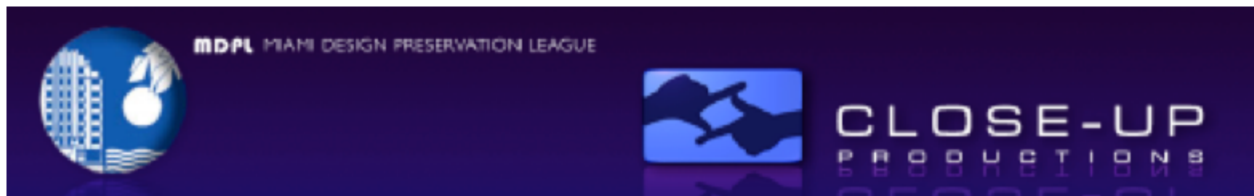


Interview with ira Giller

Kathy Hersh: Today is April 16, 2019. My name is Kathy Hersh, and I am interviewing Ira Giller in his office on Miami Beach for the Miami Beach Visual Memoirs Project. Ira, your family has been here for so long, your father even published a very thick book on your family history here. Can you tell us how the Giller family got started on Miami Beach?

Ira Giller: Well, they originally got started in North Dakota and Minnesota. The family immigrated from Europe, and my great grandmother had health problems. The doctor advised her to leave the north and the cold and move to Florida, so the family moved to Jacksonville around 1900. My father was born in Jacksonville, grew up there, and then the family moved here in 1930 to Miami Beach. They lived on Fourth Street.

Interviewer: Which street?

Giller: Fourth.

Interviewer: Fourth. Okay, right at the bottom of Miami Beach.

Giller: Yes, well, at that time, Jews couldn't live north of Fifth Street, so they were part of the original Jewish families living in south South Beach.

Interviewer: Was that- I hesitate to say an urban legend, because it was barely urban at the time, but was that spelled out legally?

Giller: Oh, yes. Carl Fisher had in his deeds that he wouldn't sell to Jews and many others. If I remember correctly, the Loomis brothers owned the property towards the south, and they didn't have that in their deeds, but Carl Fisher and most of the middle beach had those restrictions. When I was young, I still remember that there were deed restrictions on the Sunset Islands and on the La Gorce Island, La Gorce Country Club. Many of the hotels had signs, restricted clientele. It was very, very real.

Interviewer: You remember seeing those signs?

Giller: Yes. Yes.

Interviewer: Do you remember what some of them said?

Giller: Most of them said restricted clientele. Some said- we have one in the

Jewish Museum collection, No Jews and Dogs Allowed. There were a variety of signs. There was also a bit of coding in how some of the hotels and other institutions would say they had restricted clientele.

Interviewer: So, everybody kind of understood what restricted clientele meant.

Giller: Yes, yes. Very much so.

Interviewer: Even as a child, did you understand that?

Giller: Not so much, but I very vividly remember a story, not so much relating to that, but going into Woolworths that was on the corner of Lincoln Road and Washington Avenue with my mother, and they had separate water fountains, and I remember asking my mother what if I drink from the one that says colored? What will happen? She said, "Nothing. You can try it." Those were very real. I remember the counter at Woolworths, they had the colored section and the white section. I remember going on the bus to school as a child where it was segregated.

Interviewer: It was behind the north down here, wasn't it?

Giller: Miami was a sleepy southern town until the Cubans came here, but before that, and even in the early years of the 60s, Miami still have a very southern view of the world. What modified that tremendously was the influx of the Jewish population after World War II. Most of that really came from a lot of the airmen and army personnel that were stationed here. They came back, said why go back to New York or New Jersey or Chicago and freeze and come down here? In fact, my father-in-law was stationed here during the war and came back after the war and raised his family, and that's how I met my wife.

Interviewer: What made your family leave Jacksonville?

Giller: I think some of it was a matter of looking for employment in the- the Great Depression came on in 1929 and jobs were very scarce. My grandfather moved around the state a bit looking for work. They came to Miami Beach in 1930, a couple years later left, moved to Tampa for job, came back, and then at some point moved to Washington for a year. My grandfather found a job with the government. There were no other jobs to be had here in Miami.

Interviewer: So, this was during the Depression.

Giller: This was during the Depression in the mid-30s.

Interviewer: When did your family come to live more or less permanently here?

Giller: I would say by also the mid-30's, around '35, '36. Other members, cousins and, I guess what were my father's aunts and uncles had also moved down from Jacksonville and were living here.

Interviewer: When did your father become an architect?

Giller: He became an architect during the war. He was in the V-12 program that the government had where they were encouraging young professionals to stay in college and finish their professional training, engineers, architects, lawyers, to be of help in the war effort with their more professional degree, so he joined the Navy, they sent him to the University of Florida, and then he spent a year at Georgia Tech and he studied architecture. As he likes to say, he was first in his class, and he was last in his class. He was the only one in the program at the time, certainly at the University of Florida, because most everybody else had gone off to the war.

Interviewer: But, the timing worked for him, then?

Giller: The timing worked for him. Actually, he didn't go directly into college at the end of high school. The family couldn't afford it. As I said, it was the depths of the recession, and he started working as a draftsman and was doing work, and when the war began, he started working for the Corp of Engineers in Jacksonville designing what became the airfields for training all over the state of Florida. Coincidentally, one of the projects he worked on was an airfield in Boca Raton that became Florida Atlantic University, and we did several projects there many years later, and they found in the archives an old set of plans that has his initials on it from when he was working for the Corp of Engineers.

Interviewer: So, even though it was the depression, there were opportunities here in Miami Beach?

Giller: There were some. There were not a lot. The weather was good. My father's uncle had gotten into the contracting business. He was a masonry contractor. It was Uncle Ben, and he started in the late '30s as they started building some of the art deco hotels. He began to do some construction work. My grandfather was into real estate and was a real estate broker, so as that began to pick up in the late '30s, some opportunities presented themselves there. Things were a mixed bag.

Certainly, when the military came and took over the entire city, it helped support some of the locals, but the real boom times came after the war. My father went through those times- he was in the right place at the right time, as were many young servicemen that came out of the war, and the world was an opportunity for them, and South Florida began this huge boom that started in the '40s and ran well into the '70s. It was constant building. He was very much involved in designing the hotels that were being built here in Miami Beach and other parts of Miami. He designed, in the early '50s, much of Sunny Isles' Motel Row. He designed the Carillon on Miami Beach. He designed the Diplomat Hotel in Hollywood. He designed the Singapore Hotel in what's now Bal Harbour.

The boom in the early d'50s, apartment houses were being built, houses were being built, stores were being built, shopping centers became a reality, grocery stores. The amount of work that he did, it was huge, and it was due primarily to the boom that existed in post-war Miami. It's hard to describe that boom when you look at it today, but to go through the period from the bust in the mid-20s up until the post-war mid-40s, Miami suffered from a roughly 20 year period of not having prosperity, and then all of a sudden, prosperity was everywhere.

Interviewer: How did he come to be called the Father of MiMo?

Giller: He was one of the one of the first and only architects in the generation post-war that came in. We think so much of the art deco hotels and the art deco architects, Henry Hohauser, Dixon, and some of those others. My father was really of the next generation, and having grown up and been local, he had a great breadth of knowing people in the community, and they came to him for all sorts of projects.

He began doing, as I said, all these different types of projects, and some of the people he worked with early on later became very successful in the real estate development industry. He designed a housing project out on Coral Way in what was the edge of Miami at that time for a company called F&R. F&R today is one of the biggest developers in the country.

There's an apartment building he designed on West Avenue and 15th Street that he designed for Bob Turchin. Bob Turchin built about half of the high rises on Collins Avenue, particularly from 23rd Street up to 71st Street in the boom times as a general contractor.

Another one of his clients was Sam Friedland. Sam Friedland founded the grocery store chain called Food Fair. It later became Pantry Pride.

Sam also built the Diplomat Hotel.

Interviewer: So, your father was pretty busy.

Giller: Yes. Yes.

Interviewer: Did you go along with him kind of as an apprentice?

Giller: As a young kid, I did, and it really, I guess, touched me the right way, and I wanted to become an architect as well.

Interviewer: That must have been pretty exciting.

Giller: It was. I can remember as a kid going up Collins Avenue, and we would get to Sunny Isles, and I would start naming you designed this, and you designed this. You didn't design that hotel, motel, and you didn't design that motel. I remember, as well, going up to the Diplomat in Hollywood, going up A1A and, as it got north of Sunny Aisles, A1A became a very narrow road, and at certain times of the year, the road would be just absolutely covered with land crabs. They were migrating, and you'd drive, and you'd just hear the tires crunching the land crabs on the way to the Diplomat hotel site. I remember seeing that. Before, it was all mangroves. Mangrove swamps where the country club was built. Very different than it is today.

Interviewer: It didn't take much convincing, then, for your father to- son, would you like to follow me in the firm sort of thing?

Giller: No, it didn't. I spent a lot of time doing it, and I think probably from about middle school on, I pretty much knew that that's what I wanted to do.

Interviewer: It sounds like you were pretty proud.

Giller: Yes, very much so. As a family, my uncle was also an architect, my father's brother, as is his wife, and I'm an architect now. My cousin, Steve Bernard, is also an architect. We've had an impact. I was thinking about it the other day. We've probably had an impact of 75 years of architecture here in South Florida. Not too many people have that legacy other than perhaps the Pancoast legacy.

Interviewer: We know the art deco style happened in a cluster because of the 1926 hurricane. How did MiMo happen?

Giller: MiMo happened somewhat because circumstances as well. The post-World War II era brought back an urge to do new- I guess the servicemen saw the world they wanted to bring back and do so much more. The world was exploring modern architecture. They moved on from art deco, and the environment wasn't as regulated. People were a bit more daring, a bit more experimental. New materials were coming into the marketplace.

There was this new material called aluminum that you could use for. There was a concrete industry that was evolving here in South Florida. Concrete became our indigenous building material. There were experiments with what you could do with molding concrete, creating patterns in it, using it for strength. Steel was much more of a northern material. It was used sparingly here. The environment had somewhat of an impact on that, but there was also a whole lot of less regulation.

Just the other day, we were looking at a set of plans here in the office of a project that my father did, and it was eight pages. I said to my cousin, Steve, I said for us to do this today, it would be 60, 65 pages of drawings just to meet the building department requirements. But, somehow, things got built. They're still standing today. They weren't that much less safe, but it was a different environment. It was a more exciting environment in many respects.

The Miami modernism grew from the uniqueness of Miami bubbling up as a tourist destination, the ability of families to get in a car in New York, Boston, Chicago, and drive to Miami, or get on a train and come to Miami and have a warm vacation in the winter made things different and made things exciting and made things experimental. We got the motels in Sunny Isles that were all themed before Disney was doing theme parks. We had grand staircases that were being built in hotels. People were beginning to dream about what life could be rather than what life was, and the architects began to express that. My father was in the thick of it.

At the time, I don't think they were fully cognizant of what they were doing as a movement, and I know that firsthand, hearing my father say we weren't all conscious of what we were doing and what it was creating and so on. It's only now that we look back on it that we can say this was an era that brought about what we have.

What added to it certainly was the invention of air conditioning and the ability to use air conditioning in a building on a somewhat economic basis that worked. Suddenly, you could be in Miami longer periods of time and deal with the heat, but that wasn't common in the '50s. The

air conditioning that we experience today was still in its infancy in the '50s. I remember you would see the hotels and motels and the stores on Lincoln Road with signs with icicles hanging on them, Air Conditioned. Come On In. The movie theaters, Air Conditioned, Come On In. It was not as commonplace as it is today, but that's what made a difference and created some of the unique buildings and environments that we have.

Interviewer: And, now, you can even get to those buildings in an air conditioned car, so that probably too has-

Giller: Right. I tell some of my friends and relatives from up north that complain about the heat, I said we don't feel it. We live in an air conditioned house. We get up and have breakfast and get in our air conditioned car and drive to our air conditioned office and continue to move on in an air conditioned environment. We're out in the heat for five or 10 minutes. You can tell the natives, they walk in the shade. The tourists walk in the sun. We enjoy the environment, but the air conditioning made it livable. July and August here without air conditioning is-

Interviewer: What do you consider some of the good examples of adaptive architecture that's managed to meet the needs of the 21st century and the volume of tourism here but still are incorporating the design elements of MiMo and of art deco?

Giller: Certainly, I've done a couple projects that I've had the opportunity to come back and take a building and now update it. One is The Netherland on Ocean Drive. My father did work on that in the early '50s, and it was originally built, I believe, in the late '30s. In the '50s, he did some renovation and expansion, and then in the early '90s, I did a major renovation and created the multipurpose or mixed use building that it is today with apartments and stores and offices. I added three stories to it. That was one of the first actually in this, what I call our modern '90s to date, cycle of the success of Miami Beach.

Interviewer: Was your father still alive? Is he still-

Giller: He died about 10 years ago, but he certainly witnessed all of that.

Interviewer: He witnessed your renovation of his renovation.

Giller: Yes. There were several projects that he did and 25, 30 years later, I came back and then worked on and expanded upon.

Interviewer: What was that like?

Giller: I find it very interesting. When I was younger, it was somewhat trying to get into my father's head and understand what he was thinking with those projects and what his role was and what his view was, and then look at them differently or how we can build upon it. I've enjoyed it. I've done it, actually, with a couple of other projects. I did a couple of projects that Morris Lapidus designed, came back 20, 25 years later and added to it, a couple that Mel Grossman had designed.

Interviewer: What were the Morris Lapidus projects you redesigned?

Giller: I added to a fire station that he did down in on Flamingo Park.

Interviewer: He did a fire station?

Giller: He did a fire station. He did some work over here at Mt. Sinai. I subsequently came back and worked at Mt. Sinai Hospital.

Interviewer: Did you feel like you were kind of a mind reader, or did you feel like there was the ghost of Morris Lapidus looking over your shoulder?

Giller: No. When I was doing those projects, he was still alive, and I would see him. I was active with the Kiwanis Club in Miami Beach, and my father and Morris were also members, and we would have lunch every Thursday for the Kiwanis weekly meeting, and we would talk from time to time.

Interviewer: Did you ask for his advice?

Giller: We would talk and compare practices, because he went in one direction with his practice, my father went in another direction. Morris was about a half a generation older than my father.

Interviewer: You and your father had lunch with him once a week, you said?

Giller: We would be at the Kiwanis Club once a week. We would talk. Morris had a son that was also an architect that practiced in New York. They had separate practices. He admired the fact that my father and I were able to make a practice work. I attribute all of that to my father. He gave me space and gave me room. As a young son, I pushed hard, and now I get my son pushing me, and the roles are reversed a bit. We would talk from time to time about that. A lot of my father's practice and my practice, for many years, was in the corporate institutional area,

particularly from the late '60s probably up until about 20 years ago. Morris continued in the hotels and in the high rise condominiums, so we would kind of compare notes. It was a collegial environment.

Interviewer: He was ridiculed a lot, or his architecture was.

Giller: Yes.

Interviewer: Did he ever speak about that?

Giller: Sometimes. He would tell stories at the Kiwanis Club. The Kiwanis Club would have a speaker every week, and if the speaker didn't show up, okay, Morris, how about giving us a story. He would tell stories about building the Fontainebleau and dealing with Ben Novak and some of the real problems that he had with Ben Novak, how he went after Novak with a two-by-four one day. Novak was not paying him. I forget the details of the story. He got insulted, and they were on the construction site, and picked up a two-by-four and-

Interviewer: Did he whack him, or-

Giller: He didn't hit him, but he was- he was threatening. Morris was a great storyteller. He would really- we would enjoy his tales.

Interviewer: He admired the fact that you and your father could work together very collegially.

Giller: Yes.

Interviewer: Did that imply that he and his son did not?

Giller: He struggled a bit. I know his son had a very good practice in New York. He had no desire to come down here and work with Morris directly. They worked on a few projects, but- in fact, there was one project we were trying to put together where all four of us were going to work on a project that never came to fruition.

Interviewer: Did he sort of come to terms with some of the criticism, or did he-

Giller: I don't think he ever came to terms with it. I think time came to terms with the critics. The Fontainebleau was his swan song, and it met with severe criticism, but it stood the test of time, and it still stands the test of time. Some of it was that architecture in the '50s still was very much an elitist profession. When you think about, certainly pre-World War II,

most people couldn't afford to hire an architect, no less build a building, so the people that were doing the building were a very narrow, well to do class. They had some well to do ideas of what architecture was and wasn't, and the architects coming out of the '30s and '40s also had their view of the world. Modernism was kind of slap in their view of the world, in its face, at least to those that weren't open to moving on and adopting, and I think Morris suffered from some of that. I know it was quite painful through the years to him, the criticism that he got.

Interviewer: He expressed some of that?

Giller: Yeah, he talked about it from time to time. He didn't overly dwell on it, but there was an AIA convention here in the late '50s in which he was condemned very much for his architecture. He had the Fontainebleau at the time and the Americana Hotel up in Bal Harbour, and these were different than hotels that people were seeing in New York and Chicago and Boston and wherever. They were focused on grand lobbies and over the top indulgences of a vacation experience, but that's what was MiMo. It wasn't only Morris doing that. All of their peers, my father, Mel Grossman, Albert Anis, others. It was the environment of what Miami was all about. MiMo reflects Miami then, and we look all around today. We've grown from MiMo, but we still have many vestiges of it in the unique Miami environment that we see in so many of the buildings.

Interviewer: Do you think that Miami now, in the 21st century, has a sort of iconic signature aspect to the architecture?

Giller: Some of it. I think it has some unique elements. I think time will tell how it stands out. I remember my father saying many times during the course of going through MiMo, they never thought about it as the MiMo movement, or we're going to do a MiMo building today, or we're going to embrace what we're doing and have a local architects meeting and say aren't we all a bunch of great MiMo architects. It's only when we look back on it and we say this was the body of work, and this was what it reflected. We'll probably do the same thing on early 21st century architecture as well. It certainly has some signature elements, and it certainly has some very mundane elements. The signature elements will survive, and we'll forget about the mundane elements.

Interviewer: Tell us about your relationship with the Jewish Museum of Florida.

Giller: That's my baby. The Jewish Museum, I've been the architect and the general contractor, and I'm now the Chairman of the Advisory Board. I previously served as President of the museum. My father was the founding president of the museum. It's been a great joy for me to take

the first synagogue of Miami Beach and take it from the disrepair that I stepped into in 1993, 94, and bring it to life and make it the community treasure that it is today. It keeps evolving. I just finished putting on a new copper dome. That was, I call it phase four in the 25 year evolution of the Jewish Museum.

Interviewer: That sounds like a big job.

Giller: Oh, I've enjoyed it, though.

Interviewer: How long did it take you?

Giller: The copper roof, we put on in the last three months. The toughest part was for years we have had problems with the roof leaking, and I found no copper roof craftsmen here in South Florida or in Florida. I wound up finding a copper fabricator in Salt Lake City and a copper installer, a real craftsman, in New England.

Interviewer: That was the original?

Giller: What we took off was the original dome from 1936.

Interviewer: So, you had to replace it with the same material.

Giller: We replaced it with the same material, the same copper, and just finished brand new, shiny copper that's starting to get a patina already, just the couple months of exposure to the salt air.

Interviewer: And, it doesn't leak.

Giller: And, it doesn't leak.

Interviewer: There are actually two buildings side by side.

Giller: The museum started out originally in 1926, the first building was built. That was at 311 Washington. That was a very modest sanctuary, and basically, that was it. There was a very small Jewish community on Miami Beach. The Jewish community started to grow after that, and as the congregation grew, its needs grew, and they also owned the property next door, the corner at 301 Washington. In 1936, they built the new main sanctuary building and converted the original building into a social hall, and subsequently, they built some offices and four classrooms on the second floor behind that building.

When they completed that in the late ’30s, they had a wonderful synagogue complex. But, when they built it in the ’30s, they still didn’t have a lot of money. They were coming out of the Depression. The stained glass windows were not a part of the original design. It was only in the post-war time that the stained glass windows, 76 of them, were put in as the congregation grew and grew.

It peaked in membership in probably the mid-70s. By the time of the late ’70s, some of the elderly Jewish population was dying off, some other elements were moving to Broward, to Century Villages, and so on. Then, [phonetic] [32:11] Mariel came in 1980, and the crime that came with Mariel really pushed everybody else out, and the congregation suffered accordingly. By the early ’90s, the congregation was just a handful of people remaining.

In 1992, Hurricane Andrew damaged the roof, damaged some of the stained glass windows, and the congregation didn’t have the money to be able to restore and rebuild, and they were only using the main sanctuary once a year.

At the same time, there was a group that had put together a traveling exhibit on the history of the Jewish experience in Florida from 1763 to the present day, and it traveled to about a dozen cities. In 1992, 93, the exhibit was looking for a permanent home, and a marriage was made with meeting with the congregation. The congregation leased the building to the museum group for a 50-year lease with a 50-year option. That was the beginning of the museum.

We then went out and raised the funds to restore the building and incrementally repaired the roof, put in windows, put in new wood floor, new lighting, new plumbing, new air conditioning. The very first time I went in there, there was a racoon family living up in the rafters. The woman that was with me was walking with high heels, and they were sinking into the termite-eaten floor. From that, I made the beautiful museum that it is today.

As the museum grew, it needed more and more space. The congregation remained in the original 26 building, and in 2005, we convinced the congregation to sell us the whole property, and we acquired it, and then I renovated the second building and created that into a multipurpose exhibit hall and restored what needed to be restored, added offices and for the collection in the rear, in the former classrooms.

The big problem at that point was we had two buildings, and they

weren't connected. Typical of the South Beach pattern, there was about a 10 foot alley between the two buildings that had been filled with old air conditioning equipment serving the main sanctuary, and I came up with the idea to tear all of that out and put a skylight over it and connect the two buildings together so we could have the proper flow of the museum. That's how what we call the Bess Myerson Gallery got created.

Interviewer: Bess Myerson, after the former Miss America?

Giller: Yes. She was the one-

Interviewer: Was she a member?

Giller: She was the one and only Jewish Miss America, and she lived here in South Florida near the end of her life part-time, and she was on our board for a while, and she made a donation to create the gallery.

Interviewer: Did not know that.

Giller: Yes.

Interviewer: When did she die?

Giller: Good question. I want to say about seven or eight years ago. The last few years, she moved to California to live with her daughter, but she was alive when we finished the creation of the gallery.

Interviewer: She subsidized it.

Giller: Yes.

Interviewer: Wow.

Giller: One of the other problems we had with the museum was the sanctuary had a sloping floor. The balcony had a sloping floor. That doesn't lend itself to a museum very well, and I was challenged with how do I make this work with this sloping floor? If I lower the floor, the entry coming off of Washington Avenue is up too high, and we can't remove the historic entrance, and if I raise the floor to being level with that, then I would cover over the beam at the front end, and that didn't work. Finally, I said let's just leave it sloping. It works for the Guggenheim. We just have to get creative in creating furniture elements to divide the space. I came up with wedge-shaped platforms and wedged walls that had a

bottom wedge so it could take the slope, and it provides great flexibility in configuring and reconfiguring. It's one of the things that makes the museum so unique.

Interviewer: Is it true that Meyer Lansky was a member of the congregation?

Giller: Yes, he was. He used to sit right up front on the right-hand side, right near a side door that he could get out pretty quickly. He donated a window, one of the stained glass windows in the museum.

Interviewer: Do you remember him?

Giller: Yes. I remember seeing him coming in and out of Wolfie's on 21st Street. I saw him a couple times coming out of the Forge Restaurant on 41st Street. You would see him, and you'd think he's just one more guy walking down the street.

Interviewer: With his little dachshund.

Giller: Right. I don't know whether it was a dachshund, but- I don't remember. It was a small dog. He would walk it on Collins Avenue. He was very low key. Not a flamboyant personality, as some of the names and people that have come and gone in Miami.

Interviewer: They never could actually nail him, could they?

Giller: No. No.

Interviewer: He covered his tracks very well.

Giller: Apparently.

Interviewer: But, he did donate this window.

Giller: Yes. He was a member of the congregation. He would be there for high holiday services. Go to the museum today, it has the plaque with his name on it.

Interviewer: Did that embarrass anyone, or did they just think well, he's just a regular guy?

Giller: Some of my relatives were members of the congregation long before my time, so I can't relate to that, but certainly, some of the members of the congregation when he was there at the time, they have some insight into that. I don't know. From the museum's point of view, as the

museum was growing, it was one more thing to make the museum a bit attractive and have a unique story to tell. It was just part of the Jewish cultural heritage of Florida.

Interviewer: In many ways, it is very appropriate in terms of Miami Beach was a place where people kind of winked at things that weren't on the up and up exactly, and there was a lot of illicit activity that went on, a lot of gambling.

Giller: And, very low crime.

Interviewer: Until the Marielitos came.

Giller: Right. Very much so, but they were different times, and it was a different era. You didn't mess with the people that were running the town, and they didn't bother with you if you didn't bother with them. I remember as a kid leaving car doors open and front doors of houses open and riding a bicycle on the street. I look at my grandchildren now, and I say at that age, I was riding a bicycle all over Miami Beach. I just had to be home for dinner, and the rest of the time, I was out with my friends riding bikes through the neighborhood. You don't do that today.

Interviewer: That's pretty much the way those of us our age all grew up in our respective places.

Giller: Yeah, and in spite of the connotation of Lansky and everybody else that came to Miami, there was an order to it, a respected order.

Interviewer: One of the things that delights me to hear people talking about, the food, the restaurants, the cafeterias and so forth. Did your family participate in that-

Giller: We weren't in the restaurant business, per se, but we ate our fair share.

Interviewer: What were some of your favorite places?

Giller: The old Famous restaurant on Washington Avenue, that was terrific.

Interviewer: It was just called The Famous, right?

Giller: The Famous, that was the name. The Werner family owned it. You would be waiting out front for your table, and they'd bring hors d'oeuvres out for the people waiting in line. You'd get food before you

even ever sat down. You could make your own egg cream. They had seltzer bottles and chocolate and milk at the table. When I took my kids when they were young, there was a great excitement to be able to do that. That was a wonderful restaurant and of a bygone era. There was The Embers. In fact, I mentioned the Kiwanis. The Embers was our host for several years on that weekly luncheon. Joe's has always been Joe's. Wolfie's. [phonetic] [41:42] Pumpernicks. The Rascal House. We don't eat that way anymore.

Interviewer: It's probably a good thing.

Giller: Yes. Coming back from a week in Argentina, I said I haven't eaten this much beef in this short a period of time in probably 25 years. Our eating habits are totally, totally different.

Interviewer: Is there anything that I haven't asked you about that you-

Giller: I'll tell you a couple of Miami Beach stories, maybe not only Miami Beach, but I grew up, I went to Beach High, graduated from Beach High. For my senior prom, I took my now wife, then girlfriend to senior prom, and it was held at the Fontainebleau in the Club Room. In the Grand Ballroom, there was a big dinner that same night for Hubert Humphrey. He was Vice President. He was running for president. Frank Sinatra was the entertainment, and my parents were big democratic supporters, and they were at the dinner, and my mother came out and brought my wife and I in to sit for a few minutes, and as we go in, she's marching us right up to go meet Frank Sinatra. Well, as we got within about 10 feet and my wife suddenly saw him, she kind of fainted back and leaned in my arms. Couldn't believe she was meeting Frank Sinatra on prom night.

Interviewer: Your then girlfriend.

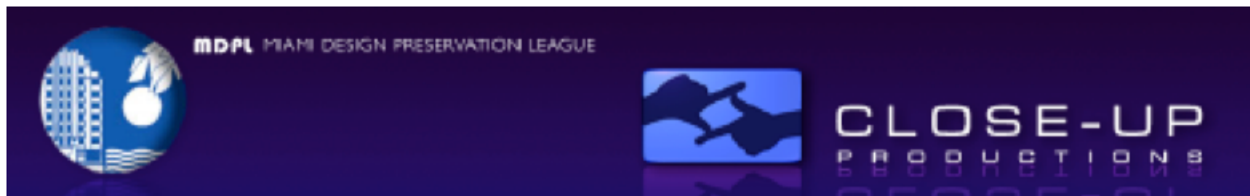
Giller: My then girlfriend.

Interviewer: Your mom really knew how to impress your girlfriend.

Giller: Yes, yes.

Interviewer: Did she literally faint?

Giller: No, but she was obviously taken aback. My wife, Honey, saw Elvis Presley with her aunt, saw the Beatles when they were here at the Deauville in their Miami Beach tour. Later saw Paul McCartney when he played the Dolphin Stadium, but she was taken aback by Sinatra.



Interviewer: And, you had another story.

Giller: Another Sinatra story. Well, they made the Hole in the Head on Ocean Drive at the Cardozo Hotel. My oldest friend lived around the corner on 13th Street in an apartment building, and his mother and my mother were very, very good friends. In fact, his parents and my parents knew each other before they got married, before each of us were born, living and growing up here on the beach. The mothers took us to go watch the filming, and in the scene when, I think it's Sinatra runs from the lobby across to the beach, into Lummus Park, into the beach, that was the scene that we saw filmed. That was a very fond memory.

Interviewer: You saw the outdoor scene.

Giller: Coming from the hotel, yeah.

Interviewer: The ocean was a lot closer then.

Giller: Yes, yes, yes. Talking about the ocean, and the closest that was, that was another one of my projects. I designed the boardwalk that's mostly being torn down on the beach. I was President of the Chamber of Commerce in the mid-80s, really at what I saw was the inflection point of the decline of the beach. We had our heyday in the '40s and the '50s and into the '60s. By the late '60s, it was over, and into the '70s, it was declining. In 1982, 83, a group of businesspeople got together and said we've got to find some way out of this. We've got to come up with a new role for Miami Beach, and that started in the mid-80s, and what we're enjoying today, 40 years later, 35 years later, is really one big role of turning around what Miami Beach was all about.

Interviewer: Tony Goldman had a big role in that.

Giller: Tony Goldman came to that about five or six years later, but he was a critical part of it. He had the vision to see what most everybody else couldn't see. He had gone through it in SoHo, and he had investors that came with him that backed his dreams, and he made a reality of it.

The very first effort to begin to turn the hotels around was with the Cardozo, the same one with Sinatra, that Barbara Capitman's son had put together a group to buy, and at the time, I was sitting on the Zoning Board of Adjustment, and they were looking for a variance to put a door to the outside porch from the lobby, add a door, and there was a whole lot of controversy. You can't do that, you can't do that. Now, we

look at how that was really, I think, probably the very first change with the hotels on Ocean Drive.

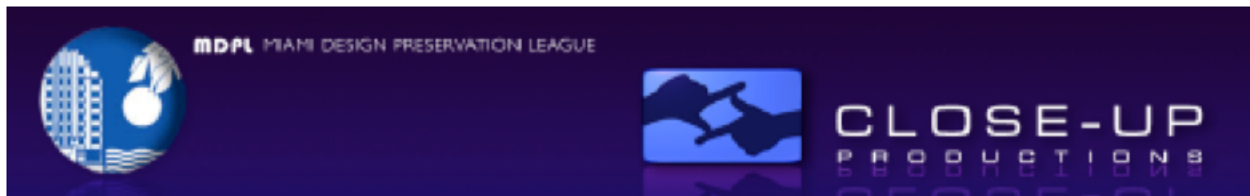
Now, we have big variances. That was a tiptoe in. I remember so many old families that owned properties were very fearful of what would happen with the art deco movement. Fearful because of a lack of knowledge and a lack of experience. They didn't know what it was going to be, so be opposed to it out of fear.

Interviewer: Fear that they might lose property values, or what?

Giller: Yeah. They thought by going down the path of historic preservation and Barbara Capitman's dream was just a road to economic hell. As it turns out, the families that sold out quickly sold out way, way, way too cheap. There were a few families that held on, but one of the problems that they had as well is it wasn't the first generation that built the hotels and were operating the hotels that were in there now. It was now second generation, and sometimes even third generation, and the drive to take the big steps of changing the properties, borrowing substantial sums of money, having a vision, just wasn't in the belly of the second and third generation. The cousins would say I just want to cash out and move on and do something else.

The real people that made money with the transformation of South Beach in the late-80s and 90s were not the locals. It was the people that came in from outside. Tony Goldman. My father, I remember saying many times, he saw time and time again in his whole career, that the locals were not the big visionaries. The locals were not the people that were making the big money. It was the people that came from New York or Chicago or wherever and said this is an opportunity. This is cheap by their standards. We looked at it, and we said oh, that's expensive. You got to put 100,000 dollars into a building. Today, you don't even put that into a room in one of those hotels anymore. We just couldn't see it.

As we're struggling a bit today in North Beach to try and convince property owners there to see the potential, they're going through the same kind of well, I just want to cash out, and I can't envision it. I can't do it. They're afraid of what it's going to be, and that's been North Beach's struggle for the last 20 years. Eventually, it's going to turn, and eventually people with vision and with financial strength will do it, but I think a lot of the locals will walk away from that as well because they just- they don't have the vision. What's amazing is that they see the success of South Beach for 30, 35 years, and yet they're afraid to take a step in North Beach, even though they already have a model that



has proven successful.

Interviewer: There are some criticisms, too, of what South Beach has become. The problems really are grossly exaggerated during spring break weeks, but many think that it's not really the vision that Barbara Capitman had for-

Giller: It's not her vision, and certainly Tony Goldman's vision was to be much more sophisticated. I think we can be there. Spring break has been an aberration and a little bit of avarice and greed on behalf of a very small segment of the business community. The restaurants don't make a lot of money during spring break. The hotels don't make a lot of money during spring break. We haven't quite figured out who does make a lot of money during spring break.

Interviewer: That's interesting.

Giller: We get a lot of people. The kids come in, they're four, six, seven to a room. The hotels aren't making money on that. The kids sometimes destroy the room. They're not coming out on that. All of the higher end restaurants don't do well at all. We locals don't want to go out and be caught up in the middle of it, and the kids aren't spending big dollars to go in there. Where is the balance?

Interviewer: I think Fort Lauderdale figured this out many years ago, right?

Giller: Yes. And, we've gone through cycles. We had kids coming for spring break 40 years ago, 25 years ago, and it goes in cycles. It's gotten out of hand in the last few years, and the pendulum needs to swing back. It really does.

Interviewer: You mentioned that you have a project on Lincoln Road in the mall.

Giller: Yes.

Interviewer: I'm interested in the history of the mall and how it has changed, I guess, from the first vision to where it is now and how has it changed? What do you see is the vision that may be the future [inaudible] [52:27]?

Giller: I can remember when Lincoln Road still had cars on it. I remember as a young kid going to the movies on Lincoln Road, at the Beach Theater, the [phonetic] [52:39] Carib Theater, the Lincoln Theater, the Colony Theater. It had a very different feel, but what had hurt Lincoln

Road at the time they created the mall was that the art deco hotels had relatively small lobbies. They had no retail. Retail was on Washington Avenue.

When the post-war hotels started to be built, particularly in the early ’50s, they started to have stores in the hotel itself. The Fontainebleau had a whole slew of stores. The Eden Rock, the Deauville, the Carillon, all had stores within, and the hoteliers were touting plans of just come and stay with us. You don’t have to go anywhere else. That hurt Lincoln Road, and that’s what brought about the Merchant’s Association getting together and saying we need to do something. They hired Morris Lapidus to come up with a vision, and let’s make it a mall. In its first years, it began to bring traffic back, but it struggled a bit.

What ultimately hurt Lincoln Road Mall was the same thing that hurt the rest of the city. Miami Beach had said we’re Miami Beach, come visit us, and we don’t have to do anything. The jet plane allowed people to fly to California, to the Caribbean, to Mexico, to Bermuda, to wherever, so that four-hour plane ride from New York to Miami suddenly became a two-hour ride, and you didn’t have to go to Miami. You could go elsewhere. You could go to Las Vegas. Suddenly, that became competition.

The stores on Lincoln Road in the ’70s weren’t doing much. The hotels weren’t doing much. The last new hotel that was built was the Doral around ’66, ’67, ’65, and we sat on our laurels for 15 years, and the world passed us by. The mall today is very different than the mall has ever been in the past. The mix of stores is totally different than where the mall started, totally different than when the mall got resurrected in the ’90s, and it had the local stores. It didn’t have the national chains, but they had character. They were unique. There were lots of good things, lots of different things happening on the mall.

Now, you’ve got the Gaps of the world paying exorbitant rents and landlords seeking exorbitant rents for buildings that they’ve paid exorbitant amounts of money for. It needs to rebalance itself. Certainly, you go there now, the tourists that are on the mall are very different than they used to be. It started out that with the resurrection of tourism in the ’90s, on Ocean Drive, that was the place to be. As a local, we would go to Ocean Drive. Now, as that started to get busier and busier and got more commercialized and more focused and more touristy, Lincoln Road came along. Lincoln Road had the unique attributes that made it so much fun in the ’90s. Then, we had the models at the end of the century that made sitting on Lincoln Road and watching people

very interesting.

Now, today, you go to Lincoln Road, and it's not the same, either. The people watching is different. The character of the people that are there are different. The stores are different. It's not the same vibe, but this too will change over time.

Interviewer: The Van Dyke. I miss the Van Dyke.

Giller: The Van Dyke certainly played an integral role in anchoring the restaurant experience on Lincoln Road in its early days. I remember going there before it was the Van Dyke, when it was [phonetic] [57:03] Lum's, and Lum's had a little strip on the outside where we could sit and have lunch, and I'd drive down there and have a relaxing lunch. At that time, the mall was empty, but it was a great place in the wintertime to get outside and have a meal.

Interviewer: It seems like there was a missed moment there of Carl Fisher's office maybe should have been preserved?

Giller: I don't know whether that existed at the time of the- by the '90s or not.

Interviewer: Was there any preservation effort before Barbara Capitman came along?

Giller: No. No. The vision for where South Beach was going, even when she first started talking, was that all these one and two-story apartment buildings are ripe to be torn down, and it's time to build some mid-rise buildings. You see some of them, the five and six-story buildings that are scattered throughout South Beach. Unfortunately, the people that were building most of them were building pretty basic boxes. The architecture wasn't anything to get excited about. In fact, it was a motivating force.

My father started a movement to say we need to start thinking about design review in passing on projects, because we've got some mediocrity that's transcending so much of what we're doing. He came up with the idea, let's set up a design review board. He was the first chair of the city's Design and Review Board. It was very different than what it is today.

At that time, it was very much an effort of a group of architects, engineers, landscape architects, and one lay person to look at the projects and give constructive criticism. At that time, it was very

collegial. The meetings were held around a conference table, not in the commission chambers. Architects would present their projects, but it was very much a today, I'm presenting my project. Next week, you're presenting your project. Let's just talk them through as a bunch of architects. It began to improve the quality of architecture.

Today, it's gotten to be a very cumbersome process. In the effort to avoid any criticism at all, they've created such restrictions on who can serve on the land use boards, the people that know the city and practice in the city and do for the city can't serve on the board. I spent two years on the Historic Preservation Board, but it was when things had slowed down a bit, and I didn't anticipate any projects coming up that would have to go to one of the land use boards. The moment I had a project that had to go, I didn't stand for reelection. Everybody's concerned about a conflict of interest, but I, more than most architects practicing in this city, know the city pretty damn well, and there are other colleagues of mine as well that simply don't serve on those boards but should. We need to get back to that. We play politics with the board instead of the real process of creating better design, the Design Review Board, the Historic Preservation Board, the Planning Board, the Zoning Board.

Interviewer: There's so much money to be made. Go back to the Alex Daoud era where the money started rolling in, and he, of course, that was his downfall.

Giller: I was his downfall, part of that story. I was sitting on the Zoning Board of Adjustment, and Alex's first sellout or first known sellout, according to his book, was when Abel Holtz asked him to put his son on the Zoning Board. Well, it was my seat that he put him on. I was forced out. He put his son on the board. Alex was a great rising star as a young politician. He'd be in Congress today. Had he kept on a less greedy track, he would have been sitting as a senior member of Congress tonight. He was-

Interviewer: You think he had that much a political gift?

Giller: He had the gift, and he had the support that when Claude Pepper retired or died in office, he was going to be Claude Pepper's successor. Then, he went greedy. There's no other way to explain it.

Interviewer: He got caught up in the whole cocaine scene and the whole-

Giller: Cocaine scene, the money scene. I think being in office went to his head. I knew him back in those days and before that. He was a young

attorney doing a lot of social- representing tenants as a socially conscious attorney. He had a lot of charisma.

Interviewer: He's kind of a tragic figure, actually.

Giller: He really is. He really is. It's unfortunate, but he had- back in the mid-80s, he had the world ready to be conquered.

Interviewer: We interviewed him, and I read his book. I don't think it took me a week. It was- I couldn't put it down. The fact that all the names that he named in there, no one sued him, he said was proof that they were guilty, because they couldn't sue him for slander or libel.

Giller: Well, remains to be seen. Alex was a pretty good storyteller, too. You see him today, he is a tragic figure. He had the world by the tail. It's a good lesson to a lot of people that get into politics. Maybe he was just no different than a lot of where politics was going from that time to now. We look at the political scene that we have today-

Interviewer: Oh, he would claim that he got caught, and others didn't. But, maybe they didn't go to the excesses that he-

Giller: That's an old political story. That's hundreds of years old. He, unfortunately, got caught, and he knew better. He came from a background where he knew better, but he got greedy.

Interviewer: Were you the class of '67?

Giller: Yes.

Interviewer: Judging by the year you were born and I was born, in '67, so who else was in your class at Beach High? Anybody that went on to heights of glory?

Giller: One of my classmates, David [phonetic] [64:51] Lit, went on- he worked in the State Department. He became a foreign service officer and ultimately became the ambassador to Dubai. Nice Jewish kid from Miami Beach. Probably one of the more successful members of our class.

Interviewer: Was he born and raised on the beach?

Giller: I don't know if he was born on the beach. He grew up here and still comes back when we have high school reunions. I'm still in touch with

him.

Interviewer: He doesn't live here, though?

Giller: No. He retired from the foreign service half a dozen years ago and lives in Chapel Hill. Not only was he an ambassador, he was the political advisor to the Central Command during the war in Iraq. He was also a political advisor to the Special Operations Command in Tampa.

You mentioned the Flamingo Hotel before we went on camera. We lived across the street from the Flamingo Hotel, and when it was sold to be torn down and to build the Morton Towers, that's when my father decided to move up here to Mid Beach, but as a kid, it would close in the summer. It was only open in the winter, so in the summer, we could climb over the wall, the kids in the neighborhood, and go running around on the property. I remember as a kid seeing the colored dome changing lights at night. They used to have some really big yachts out in the bay.

Interviewer: The Roney Plaza, did you go there?

Giller: I went to the Roney Plaza.

Interviewer: Who didn't, right?

Giller: Right. A friend of mine had a cabana. I remember going there. Big, big, big swimming pool.

Interviewer: Why did they tear that down?

Giller: They needed somebody bigger, and they needed something better, and they wound up building something a whole lot bigger. It wasn't necessarily better, although now, in recent years, they've done some major renovations. In fact, I'm looking at it right over your shoulder.

Interviewer: Oh, I know the other thing I want to touch on, sea level rise. You talk about vision for the future. The vision has to be up higher, at least the foundations or something. It's inevitable, right?

Giller: I became a believer in the last few years that sea level rise was real as the tides- I live on the water here in Mid Beach on Meridian Avenue, and when I first bought the house, when we would have these big spring tides, the water would come up to about six inches below my seawall, and I had a concrete dock that was set down six inches, and

the water would just flood over that. We could step in a couple inches of water. Now, it comes over the seawall. I've been in the house for 40 years. I've seen a rise of probably six inches in 40 years.

Interviewer: Wow. That's a lot.

Giller: Yes, and when I see it coming over the seawall- it did a couple weeks ago, last week- it's real. People don't appreciate it still. They don't believe it, but it's real. What's its impact on Miami Beach? I think we're not this small, very sparsely populated little island. There are billions and billions of dollars invested in this island, and the effort to raise the island is going to be- and that's reality, and we just need to know how to get from A to Z. We know A. We know Z. We just got to figure out how the pieces go in between. It's starting.

I think the leadership in the city government is rightfully placed. Mayor Levine did an outstanding job of focusing attention on it. He was at one of the lowest parts of the whole city, and his property would be desperately flooded, but nobody was taking it seriously. He pushed it. It's real, and it continues to be real. We'll come back 40 years from now and the city will be two feet higher than it is now. Slowly, buildings will fall, be replaced by new buildings at a higher elevation.

It creates a bit of a dilemma for the Design Preservation League and the preservationists in the community in that we've been operating for 40 years under this notion of we got to preserve everything. What's been unique about preservation in Miami Beach has been we've got neighborhoods, whole districts, and those whole districts, I don't think, are going to survive the way they've been into the next 40 years.

We've got to selectively pick buildings that are representative of the true quality design efforts and preserve them at great cost, perhaps raise them up, create ways of maintaining them, and recognize that in all the districts, a lot of the buildings are going to fall by the wayside, and they'll be replaced by new buildings. The future lies in creating an environment that fosters good design in that replacement process. We're still trying to find what good design really means and how to regulate it.

Interviewer: The design may have to have… how should I put this? There'll have to be a collaboration with science.

Giller: Yes. Yes.

Interviewer: With the hard science of water intrusion and…

Giller: First, we got to recognize we have a problem. We struggle with a president that struggles with it. It's real, and I think if you look at where we're at today, and look at where we were five years ago, and look at where we were 10 years ago, 10 years ago, most people would have poo-pooed it and it really wasn't even on their radar. More and more people are beginning to believe it and do something about it. That process has to continue, but the science will find the answers, the detailed answers.

Where we're coming in and raising roads and having buildings that remain low and drain low is not a model that I think can be sustained for a long period of time, but there's also got to be a recognition that that low lying building is not necessarily rising to the quality of architectural treasure that it needs to be preserved.

Barbara Capitman's view, I think, started with creating one historic district. We've grown well beyond that, and even that had some problems in that it- in my view, it wasn't sophisticated enough in making the distinction with this is worth saving and this isn't. I've wrestled with this most of my career. I haven't fully embraced a lot of what MDPL has done over the years, and now, today, I sit on their board, but I wrestled with- they weren't seeing the long-term future, and yet, in its time, their aggressiveness was needed to bring attention to the community, say these are worth saving, they have an economic basis in moving forward, and we've got to look at the world around us a little differently.

That was needed and part of the process. That was phase one. Now, we're moving into phase two, how do we deal with it in the context of sea level rising, and we've got to think about it differently. If I were to come back 40 years from now and look at Miami Beach, I know it's going to look different than it does today, and I think we've got a lot of single family homes that are contenders for being replaced.

I think we've got a lot of commercial buildings that are contenders to be replaced. I think we've got a few gems that we have to find ways of preserving them, because they're unique. Some lend themselves more to that than others. Some were built up a bit already in their natural design, not because of sea level rising. It was just an instinctive design effort that was made at the time they were created. It's a real problem.

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