



**FRANK, OCEAN**  
Sinatra and crew in 1968. The Surf Club's period details have been meticulously restored.

HOT PROPERTY

## BOARDWALK EMPIRE

Miami's iconic Surf Club, once a retreat for the rich and famous, is being restored and expanded, with new buildings designed by Richard Meier and interiors by Joseph Dirand.

BY TOM VANDERBILT

**I**N THE LATE 1920S, there were plenty of dreams floating around Miami Beach, a fantasy empire carved from a once-unwanted stretch of mangrove swamp. The country's winter playground mixed together, like some garishly intoxicating cocktail, old-line WASPs with Detroit industrialists, Hollywood starlets with European royalty, ballroom dances with big crime syndicates.

Amid that heady air, a new vision took shape one night aboard the yacht of rubber magnate Harvey Firestone. The Surf Club, as it became known, would be a private haven where the well-to-do could withdraw from the crowds on a generous oceanfront parcel at 90th Street and Collins Avenue. Opened

on New Year's Eve, 1930, in a Mediterranean Revival building (with accompanying cabanas) by seminal Miami architect Russell Pancoast, the place, as Tom Austin writes in his book *The Surf Club*, had "the hush of money and the cool serenity of a European cathedral, leavened with a dose of all-American decorative pizzazz."

Under swaying palm fronds, with a mural of Bacchus (and the text to the Prohibition Act) in the background and attended to by military-crisp cabana boys and epauletted waiters, the Surf Club's guests included members of the beau monde: Douglas Fairbanks Jr., Gary Cooper, Alfred Hitchcock, Tennessee Williams, Frank Sinatra,

Elizabeth Taylor and Noël Coward, to name a few.

This was hardly the picture that greeted Nadim Ashi, a Liberian-born Lebanese developer, when he began to visit the Surf Club five or so years ago. "It felt like the world had stopped," he says with a tone of wonder. All was not well in paradise. Membership was declining—dying off, selling off or simply vanishing. Finances were stretched. The club's former architectural glory had been covered up, bit by bit, with additions like acoustic-tiled drop ceilings.

Ashi became so entranced with the Surf Club that he (along with several investors, including Turkish conglomerate Koç Holding and the Boston-based Cabot family) bought it for \$116 million. The place >

still had the potential to dazzle. One day when he dropped in for a beer, Ashi says, he was startled to realize that the person next to him at the bar was Lech Walesa, the onetime Polish president and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize. “He said he liked it because nobody knew who he was. He said, ‘I go to the beach, rent a cabana, have a drink.’”

In early 2017, the Surf Club will reopen, not as a private club but as a 77-room Four Seasons hotel, floating above the overhauled, historically faithful Pancoast building, and flanked by two new 12-story residential buildings, all designed by Pritzker Prize-winning architect Richard Meier. The hotel, with interiors by Parisian architect and designer Joseph Dirand, will feature two restaurants by Thomas Keller and Antonio Sersale, of Positano’s famed Le Sirenuse (his first excursion outside of Italy), as well as a spa, the shop Les Ateliers Courbet and a branch of the Turkish home-goods boutique Haremlique.

Standing at a bar of brass and green lava stone, designed by Dirand, amid the dust and bustle of construction, Ashi, sporting close-cropped hair and eyeglasses with translucent frames, recounts that his first task was to win over the club’s members, who collectively owned the property and had been approached previously with an offer to buy part of it, a small hotel on the northern side. “I said, ‘Why don’t you sell me the whole club, let me preserve it, bring it back to how it was?’” He promised the previous members lifetime access to the new Surf Club, offering them their own dedicated space. Once the sale went through (not without a lawsuit from several disgruntled owners, since settled), the next hurdle was the local department of historic preservation. “I still remember the first meeting. They told me, ‘You can only build a Mediterranean building,’” says Ashi. “I said, ‘That will hurt the building. It’s going to look like Disney.’”

Ashi had other plans, specifically a nearby condominium project—“the Glass House”—commissioned from Meier but never built. “I felt it was like a jewel,” he says. Meier agreed to let him repurpose the design, with one proviso: He wanted to design the whole property. Ashi eventually won over the preservation committee, in part by convincing them that Meier’s design could harmonize with the existing Surf Club but also, through an exhaustive trawl of photographs and records, that much of the original building had already been changed. “They had beautiful doors,” he says, gesturing toward an opening to the beach. “But they replaced them with ugly doors. We brought back mahogany doors.”

The final piece of the puzzle was the Four Seasons. First Ashi had to persuade a Four Seasons owner in Palm Beach, who possessed an exclusivity clause, to allow him to open (“We became great friends, and I ended up buying his property”). Even then, what Ashi was proposing with the Surf Club was a bit out of the hotel company’s comfort zone: a 77-unit property in a market where 200-unit hotels are the norm. The company wanted ballrooms, but Ashi thought weddings in a place that a wealthy client base would call home, at least some of the time, would “kill the energy.” (Ashi says his friend, the

late architect Zaha Hadid, who lived part time in an apartment in the Miami W, complained of hotel guests in the elevator spoiling the feeling of domesticity; at the Surf Club, the residences will have their own Four Seasons valets.)

Strolling down the club’s “Peacock Alley,” a loggia flanked by vaguely Moorish arched columns, with an open view of a mature banyan tree transplanted to the outdoor patio, Dirand, unshaven, clad in jeans, an untucked blue shirt and espadrilles, says that he wanted visitors to move from the heart of the historic club, with its regal keystone and painted timbers, into “another paradise,” the minimal, light-maximizing world of Meier.

As we enter a finished oceanfront hotel room, Dirand notes that the palette (beige, white, blue, green) is “related to what you have in front of your eyes”—sand, grass and the shifting hues of sky and ocean. The minibar area is made from Irish marble; the precast-plaster walls are ribbed, evoking the old paneled walls of the beach cabanas. Mirrors near the window expand the ocean view, like a visual infinity pool. Where hotel orthodoxy might call for a plain desk with an ergonomic task chair, or the superfluous bedroom sofa (“When I rent a suite, I’m never going to sit next to my wife or girlfriend or whatever,” he says), Dirand designed a “multifunctional object,” a connecting set of daybeds with a movable tabletop that allows both a natural dining nook, nestled just against the glass to access the full sweep of the view, as well as a place to lounge. (“It creates a lot of erotic ideas as well,” notes Dirand.)

One person taken with the Surf Club’s voluminous ocean frontage—a rarity in Miami, where properties are typically wedged in, perpendicular to the beach—is Meier himself. “I’ve done buildings around the world, and I always say, ‘That’s a nice place to be,’” the architect told me in Manhattan. This one he thought so nice he bought a residence there. “I have a photograph somewhere of Winston Churchill sitting in his cabana doing a watercolor. I hope someday I’m able to do that myself.” ●



**COCKTAIL HOUR**  
Clockwise from left: Joseph Dirand, at the bar, oversaw the Surf Club’s remodeled interiors; a former ballroom will become the champagne bar; the new Richard Meier buildings.

FROM TOP: PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRIAN CARLSON (6); COURTESY OF THE SURF CLUB



**ROOM SERVICE**  
Left: Ribbed walls, part of Dirand’s scheme for the residences in the new Meier-designed buildings, evoke the club’s beach cabanas. Below: A high flier above the pool.

