

THE
SURF
CLUB



FOUR SEASONS
HOTEL AND RESIDENCES

A PROJECT BY FORT PARTNERS



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

WSJ.
MAGAZINE

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 | NOV 29TH

— *Read the Original Article* —

IN THE LATE 1920S, there were plenty of dreams floating around Miami Beach, a fantasy empire carved from a once-unwanted stretch of man-grove 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.



Joseph Dirand, at the bar, oversaw the Surf Club's remodeled interiors.



A former ballroom will become the champagne bar,

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.’”