

ROBERTS BEACH / ATLANTIC BEACH HOTEL
3400 COLLINS AVENUE, MIAMI BEACH

This 3½ -story, Art Deco-style hotel building on the northwest corner of Collins Avenue and 34th Street occupies Lots 10 and 12 of Block 22 in the Miami Beach Improvement Company's Oceanfront Subdivision. It is classified as a Contributing building in the Collins Waterfront Historic District, designated by the City of Miami Beach in January 2001.

Contextual History

The Miami Beach Improvement Company, formed in 1912 by Miami Beach pioneer John S. Collins and his family, platted this subdivision in 1916. In the 1920s a scattering of Mediterranean-style residences and hotels were built here, including the city's first grand oceanfront hotel, the Pancoast, at 29th Street (later replaced by the Seville Hotel). The 1930s saw a proliferation of new structures here, and a stylistic change to Art Deco design:

Although buildings in the 'traditional' Mediterranean-eclectic style continued to be built during the '30s, the new wave of tourists sought to forget the gloomy, Depression-ridden northern cities....The more modest Streamline-Moderne buildings were less pretentious, less expensive, and thus better suited to the taste and pocketbooks of the 'newly-arriving' middle class.¹

The subject building, constructed in 1938, is representative of this new development in the city's history. It was designed by Roy F. France (see Biography following), the most renowned and prolific architect in this area of the city in the 1930s. Like the city itself, Roy France too was revising and modernizing his design style at the time.

¹ H.Raley, L.Polansky, A.Millas; Old Miami Beach, Florida: Miami Design Preservation League, 1994, pp. 9-11.

Specific History

The building permit was issued on November 15, 1938, for this CBS structure on wood pilings, costing \$40,000. It contained 22 apartment units and one hotel room, had an elevator, and a dining room as an accessory use. The original owner of the property was Pearl A. Carroll, listed in the 1930 U.S. Census as the wife of S.K. Carroll, a building contractor, living in Coral Gables. Their son Eddie, who was 21 years old in 1938, is shown on the Building Permit Card as the general contractor for this building's construction.

Although built as an apartment house, the building may have first been called the Carol Hotel, which is typed on the Permit Card. The 1939 Polk's City Directory lists it, probably erroneously, as the Hotel Oliver. By 1939, however, a postcard documents it as the Roberts Beach Hotel, "an Arthur L. Roberts Hotel."² The Arthur L. Roberts hotel chain began in the Midwest in the 1920s and eventually became "perhaps the widest-known hotel owner in the northwest," operating hotels in Minnesota, Wisconsin, North Dakota, Montana, Nebraska, and elsewhere.³ Apparently it expanded into Florida as well.

During World War II, the Roberts Beach Hotel was one of approximately 300 properties in Miami Beach that were leased by the U.S. Army-Air Forces, where an estimated 500,000 soldiers were posted over the war years. While the area south of 23rd Street was a training center for new recruits, this section of mid-beach served as a Redistribution Center, where soldiers returning from active duty were processed for reassignment or discharge. Records show that the Roberts Beach served as a medical facility for this program, accommodating 236 men in its 55 rooms, at \$10,200 annual rent.⁴ It returned to civilian use on December 15, 1945.

² Teich postcard #9AH-2228, date code for 1939; Curt Teich Postcard Archive, Wauconda, Ill.

³ Online sites: "Nelle Palmer of Stillwater," "Hotels of Kearney (Nebraska)," "River Inn (Fergus Falls, Minn.)"

⁴ Online: "Investigation of the National Defense Program," Senate Resolution 6; January 4, 1944, p. 9124.

In the meantime, the Roberts Beach was one of four Miami Beach hotels purchased by entrepreneur Polly Lux in April, 1944.⁵ A former Ziegfeld showgirl, Lux came to Miami Beach in the early 1930s, invested in real estate, and was one of only three women in the nation at that time to have a license as a general contractor. She eventually owned more than thirty small hotels here.⁶ It was probably Polly Lux who changed the name Roberts Beach to Atlantic Beach Hotel, which it has kept since the 1940s.

Architecture

Roy France's original plans for the Roberts Beach that survive on microfilm #11874 in the Miami Beach Building Department include five pages of structural plans (beam schedules and framing), a basement floor plan, fragments of all four exterior elevations, a roof/plot plan, and north and south interior lobby elevations with a few details.

No archival photographs of the building, interior or exterior, have yet been found, but three drawn images were found on archival postcards: the 1939 postcard cited above, an "Atlantic Beach Hotel" postcard of unknown date that uses the same 1939 image, and another undated "Atlantic Beach" card. All show the building from the southeast, with front and side elevations. A photograph of the building in the Miami Beach Planning Department database dates from 1997.

A comparison of the building today with these early plans and images shows that it has changed little over the years. This is a flat-roofed, 3½ story building with a partial basement. The front facade spreads across the double lot, facing east onto Collins Avenue. The front elevation is symmetrical and is composed of three bays, typical of Art Deco; the center bay is set back slightly from the others and has a slightly higher parapet. A walled-in front terrace, three steps up from

⁵"Polly Lux Buys 4 Beach Hotels for \$590,000," *Miami Daily News*, April 2, 1944. (The others were the Sadigo Court, Normandy Plaza, and Crescent.)

⁶"From Showgirl to Benefactor," *Miami Herald*, May 5, 1986, pp.1-C, 3-C.

the street, projects out from this center bay. The front door is centered, and above it, four vertical ribs of convex fluting rise up two stories, with small windows between them. On each of the two side bays, a vertical panel of incised lines in the stucco extends from the basement windows up to the third-floor eyebrows.

The exterior has a multitude of eyebrows. Nearly every window on the east, south, and west façades has its own individual eyebrow, with the exception of two double-length eyebrows on the third-floor front. There are even five miniature eyebrows on the north façade, where they have little function. Windows were originally steel casements, according to the Permit Card, replaced with jalousies and awning-type windows in 1958.

The original front door appears on the plans to be a double door of vertical glass panels set into solid, probably wood, frames, with plain side lights and transom. The present aluminum door, together with the blue and white tile surrounding the entry, are recent alterations. Room air conditioners were set into the exterior walls at an unknown date.

On the interior, several features seen in the original plans still survive in the lobby, most notably the reception desk on the north wall and baseboards all around, both of “quarry keystone”; and the cove ceiling and molding. The lobby floor, probably original, is of plain cream-color terrazzo, with a single salmon-color stripe around the edges. Two features seen on the plans are missing from the present lobby: a mantel on the south wall, with a round mirror above it; and a trim that encircled the lobby walls, consisting of two pairs of thin horizontal strips of wood. Three additional strips decorated the reception desk.

The first story here is a split-level, with short stairs on the north, west, and south sides of the lobby leading up a half-story to the guest rooms, and another stair by the reception desk leading down a half-story to the basement. The dining

room occupied the northeast corner of the basement; also downstairs were the kitchen, rest rooms, “help’s” dining room, boiler room, linen room, and storage.

Addenda

The current project proposal for this site also includes Lots 12 and 13 of this block, immediately north of the Atlantic Beach. The Cornell Hotel was constructed here, at 3420 Collins Avenue, in 1934. Its architect was George Bruce, and postcard images show it as a plain, three-story structure with a balcony of perforated masonry over the door. One depiction shows small peaks on the roof, but another does not. It was demolished in 1981 and the site remains vacant.

The proposed project also occupies Block 20, to the south of the Atlantic Beach, from Collins Avenue to Indian Creek Drive between 33rd and 34th Streets. This entire block was, coincidentally, the site of Roy France’s first Miami Beach project for William Whitman, the Indian Creek Apartments (later named the Scott Bryan Apartments). The permit was issued on June 12, 1931. Archival photographs show it as a sprawling three-story Mediterranean Revival-style structure. It was demolished in August, 1966, and the site remains vacant.

--Carolyn Klepser, researcher
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Architect Biography

Roy F. France (1888-1972) was born in Hawley, Minnesota, worked as a draftsman in Chicago as a young man,⁷ and studied at the Armour Institute of Technology (1905-6) and the Chicago Technical School.⁸ Several buildings from his early career, some in Tudor and Gothic styles, are preserved in Chicago's historic districts.

France and his wife took a train trip to Florida in 1931 and, inspired by the sunlight and sea air, moved permanently to Miami Beach, where France's design style changed drastically, becoming more open and modern. Here he first worked for Chicago publisher William F. Whitman, who had an oceanfront home at 32nd Street and invested in local real estate.⁹ France first designed the Indian Creek Apartments for Whitman in 1931, and the 10-story Whitman Hotel at 3301 Collins Avenue in 1935 (both now demolished), followed by dozens of buildings throughout the city, from "skyscraper" hotels to modest single- and multi-family residences, in Med-Deco Transitional, Art Deco, and Postwar Modern styles. Many of France's buildings have been lost, but twenty still survive in the Collins Waterfront Historic District alone. By the 1940s, France had literally created the mid-beach skyline between 30th and 40th Streets with a row of oceanfront structures: the Sea Isle (now Palms Hotel), Saxony, Versailles, Whitman (demolished), Shoremede (demolished), Patrician, Ocean Grande, and Cadillac Hotels. His other buildings include:

National Hotel	1677 Collins Ave.
Cavalier Hotel	1320 Ocean Drive
Edgewater Beach	1404 Ocean Drive
Pines & Palms Apts.	2463 Pine Tree Dr.
Sovereign	4385 Collins Ave.
Casablanca	6345 Collins Ave.

⁷ Obituary, *Miami Herald*, Feb. 17, 1972.

⁸ Keith Root, *Miami Beach Art Deco Guide*; MDPL, 1987, p.32.

⁹ Interview with Whitman's son Dudley, 1998.