

## **Architect Biographies**

A number of architects made a distinct contribution to the architectural character of the North Beach area of the city of Miami Beach. Some of the more important individuals are listed below.

**Joseph J. DeBrita** (1901-1992) practiced in Miami Beach from the 1930s to the 1950s. He designed dozens of residential, hotel, and apartment buildings in the Art Deco, Classical Revival, and Post-War Modern styles. These include the Villa Luisa and Ocean Blue hotels on Ocean Drive, the Dorset and Coral Reef hotels on Collins Avenue, and the Eastview Apartments (Marriott) on Washington Avenue. With architect A. Kononoff, he designed the classical revival Mount Vernon and Monticello (Harding) hotels at 63rd Street in 1946. Other notable buildings by DeBrita include the Tropicaire Hotel at 880 71st Street, and apartment buildings located at 7725 Byron Avenue and 1208 71st Street.

**L. Murray Dixon** (1901–1949) was a native of Live Oak, Florida, educated at the Georgia Institute of Technology (1918–1919). After Dixon moved to Miami Beach, he designed, beginning in 1933, over 100 surviving buildings in the Miami Beach Architectural District (N.R. 1979). In his short lifetime, he became one of Miami Beach’s most prolific and talented designers of hotels, residences and commercial buildings.

Some of the many hotels Dixon designed are The Tides, Victor, Tiffany, Marlin, Ritz Plaza and Raleigh, along with numerous apartment buildings. In North Beach, he designed the Normandy Plaza Hotel at 6979 Collins Avenue and a number of apartment buildings, including 920 Bay Drive; 7345 Byron Avenue; 7625 Abbott Avenue; and 320–328 80th Street.

**Gilbert M. Fein** (1920–2003) was from New York City and studied architecture at New York University. He served in the Army Corps of Engineers during World War II and settled in Miami Beach after the war. He designed hundreds of residential and commercial buildings in South Florida in the new Post-War Modern style. One of his trademarks was a type of mirrored garden apartment building, featuring two 2-story buildings joined at the front by a marquee or gable roof, and framing a landscaped courtyard. Most of Fein’s comfortably livable buildings are function extremely well in Miami Beach’s low scale multi-family neighborhoods. In the North Shore and Normandy Isle neighborhoods there are over 76 buildings designed by Gilbert Fein from 1949 to 1961, but some of the better-known are the Ocean Front Apartments, 7400 Ocean Terrace; Ocean Way Hotel, 7430 Ocean Terrace; Beach Place Motel, 8601 Harding Avenue; and Deco Palm Apartments, 6930 Rue Versailles.

**Roy F. France** (1888–1972) was born in Hawley, Minnesota, and studied at the Armour Institute of Technology (1905–06) and the Chicago Technical School. As a young man, he worked as a draftsman in Chicago. He was a hotel architect in the Windy City until he and his wife took a train trip to Florida in 1931 and enjoyed it so much that they

settled permanently in Miami Beach. Here, he designed dozens of prominent Art Deco and Postwar Modern oceanfront hotels, virtually creating the Miami Beach skyline, particularly in the Mid-beach area. Many of France's Miami Beach buildings have been demolished but 20 still remain between 24<sup>th</sup> and 44<sup>th</sup> Streets. His philosophy for design was to "Let in the air and sun. That's what people come to Florida for." Existing buildings include several hotels located on Collins Avenue such as the National (1677), Saxony (3201), Sovereign (4385), and Casablanca (6345) hotels. His son, Roy France, Jr., worked as his partner briefly but died at a young age.

**Norman Giller** (1918–2008) was well-known as one of Florida's most prolific and influential architects of the Post-War Modern style. Born in Jacksonville, Florida, he graduated from the University of Florida in 1945 and worked with Henry Hohaus and Albert Anis in his early career. He pioneered the use of air conditioning, flat-slab construction techniques, and early motel design. His buildings include the Diplomat Hotel in Hollywood (demolished), the Ocean Palm and Thunderbird Motels in Sunny Isles Beach, and the Carillon Hotel and the North Shore Bandshell in North Beach.

**Leonard H. Glasser** (1922–1982) and his brother Robert L. Glasser both attended Miami Beach High School before serving in World War II, Leonard in the Army and Robert in the Navy. Both resumed their study of architecture at the University of Florida after the war. Leonard completed the state boards in 1949, and Robert in 1954, becoming a junior partner in his brother's firm with offices on Lincoln Road. The Glassers designed several groups of homes in Fort Lauderdale, Vero Beach, and Marathon. They are also responsible for the new oceanfront auditorium at 10th Street and Ocean Drive, Miami Beach, as well as more than 40 buildings constructed in North Beach from 1950–1955. They also designed the Coral Gables Post Office, the Fun Fair drive-in on the 79th Street Causeway, and Miami's 990 Insurance Building. The Glassers relocated their office to Puerto Rico in 1961 to work on projects there and in Central America. While in Puerto Rico, the Glassers collaborated with the firm of SACMAG International (Enrique Gutierrez) on the design of the Bacardi Building in Miami. In 1969 they formed a partnership, Glasser-SACMAG Associates. Leonard Glasser died in 1982 at age 60. Robert Glasser was living in Winter Park, Florida, in 1996.

**Melvin Grossman** (1914–2003) was an associate with Albert Anis in 1950 and was also a protégé of master MiMo architect Morris Lapidus. In fact, all three collaborated on the Nautilus Hotel (now the Riande, 1825 Collins Ave.) in 1950 and a year later on the Biltmore Terrace hotel. Grossman and Lapidus partnered in designing the DiLido Hotel in 1953. Influenced by both Anis and Lapidus, Grossman would go on to design the Seville hotel in 1955, the 593-room Deauville in 1957, and the Doral Beach hotel. He also exported the MiMo style in designing the original Caesar's Palace in Las Vegas and the Acapulco Princess Hotel in Mexico.

**Henry Hohaus** (1889–1963) was born in New York City and educated at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, New York. He came to Miami in 1932 and practiced architecture in Miami Beach for over 20 years, becoming one of the area's most prolific architects. His

firm designed over 300 buildings in the Miami area, and he is “generally credited with being the originator of modernism in Miami Beach. Just a few of Hohaus’s well-known buildings in South Beach are the Park Central Hotel, Colony Hotel, Edison Hotel, and the Cardozo Hotel. His work in North Beach spans the period from 1937–1954, including examples of Moderne and Post-War Modern apartments. Notable structures include the White Apartments at 405 76th Street and Good House at 530 75th Street.

**Morris Lapidus** (1902–2001). Emigrating from Russia to New York as a child, Lapidus graduated from Columbia University and started his career in New York in retail design. Masterpieces of consumer psychology, his storefronts featured inventive shapes, curvilinear forms, and receding show windows to draw in shoppers. He first came to Miami Beach in 1929 on his honeymoon. After World War II, he returned here to pursue his ambition to design hotels, trading salesmanship for showmanship. His first major project was the interior of the Sans Souci hotel for fellow New Yorker Ben Novack and his partners, Harry Mufson and Harry Toffel. More interior work followed on the Algiers, Nautilus, DiLido, and Biltmore Terrace hotels. In 1954, as rezoning was underway, Novack again hired Lapidus to design an entire hotel project on the site of the soon-to-be-raised Firestone estate: the Fontainebleau, which according to author Howard Kleinberg became “Miami Beach’s most favored, most adored, most panned, most reviled hotel.”

In the following year, Novack’s partner Harry Mufson hired Lapidus to design the Eden Roc Hotel next door to the Fontainebleau, resulting in legendary turmoil but also another landmark hotel design. Even before the Eden Roc opened, Lapidus won a commission to design the Americana hotel in Bal Harbour for the Tisch brothers. This magnificent structure was severely altered over the years and demolished in 2008. Lapidus’ next major project was the conversion of Lincoln Road to a pedestrian mall in 1960. Shortly after that he began the Seacoast Towers buildings for Alexander Muss. Elsewhere, Lapidus designed the Americana (now Summit) Hotel in New York City, resort hotels throughout the Caribbean, and finally the Daniel Tower Hotel in Israel.

Lapidus eventually became one of Miami Beach’s most beloved architects. His approach to design can best be summed up in the titles of two of his books: The Architecture of Joy and Too Much Is Never Enough.

**Robert M. Little** came to Miami from Philadelphia in 1925. He worked for Robert A. Taylor (designer of Roney’s Spanish Village on Española Way) before forming his own practice in 1933. He rose to prominence as a residential architect in Miami Beach prior to World War II, with many of his buildings in North Beach. After the war, he worked more frequently in Miami and is best known for his work on the Merrick Building at the University of Miami.

### **MacKay & Gibbs:**

Frederick Alton Gibbs (1910-1991) was born in Miami and studied at the Carnegie Institute of Technology in Pittsburgh. He returned to Miami and worked in association with Henry Hohaus from 1934 - 41.

Edward A. MacKay was born in Flint, Michigan in 1908 and graduated from the University of Minnesota in 1934. The two formed a partnership in 1946. Between 1947 and 1965, MacKay & Gibbs designed many fine buildings in the Postwar Modern style in Miami Beach, including the Sherbrooke Apartments (901 Collins Avenue), Surfcomber Hotel (1717 Collins Avenue), and Carriage Club North (5005 Collins Avenue).

MacKay passed away in 1966; thereafter the firm of Gibbs & Wang designed several larger apartment buildings, such as the Carriage Club South (5001 Collins Avenue) and Seacoast Towers West (5700 Collins Avenue).

**A. Herbert Mathes** (1912–1977) graduated from New York University in 1937 and came to Miami Beach in 1944. Previously he had designed stores for the National Shoe Company, shoe exhibits at the 1939 New York World's Fair, packing plants in Kansas, film labs for 20th Century Fox, and Forest Park Gardens in Rye, New York. During World War II he designed ships for the U.S. Navy. In Miami Beach he designed a number of commercial, residential and municipal buildings, including Collins Avenue hotels the Parisian (1510), the Continental (4000), and the Allison (261). In the Morris Lapidus/Mid 20<sup>th</sup> Century Historic District, Mathes designed the north addition to the Fontainebleau, popularly known as the "spite wall," in 1958.

**Charles Foster McKirahan** was born in Tulsa, Oklahoma, in 1919, and first studied at Oklahoma State University. During World War II, he served for three years as a captain with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in Australia, Hawaii, Guam, Japan, and the South Pacific, an experience that strongly influenced his later work. He completed a B.S. degree in architecture from the University of Illinois in 1947. He moved to Fort Lauderdale that same year, forming the partnership of Wilmer & McKirahan in 1951 and his own practice in 1953. One of his firm's first projects was the Polynesian-themed Mai Kai Restaurant, which is still intact and operating in Fort Lauderdale on U.S. 1 north of Oakland Park Boulevard.

As Broward County was growing in the post-war years, the prominent Coral Ridge Properties development firm hired McKirahan to design hundreds of homes and apartments, including Coral Cove, Bay Club, Sunrise Bay Club, Coral Ridge Towers (North and East), and Ocean Manors Hotel, as well as the Coral Ridge Country Club and Yacht Club. Elsewhere in Fort Lauderdale, he designed the Point of America Condominium, Everglades House, Sky Harbour East, Lago Mar Apartments, Birch Tower, Birch House, Sea Chateau Motel, and Manhattan Tower among others.

In Miami-Dade County, his work included the Castaways Island Hotel (also with a Far Eastern theme), the Seaquarium dome, Point View Co-op, Island House on Key Biscayne, and the Bay Harbor Club and Continental co-ops on Bay Harbor Islands. In the Morris Lapidus/Mid 20<sup>th</sup> Century Historic District, he designed the original Seacoast Towers (now the Alexander), in 1962 for Alexander Muss.

McKirahan also worked in the Bahamas Ecuador, Honduras, Dominican Republic, and Brazil, and designed residences for actor Raymond Burr and artist Alexander Calder. Sadly, this prolific and gifted architect was killed in a West Palm Beach auto accident in 1964. He was just 44 years old.

**Victor H. Nellenbogen** (1888–1959) was a native of Hungary schooled in New York. Arriving in Miami Beach in 1928, he became a prominent designer of residences and hotels in the Mediterranean Revival and Art Deco styles. His hotels include the Bowman (Shep Davis Plaza), Savoy Plaza, the Nash, the Alamac, the Franklin, and the Lord Tarleton (Crown/Ramada). He also remodeled the Sterling Building at 927 Lincoln Road in the Art Deco style in 1941. Noteworthy buildings in North Beach by Nellenbogen include the Moderne Olsen Hotel at 7300 Ocean Terrace and a series of wood-frame vernacular houses built from 1935–36.

**Harry O. Nelson** (1902–died?) was born in Denmark in 1902 and came to the U.S. as an infant. In Miami in the 1920s he worked as a draftsman for August Geiger. He was especially gifted in the Art Deco style and left a legacy of very fine buildings in Miami Beach, dating from 1930 to 1950, including his own home at 6868 Harding Avenue. Some of his best work in South Beach includes the Park Avenue Hotel, Beacon Hotel, Florence Villas, Lakeside Apartments; and residences located at 829, 830, 836 Española Way. Noteworthy buildings in North Beach include the Ocean Terrace Hotel (Days Inn) at 7460 Ocean Terrace; the Baltic Hotel at 7643 Harding Avenue; and an apartment building at 6946 Rue Vendome.

**Gerard Pitt** (1885–1971) was born in New Rochelle, New York, and graduated from Columbia University in 1907. In his early career, he worked in New York City and Detroit, Michigan. He moved to Miami in 1930 and was in partnership with George L. Pfeiffer from 1940 to 1941. Pitt served as supervising architect for the southeast district of the Florida Hotel Commission from 1935 to 1957. In Miami Beach, he designed dozens of mostly small-scale apartment buildings in the Art Deco and Post-War Modern styles from 1939 to the mid 1960s, when he was in his 80s. He was one of the most prolific architects in the North Beach area with at least 59 buildings to his credit in the North Shore and Normandy Isles neighborhoods.

**Nathan A. Seiderman** (1908–2002) had an office on Normandy Isle and worked mostly in North Beach, designing at least 32 apartment buildings there from 1951 to 1959. He also designed the Fairfax Apartments at 1776 Collins Avenue in 1951. He later moved to Los Angeles, California, and died in 2002.

**Anton Skislewicz** (1895–1980) a native of Dubrovnik, Yugoslavia, and a World War I aviator, immigrated to New York after that war and graduated from Columbia University in 1929. Drawn by the Depression-era building boom in Miami Beach, he opened a practice here in 1934 and contributed a European sensibility to local architecture. His early work in naval architecture and aviation is clearly evident in his Streamlined buildings. (He also designed a limited-edition limousine for Lincoln Motors in

1938.) During World War II, he closed his practice and returned to shipbuilding in Tampa, Florida. Some of his buildings include the Breakwater Hotel, Lord Balfour Hotel, and Plymouth Hotel. His most notable North Beach building was the Ocean Surf Hotel at 7435 Ocean Terrace.

**Donald G. Smith** (1906–1967) was born in Indiana and educated at Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio. In 1938, he established a private practice in Miami Beach. The Royal Palm Hotel in Miami Beach was one of his earliest and best works. He also designed the Lynmar Hotel and the Metropole Hotel in South Beach and dozens of small residences and apartment houses throughout the city. In the post-war years he formed a well-known partnership with Irvin Korach. Notable examples in North Beach are the Drake Villas along Tatum Waterway Drive and Ocean Horizon at 7420 Ocean Terrace.

**B. Robert Swartburg** was born in New York in 1895 and worked in an architect's office, he claimed, when he was nine years old. He was educated at Columbia University, at the American Academy in Rome, and at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris. He worked in Florida briefly from 1925 to 1927, then returned to New York, but moved to Miami permanently in 1944. He worked here until his retirement in 1972, when he merged his firm with Grove-Haack & Associates and served as a consultant. He died three years later at age 80. In his 35-year career he is said to have designed more than 1000 buildings.

In New York, he is credited with designing Garden Bay Manor, a \$17 million housing project for the Federal Housing Administration. In Miami, he designed municipal buildings such as the Miami Civic Center, the Metro Justice Building, and the former Miami Beach Convention Hall, as well as Riviera Junior High School and Ojus Elementary School.

In Miami Beach, he is best known for designing the Delano Hotel at 1685 Collins Avenue, one of the first post-war hotels to be built on the beach. In the Morris Lapidus/Mid 20<sup>th</sup> Century Historic District, he is represented by the reconstructed façade of the Sorrento Hotel, designed in 1948 at 4391 Collins Avenue, now part of the Fontainebleau Resort; and by the Executive House apartments at 4925 Collins Avenue, built in 1959. In the Normandy Isles Historic District, Swartberg designed several notable apartment buildings including 910, 960 and 6881 Bay Drive. His other works include the Vagabond Motel on Biscayne Boulevard and NE 73<sup>rd</sup> Street and Belle Towers on Belle Isle. Mr. Swartburg was also an accomplished artist who painted for pleasure, and executed murals and sculptures to embellish his buildings.