautner houses in Los Angeles,” he says.

The house sits on the edge of the bay with a swimming pool and its own dock. The street side presents a fairly classic mid-century modern façade with low, horizontal lines, a flat roof and deep overhangs to create shadows and keep the Florida sun at bay. From the circular driveway, you walk up a few steps, cross the diagonal foyer and step back down into a sunken living room. The floor plan resembles the layout of the Fontainebleau, only in miniature, with its many level changes, angular openings, arcing walls and skewed lines of sight.

A Lapidus building is never just an object perched on the land. He designed border plantings and sunken gardens to help integrate the house into the landscape. A zig-zagging wall, something like a Mayan sacrificial altar, provides a screen for a side garden and supports a series of triangular copper planters with cacti and other prickly exotics. A small corner garden near the front entry is filled with smooth black stones, leafy plants and a blue ceramic fountain with the figure of a naked goddess; other parts of the garden were later



STAIRCASES THAT LEAD NOWHERE, IT'S HARD TO IMAGINE LAPIDUS AS A LESS-IS-MORE ARCHITECT

filled in with mounds of multicolored pieces of recycled glass—a twist that feels appropriate.

The house, one of only three residences Lapidus ever designed, was built in 1958 for his dentist, Leonard Finn. “Design me a house,” demanded the dentist as the architect sat there benumbed with Novocain (or so the story goes). “I don’t do houses,” Lapidus mumbled. “I do hotels.” Eventually he consented and designed a U-shaped plan with one wing containing private spaces (master-bedroom suite and children’s bedroom) and the other a circular breakfast nook, kitchen and dining room. A long, glassed-in living area, known in the South as a “Florida Room,” extends out toward the waters of Biscayne Bay and ends with a bowed wall of floor-to-ceiling glass. “This was a fairly minor commission at the time, but Lapidus built it as if it were a major project,” the current owner says, explaining how the house was propped up on pilings to raise it 9 feet above sea level and hurricane flood, “the same way he built the Fontainebleau.”

The couple took almost 10 years to restore the house to its original condition. A week after finishing and moving in, they called Lapidus, explaining that they were the proud owners of one of his creations and would like to meet him, but he interrupted. “I never built a house,”

he said and hung up the phone. Apparently, the original owner had filled the house with fake Louis XIV furniture and Lapidus was so horrified that he disowned the project and temporarily erased it from his memory. A few days later, he came to his senses and dropped by for a visit. He was delighted with the final results and once again embraced the house as part of his official oeuvre. “He loved what we had done,” says the owner, who began to collect an eclectic mix of furniture, starting with a few tasteful mid-century modern pieces by Charles Eames and George Nelson. He and his wife felt that the house and its architect demanded a more flamboyant approach, however, and soon began to buy Italian furniture from the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s including vintage pieces by Giò Ponti, Gaetano Pesce and Ettore Sottsass as well as more recent work by younger (non-Italian) designers such as Droog and Joris Laarman, all arranged in the most casual overlapping of styles and periods.

Born in Odessa in 1902, Lapidus, along with his Jewish family, fled the Russian pogroms and moved to New York City the following year. He had started a career in the theater before deciding to study architecture at Columbia University in the mid-1920s. The smoke and mirrors of the theater would continue to animate his

Far left: Cool modern elements contrast with spiky tropics growing in a bed of recycled glass. **Center:** A Henry Bertoia sculpture (1974) stands by a foam rubber cactus (1968) by Gufram in the foyer. **Top right:** The “Florida Room” with its faux leopard sofa by Archizoom (1968) and custom cabinets designed by Gaetano Pesce (who designed the rug too). “The Italians were so wild,” the owner says. “While this might not work in a Tudor house in the suburbs of New York, it looks great in Florida.”



Insets, above: How the house looked when it was built in 1958 and Lapidus’s skewed floorplan, not unlike a miniature version of one of his hotels.



LAPIDUS, WHO NEVER FORGOT HIS VAUDEVILLE DAYS, LOVED SLAPSTICK COMEDY

built projects for the rest of his life. Before the hotels, there were ladies' shoe stores and showrooms in Manhattan—like the Parisian Bootery (1928)—in which façades of curvaceous glass, neon signs and bold modernist graphics were used to attract wary, Depression-era consumers. As the economy improved, his techniques grew even more operatic and after just a few years designing hotels he created Miami Beach's largest in 1954: the Fontainebleau. By then cold corporate modernism dominated his profession, but Lapidus dared to mix clean modern lines with garish splendor, giant crystal chandeliers and fluted columns that appeared to hover, kidney-shaped cutouts in the ceiling and a whole array of signature ingredients that had pet names such as “woggles,” “cheeseholes” and “beanpoles.”

When the mayor of the French city of Fontainebleau visited, he remarked: “C'est une bouillabaisse!” Lapidus took it as a compliment. Next he created the Eden Roc, and then moved further afield, designing the Americana in Bal Harbour—with its glass-enclosed jungle and live alligators—and the Aruba Caribbean in Aruba in 1955 and the Arawak in Jamaica in 1957.

After befriending Lapidus, the couple who restored the Finn house often invited him over to his little mas-

terpiece to hold forth about his life and architecture. Lapidus, who never forgot his vaudeville days, loved slapstick comedy. On one occasion, they had a dinner party and Lapidus performed an hour-long comedy routine dressed in a tuxedo. The architect was 90 years old at the time.

Eight years after his death, Lapidus's work is once again in favor. A line of Lapidus furniture, including a serpentine bench and a sofa with acrylic arms, is being produced by Dennis Miller Associates. His Summit Hotel in New York has been landmarked, and the Lincoln Road pedestrian mall Lapidus designed is now being expanded and is under consideration for historic status. And Desilets, the Miami architect, is working on the ultimate Lapidus monograph, “The Architecture of Joy,” to be published by Rizzoli.

The Lapidus legacy continues to be reconfigured. Some have seen him as a precursor to the postmodern movement. Others see him as a pioneering mannerist who wasn't afraid to combine high modern sensibilities with theatrical and even kitsch embellishments. “He's the Zelig of American architecture,” says Desilets, standing on the sun-drenched terrace of the Finn house. “His work becomes what anyone wants it to be.” ♦

Top: Two wings embrace a pool. **Insets, from top:** The Eden Roc in 1956 and the Fontainebleau in 1976. **Opposite, clockwise from top left:** A sunken bath with original gold faucets near a cabinet by Tejo Remy (1991); a fountain punctuates the entry garden; screens were always key to the overall effect; an '80s Memphis lamp outside the dining room with Dan Johnson dining set (1958) and an “85 Bulb” chandelier by Droog (1993).

See Lapidus's vaudeville routine at wsjmagazine.com



