

TOWN&COUNTRY

A Guide to Miami's Chicest Shopping Districts

In the city's retail wars, there's a fight for luxury dollars as sprawling as Game of Thrones. Which kingdom is right for you?



by **HORACIO SILVA** NOV 30, 2018



hen it comes to fashion, **Miami** has been derided for decades as the land that style forgot, but the city has been an epicenter of chic since long before Gianni Versace ruled South Beach. In its between-the-wars heyday, Lincoln Road, one of the country's first pedestrian malls, was referred to as the Fifth Avenue of the South.

Granted, the days when Lincoln Road's garmentos sneezed and fashionable women everywhere caught a cold, when department stores such as Bonwit Teller dominated the strip, are long gone—as faded as last year's tan. But thanks to a group of ambitious developers reimagining the future of brick-and-mortar retail as a series of experiences and artful adventures, the city is enjoying another moment in the fashion sun.

AVENTURA: FOR THE BIG SPENDERS CRAVING EVERYTHING FROM SUSHI TO GUCCI

"We're in a mall, but it doesn't have the stigma associated with old-school malls," says Jackie Soffer, the co-chair and CEO of Turnberry Associates, the family-held company that is the majority owner of Aventura, the leviathan in northeastern Miami that opened in 1983 and gets 28 million visitors a year. "It's more sophisticated than people expect."



AN ENORMOUS 93-FOOT-LONG SILVER SLIDE IN AVENTURA, MIAMI, DESIGNED BY GERMAN SCULPTOR CARSTEN HÖLLER.

COURTESY AVENTURA

No kidding. Soffer, who is dressed in a high/low mix of Celine and COS, her petite frame augmented by towering cork wedges, is walking me through the ground level of the new three-story, 315,000-square-foot luxury wing that opened in 2017. The entrance to the \$214 million expansion is dominated by two interactive artworks, a 93-foot spiral structure designed by German sculptor Carsten Höller and a splash fountain installation of three large-scale bronze gorillas and four bronze trees by design world darlings Simon and Nikolai Haas.

The landscaping, by designer and urban planner Nathan Browning (mostly transplanted mahogany and black ironwood trees), looms over the courtyard, giving it an air of ripened permanence. The only clue that the place is relatively new is a coming soon sign for a restaurant by San Francisco's award-winning Michael Mina. On the upper level we find three Ugo Rondinone clay sculptures, a Tesla showroom, a hipster gastropub, and a sprawling indoor-outdoor event space, which, perhaps as a sign of the changing tenor of shopping, may or may not ultimately include a discrete VIP area.

"Retail today is all about critical mass and increasing the reasons for shoppers to come," Soffer says, somehow managing to juggle two other conversations on her phone. "The goal is to create multiple reasons for people to want to experience our property."

Though Soffer, an art collector in her own right, is quick to point out that she has been acquiring significant works for her properties since Norman Braman, the Miami businessman and art collector, implored her to do so in the early '00s ("He basically told me it was my civic duty"), she might also be accused of finding inspiration a little closer to home.

DESIGN DISTRICT: FOR ART COLLECTORS, CULTURE VULTURES, AND LABEL COGNOSCENTI

Soffer is married to developer Craig Robins, who was responsible for the revitalization of South Beach in the '80s and is the driving force behind the Design District, which spans 18 city blocks north of downtown Miami, bordering the neighborhoods of Wynwood and Edgewater. (They met at a deposition.) The knock on the Design District following its 2002 opening was that it was a fancy Potemkin village of sorts, a cluster of luxuriously appointed retail palaces on often deserted streets in search of a neighborhood. But after years of seemingly endless construction, the art-inflected area—also landscaped by Browning—is finally coming into its own as a vibrant enclave.

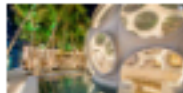


THE DESIGN DISTRICT'S MUSEUM GARAGE IS AN EXQUISITE CORPSE OF ARCHITECTURAL FACADES.

MIGUEL DE GUZMAN

Existing public installations by the likes of John Baldessari and Buckminster Fuller have been joined by site-specific works by Urs Fischer and the Bouroullec brothers. Homes for the Institute of Contemporary Art Miami (supported by Norman Braman) and the De la Cruz collection have opened, as has the Museum Garage, a parking station the façade of which has been tricked out by five different artists. Toptier brands such as Hermès, Dior, and Louis Vuitton continue to build monumental flagships, lending weight to the argument that while the foot traffic here might not yet match the District's rivals, the shoppers are not short of a dime.

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Meanwhile, stalwarts such as Michael's Genuine Food will now have competition from new spots by Brad Kilgore and Joël Robuchon (his partners are still committed to the three locations the

master chef was slated to open before he died earlier this year), as well as Swan, an eagerly anticipated restaurant and lounge by Pharrell Williams and hospitality maven David Grutman, with very Instagrammable interiors by Ken Fulk.

"Whenever you truly invent something, it takes time," Robins says, sitting in his office at Dacra, the development company that operates the District. "And with a new vision for an outdoor museum that makes a statement about retail that's different from anything else, it was always going to take a little while to build up. But I think we're almost there."

BAL HARBOUR: FOR ROYALS, POTENTATES, AND JETSETTING VOLUPTUARIES

Of course, the emergence of the Design District as a bona fide force in the luxury wars is in no small part the result of protracted arm-wrestling between Robins and the Whitman family, which owns Bal Harbour, the ne plus ultra of shopping in South Florida since it opened in 1965. The city relies on tourists (recent studies point to more than 15 million overnight visitors a year, generating sales of \$26 billion), and from the get-go Bal Harbour's location, near many hotels and condos in a one-mile area between the beach and the bay, gave it a direct pipeline to the most affluent among them, making it the most consistently profitable mall in the country.



BAL HARBOUR SHOPS IS AT WORK ON A 350,000-SQUARE-FOOT, \$400 MILLION EXPANSION TO OPEN IN 2023. BARNEYS NEW YORK WILL BE AMONG ITS TENTPOLES.

DOUG CASTANEDO

A none-too-secret element of its success was its savvy radius restriction, which prevented tenants from setting up shop elsewhere by relegating them to less-trafficked areas or requiring them to cough up a percentage of sales. In 2011, when Louis Vuitton left Bal Harbour, other LVMH labels followed, and with them went the suggestion that there was only one luxury name in town— especially when LVMH bought into the Design District through one of its investment arms.

At the time, Randall Whitman, the son of founder Stanley Whitman, sent Robins a stinging message to relay to the bigwigs at LVMH. But if there is any residual animosity, the key players aren't telling. "Frankly, I think it was past time to move on," says Matthew Whitman Lazenby, Stanley's grandson, who has been president and CEO since 2013. "Life's too short. And whether it's for us or for them, business is too important to sacrifice on things like that." Lazenby points out that some of LVMH's brands—including Loro Piana and Bulgari—never left, and he is working with the company to bring back some defectors.

Robins is playing nice too. "I think the Whitmans have contributed so much to our community, and I wish them nothing but the best," he says. Soffer adds, "I see them out, but I really don't know them"—though she sounds more like the Mariah Carey meme in which the diva claims to be unfamiliar with a rival.

Besides, Lazenby and his team are busy developing an additional 350,000 square feet, including an adjacent parcel of land on the southwest side of the mall. Construction on the \$400 million expansion won't be completed until 2023, but Lazenby is worried not so much about growing as about diluting the exclusivity of his offerings. "We could probably fill the entire new space just by making existing tenants larger," he says, adding that he could fill any leftover space from the wait list of prospective tenants. "My philosophy of almost everything in life is that it's all a cycle. Right now luxury is in expansion mode, and at some point, as in all things, it will go too far and contract again. But it's a different world, and for now the Miami market can definitely accommodate three or four locations for luxury brands."

BRICKELL: FOR TECHIES AND TITANS OF INDUSTRY

As of late 2016, the latest entrant in Miami's Game of Thrones is Brickell City Centre, a retail-and-hospitality behemoth owned by Hong Kong's Swire Properties that, in a neat twist to rival the Robins-Soffer marriage, has gotten an assist from an unlikely ally: the Whitmans. With a price tag of more than \$1 billion, the 4.9-million-square-foot shopping, office, condominium, and hotel project is arguably the most talked-about development in Miami. In addition to the 40-story East Miami Hotel, it's home to Saks Fifth Avenue, the three-story Italian food hall La Centrale, a newfangled CMX movie theater, and the holy grail of millennial retail: an Apple store.



THE SWEEPING BRICKELL CITY CENTRE HOSTS EVERYTHING FROM CONCERTS TO FARMERS' MARKETS IN ADDITION TO RETAIL STORES.

JUAN MONTERO V.

Whereas close to 65 percent of sales at Bal Harbour come from tourists, this complex in the financial district is relying on the area's large daytime office population and the residents of the 5,000 apartments that have sprung up nearby in the past few years. "People don't want to live a million miles away from where they work," says Kieran Bowers, the Oxford-educated president of Swire Properties USA. "And with the way the Miami map is divided, we saw a real opportunity in a downtown location with next to no retail of any substance."

Bowers and his cohort have been paying close attention to the competition. Brickell doesn't yet have a permanent art collection, but last year, just in time for Art Basel Miami Beach, the mall invited local curators to incorporate feminist-themed exhibitions by Yoko Ono and the Guerrilla Girls into its offerings.

"Art may not have a direct transactional purpose, but it creates a flash point and a sense of urgency," he says. "At the end of the day we are all in the business of creating stimulating moments and curiosity." Or, to borrow from the universal language of commerce, *ka-ching!*

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