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Star architects rolling into Miami Beach

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Arquitectonica

This rendering shows the exterior of a new mixed-use Miami Beach parking garage designed by Arquitectonica for the Sunset Harbour neighborhood.

After just a brief lull — worldwide recession and all that — the starchitects are back in town, and they're lighting up Miami Beach with some of the cutting-edgiest projects either side of Biscayne Bay has seen since, well, the building boom fizzled out. And in what is rapidly becoming a Beach idiosyncrasy, one of two newly announced projects is a startling parking garage.

The other: a streamlined new beachfront condo tower on Collins Avenue some say is so good it could set a new high bar for luxe high-rise residential design in South Florida.

The firm of one of the most famous and prolific architects in the world, Sir Norman Foster — the British designer of the pickle-shaped, glass "Gherkin" tower in London and the new Two World Trade Center skyscraper — has produced plans for a tapered, oblong 16-story tower that's part of ultra-artistic Buenos Aires developer Alan Faena's ambitious \$350

million scheme to resuscitate the landmark Saxony Hotel. The tower will be raised on thin columns over a lily pond and extensive gardens designed by Miamian Raymond Jungles.

Meanwhile, the firm of another equally famed architect, the also London-based Zaha Hadid, has been selected by the city of Miami Beach to design the latest entry in the resort town's escalating designer-garage arms race.

Her conceptual plan for the Collins Park neighborhood, just north of the Miami Beach Public Library: five swooping, exposed stacked decks of parking, resembling those old figure-eight Hot Wheels tracks, that rivals the monumental, privately developed 1111 Lincoln Road garage by the Swiss firm Herzog & de Meuron for architectural panache.

Like Herzog & de Meuron, whose Miami Art Museum is now rising in Bicentennial Park, Foster and Hadid are winners of the Pritzker Prize, the architectural Nobel. Hadid, a frequent visitor to Miami Beach and one of the few women with starchitect status, has been looking to do a local project for years. It's not often, though, that architects of that caliber are called upon to create stand-alone parking garages, a form once widely derided as the nadir of urban design.

But the Beach has managed to turn garage design into an art.

Assuming the city and Hadid agree on a contract for the \$12.5 million project, hers would join a Beach lineup of unusual parking structures that includes not just the bare-concrete, origami-like 1111, which has become a popular venue for parties and weddings, but two garages now under construction and designed

by international-star-quality firms. Those garages, by New York-based Mexican architect Enrique Norten and Miami's own Arquitectonica, will — like 1111 — contain retail stores and restaurants at ground level. Unlike 1111 and Hadid's, both would hide the parking decks behind intricate facades and dramatic lighting effects.

Norten's — a block south of Lincoln Road Mall — is minimalist, a smooth, rounded facade punctured by an irregular, computer-designed pattern of square holes through which light will shine at night. Arquitectonica's — in the Sunset Harbour neighborhood — has more razzle-dazzle: colored metal panels arranged in a shimmering trapezoidal shape, as if the garage were speeding by.

"It's interesting; it's not just banal structures," Arquitectonica co-principal Bernardo Fort-Brescia said of the trend. "I think it's a good story."

This is the city, you may recall, that prevailed upon the world's most famous architect, Frank Gehry, to have his firm design the metallic-mesh-covered exterior of the garage next to his New World Symphony building, which opened earlier this year.

The idea is not really new: The Beach's first architecturally distinctive garage, Arquitectonica's Ballet Valet on Collins and Seventh Street — known in some quarters as the Chia Pet garage for the thick, hanging green plantings that cover its upper stories — was built in 1996.

But it has really taken off in the past few years as city planners have tried to satisfy a ravenous demand for parking and new commercial development while preserving the walkable fabric and architectural distinctiveness of the Beach's numerous historic districts.

"It really makes perfect sense when you think of the location of Miami Beach — it's at the end of the road," said John Stuart, architecture chair at Florida International University and a Beach resident. "Everybody comes in and they need to park. So it makes sense to have a signature location for cars. It's about how design can enhance an experience, about creating more exciting experiences for people on Miami Beach." (No surprise that marketing firms rate South Florida as one of the top luxury car markets in the United States.)

Like Stuart, some observers say the Foster + Partners tower at the Saxony and the new parking garages — all located in legally protected historic districts — demonstrate how skilled designers can devise striking, even mold-breaking new buildings while fitting in with the old. It's a rare art, they say, that Miami Beach planners have grown increasingly successful at, ahem, fostering, through a combination of tight urban regulation and a liberal approach to design.

Just like Roy France's design for the Saxony in 1948 signaled a turning point in Miami Beach's architecture, from Art Deco to the more-severe, undecorated International Style, the new Foster + Partners tower could set a new high-water mark for adaptation of historic buildings in the city, Stuart said.

"The Saxony is a progressive statement about what can be done when given a bit of leeway," Stuart said.

Wrapped almost entirely in broad, rounded, overhanging balconies that recall the verandas on cruise ships, the unfussy tower achieves a spare modernity while echoing its Deco — or more precisely, Streamline Moderne — predecessors as well as the deep balconies on the south side of the more-linear, mid-century Saxony.

"We were trying to capture a new image for South Beach and reinvent it for future buildings," said Brandon Haw, Foster's New York-based senior partner responsible for North America. "We didn't want to overshadow the Saxony. That was important to how we articulated the building."

Foster, known for high-tech, green-oriented designs, has designed the planned new Apple headquarters in California, famously put a glass dome on the Reichstag in Berlin, and designed a tower for Hearst publications in Manhattan that explodes like a geometric glass jack-in-the-box from a 1928 classically inspired stone base. At the Swiss Re “gherkin” tower in London, the glass exterior breathes to regulate the building’s core temperature.

Just so, at the Saxony addition, Haw said, the terrace-like verandas are shaped with the environment in mind: The building tapers as it rises, more sharply on the northeastern end, with the angle calculated to provide as much shade from the sun as possible as it moves from east to west during the day, he said. The rounded edges on overhangs were tested in a wind tunnel to mitigate high wind velocities.

“The esthetics come out of quite-stringent engineering principles,” Haw said.

The tower, which will be reviewed Oct. 12 by the city’s Historic Preservation Board, may also signal a revival of the high-end, haute-design condo market, at least on the Beach, propelled in large part by Latin American buyers.

Beside taking over the Saxony renovation, which stalled with the recession, Faena and his partners also purchased two properties across Collins Avenue, one vacant and the other with a historic but empty low-rise hotel. Faena said he is still working on ideas for those lots, but city planners say he envisions renovating the hotel and building a parking garage and retail center next to it.

“Miami is for us the door to get into the world,” said Faena, the fashion-entrepreneur-turned-developer who has redeveloped a chunk of Buenos Aires’ once-derelict and now-booming Puerto Madero, the city’s port district, with an unusual luxury hotel in a historic mill building, a new residential block, the Aleph, designed by Foster’s firm, and a just-opened art center. “Miami is where all Argentineans, Brazilians, Mexicans love to go. In a way it is our house.

“We said, if want to grow, let’s go to Miami. We found this fantastic piece of land and quietly we have been buying. Our dream is to do what we did here in Buenos Aires — create something really special working with the best minds in the world.”

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