

Interview with Mel Schlessor

Kathy Hersh: It's June 12, 2019. We're interviewing Mel Schlessor at 1300 Collins Avenue. This is from the Miami Beach Visual Memoirs Project. My name is Kathy Hersh. I'm the interviewer. I want to hear the story about what made you decide to come down to Miami Beach.

Mel Schlessor: Kathy, I started my career, in New York, as a criminal trial lawyer. In approximately 1980, I moved to Florida, in Fort Lauderdale. I lived in Lighthouse Point, and I opened up a law office and Fort Lauderdale. I had taken about a year and a half off, between New York and Florida, and travel with my family around the country and through Europe, wherever we could and whenever the kids were out of school.

We settled in Fort Lauderdale. I actually bought a building there with my partner, who was a an attorney, like myself. We formed a partnership. We had a nice practice there. Criminal trial was my area of expertise. I was trying one of the first copyright cases that involved criminal charges in Miami. I traveled every day during that trial. It was at least a month or so. I traveled every day from Fort Lauderdale to Miami.

One day, during the middle of the trial, a friend of mine called me, who was a real estate developer, in New York. His name was Arthur Leeds [phonetic] [01:33]. He said to me, "Mel, I was talking to a fellow up here, named a Tony Goldman, who is in the real estate business and pretty well-known in Soho. Tony was talking about a building he bought on Ocean Drive and was really enthusiastic about the possibilities."

He says, "What do you think?" I said, "Arthur, I'm traveling every day now to Miami, and after the trial, I'm going to go take a ride over to the beach and see what's going on." I said, "Of course. I know Miami Beach a bit. My grandmother lived there — I'll never forget it — at 524 Washington Avenue. On occasion, once or twice, I was there for the Art Deco Festival. So, I have a feeling about what you're talking about, but I'm going to go over and take a look."

After the trial was over, one day, I took a ride across the causeway and came to Ocean Drive. I think it was the Carlisle I was at, sitting there with a drink. I'm looking around, and I said, "My God, this is



gorgeous." I always had an affinity for architecture. I loved it. I was very good in construction, by hobby. I wanted to be an architect, but I wound up being a lawyer. My hobby was construction.

Every time my ex-wife and I bought house, I would take it apart and redesign it. Many things I could do myself, I did. When I saw these beautiful old buildings on Ocean Drive, I said, "This, to me, looks like an incredibly wonderful possibility. People in Miami and South Florida don't recognize and don't understand the concept of rehabilitation, of gentrification, of rebuilding an area.

Miami, in South Florida, just takes things down and builds it new. This is my thinking at the time. I said, "With that kind of an attitude, I would think that there's more value in rehabilitating what is old and classic." So, I went inside and called Arthur, and I said, "Arthur, I love it. I really think there's something here. I think Tony is right. I really think there's something special here." That was it. Arthur came down a week or so after that. I remember meeting him at the airport. We drove around.

Interviewer: What year would that be?

Schlesser: That was approximately 1986 because several months after we first looked around, we started to buy buildings. Our first purchases were two beautiful residential buildings on Meridian Avenue. They were next to each other. It was two separate owners, but we were able to acquire both. They were beautiful, large, one-bedroom apartments with all of the beautiful deco features. They had the old wood floors.

They had the beautifully designed fireplaces with these deco designs on them and black and white tiles in the bathroom, and they were in rather good shape. Those two buildings we were able to acquire. We did fix them up, but we didn't gut them. We used that as an experiment because we were mostly in the residential development at that time. They turned out to be lovely buildings. As I said, we fixed them up. I remember, even at that time, I went in there with my own tools and did a couple of things because the buildings were in very nice condition.

Interviewer: What did you call them? Did you keep the same names?

Schlesser: The buildings did not have a specific name. I remember 1551 and 1557 Meridian Avenue where the first two buildings. They did not have a name, and I don't think they have a name today. During the



time from 2006 to about 2009, we condoed a lot of the buildings that we had renovated. We sold them off. Now we have the larger buildings, but that's what started it. So, we bought the buildings on Meridian Avenue in '86. We bought the wonderful Lincoln Center, which we still own, on Lincoln Road and Euclid Avenue.

I'm laughing because it was a hard thing to hold onto, but we did have approximately five hotels on Ocean Drive. We had the Winter Haven, which was an operating hotel. We had the Drake Hotel, which was not operating. The Casa Grande, which was not operating, and the Beach Paradise, which was operating. At one time, we were foolish enough to own, on 21st Street, the Ritz Plaza. That was a major operating hotel. I knew nothing about the hotel business. We didn't buy them for the hotel business.

We bought them primarily because they were real estate and in good positions. So, I suddenly found myself in the hotel business. Of course, we bought this building here, which was closed. This was approximately a 115-room hotel, called the Alamac. This is where we started our construction business. We started to do the work in this building first by gut renovating it. That was the beginning. We bought this building in, I think, about 1987 or '88.

Interviewer: Then there was this boom.

Schlesser: Well, it didn't boom too quickly. If you recall, particularly, I think in 1987, there was a dramatic drop in the stock market. There were big issues of a recession that were sweeping the country. So, there were a lot of frightened people. It was difficult at that time to go forward in forward thinking, but we did. We started this building here, which is the Alamac, at 1300 Collins. We started renovating that in 1988. We gutted it out. This building was one of the better buildings. It's all poured concrete. We were able to gut out the entire floor.

This was my first major construction project. Arthur, who was pretty experienced in the field, would come down maybe once a month and go over it with me. I ran the project, but we did have a construction manager. We actually hired the workers here. We did subcontracting. I was both learning the business and handling the business. We did quite well. It took us about a year. We gutted it and reconfigured it into 45 apartments. I was able to re-establish the retail area here. At one time, there was a synagogue down here.



Interviewer: In this building?

Schlesser: In the hotel, yes. This was a synagogue area. It was a kosher hotel. It was closed when we bought it. The Alamac was originally a kosher hotel. Not long ago, when we were doing some work out in front of the pool, they chipped away some of the stucco. You'll see the sign, under the stucco, that said. "The Alamac - A Saltwater Pool." It was originally a kosher hotel with a synagogue in the basement and a saltwater pool. That is now where the retail spaces are.

I remember we found some of the prayer books. We brought them to a rabbi to properly dispose of them. They were piled in a corner of what was the basement, which is now the retail space. When we renovated the building, we opened up the retail space. We mentioned Harold Rosen before. I met Harold, at that time, in the late 80s. He was the attorney who worked with us to revitalize the variances that were necessary to re-establish the retail in this building.

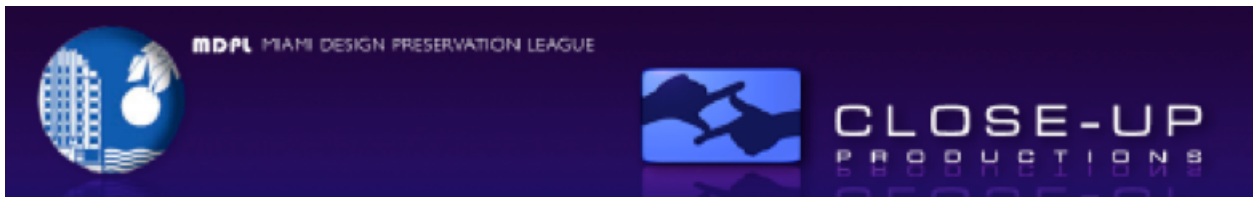
Interviewer: Did you work with any of the architects who are kind of known now as the preservation architects?

Schlesser: We work with Randy Sender. Randy Sender was a wonderful young architect who was involved in a lot of historic preservation. Randy, unfortunately, as a young man, died at a young age as the result of suicide. He was a troubled young guy, but he was a fabulous architect. He worked with a lot of the historic buildings here and was well-known to the historic preservation community. He was our first architect there. There was a young man that worked with him, Mark Campbell, who wasn't as well known, but he kind of finished up the projects after we lost the Randy.

Interviewer: You said that you met Barbara Capitman [phonetic] [10:42].

Schlesser: Yes, I had met Barbara Capitman in the early days there. It was interesting. The beach was a really wonderful, friendly place. It was mixed in its socioeconomic grouping. There were people there who were very hip, young people. I remember several Europeans. We were at parties together. You could sense the changing feeling on the beach. It reminded me of the early days in Soho when I was in New York.

I remember, in Soho once, going to a party in a restaurant. You had



to go through the back alley, around the garbage pail and up the stairs. Then you open up the door, and suddenly, you're in another world. That was part of the shtick, so to speak, of how that restaurant worked and how that party image worked. It was very similar here, in Miami Beach. There were actually jazz clubs. There were actually cocktail parties. I remember cocktail parties in the basement of a couple of hotels. I met Barbara at some of the meetings.

Interviewer: What was your impression of her?

Schlesser: She obviously was a very motivated lady. She was going to get her work done under any circumstances. She was a terrific lady. I was very personally involved in historic preservation. I felt, with the world moving as quickly as it did, that that which is old is going to be more valuable as the technology moves forward. Even in those days, in the late 80s/early 90s, you could feel that things that were old and preserved, like architecture design, would become more valuable as the world advances.

Of course, in Miami, we think of something as historic that was built in 1933. I spent a lot of years traveling through Europe, and of course, in Europe, that's something that makes people smile, really. How about the sixth century and the seventh century buildings? We started here in the 1930s. It will never get 200 years old unless we preserve it. Even as a developer, it was never my vision to take down and build new. To this day, I feel the value of historic structures and history.

Interviewer: Do you think that that's why so many New Yorkers were key to the preservation effort here?

Schlesser: I think that's part of it. I think it's also because so many New Yorkers lived through what it's like for us to revitalize and gentrify an area. As I said, in Florida, I found it's always, "Tear something down that's old and build it new." Florida is a new state. Miami was relatively new. It was built primarily by the Cuban exiles who came here and created a city, but it was all new. The things that were left to languish were just thought of as, "Let's just get rid of them and build something else," whereas New Yorkers understand gentrification.

I know sometimes people say gentrification is a dirty word because it displaces certain people, but it also is the fuel that really runs the



machine that revitalizes areas. If it wasn't for the need or the desire to gentrify, Miami Beach would not be where it is today. So, yes, I think historic preservation is important. It certainly is important to me, personally, and it's important for me even, I believe, financially. The value is in the historic buildings.

Interviewer: You see a real financial advantage to there being historic buildings here.

Schlesser: Absolutely, historic areas, again, are unique. They cannot be duplicated. I think people flock to them. People traveled to Europe to visit ancient ruins to visit old churches. They come to my own beach now to see a lot of the deco buildings. Unfortunately, what has evolved in Miami Beach is also a party attitude, where too many folks come here because they think it's a party place, which it is, but they're not here because of the unique character of the area.

I think the city fathers now, our government, is realizing that. It's a difficult change to make, but I think it's kind of caught on, at least, in the city and with the city commissions and those that run the city. There's a value of trying to keep the right people coming here who appreciate the area and appreciate the architecture.

Interviewer: Have you seen any mitigations, in terms of the commission, towards that direction?

Schlesser: It's yes and no. I'm not personally familiar with the areas they're going now, but sometimes you get a Planning Department that is more liberal. In the past, you had planning departments that were more conservative, in terms of allowing changes to the buildings, but I think there's a balance that has to be made in order to keep the buildings economically viable. If you don't do that, then, unfortunately, the people are not going to come here and renovate and maintain the buildings.

There is that balance. I think the city, at this time, is dealing relatively well with trying to achieve that balance. We just recently had an issue on Lincoln Road. I was one of the founders of the executive committee that created the Lincoln Road Business Improvement District, which is a great concept that also came to a lot of business improvement districts in New York and other places in the country. It did pick up here, in South Florida.

With the vote of the property owners in the district, which was Lincoln Road, essentially, we established a tax assessment against



ourselves that we pay into a fund of now about a million and a half dollars. It's primarily to market this street. The BID plays a big part in that. Just recently, there was an issue that came up on Lincoln Road regarding the lease of a Walgreens store, which wanted to open up on Lincoln Road. There was a lot of opposition from the Lincoln Road bid. There were others who were in favor of it.

The Lincoln Road BID voted against it, feeling that it wasn't part of the vision we had for Lincoln Road. The city commission unanimously backed the Lincoln Road position and the owners of Lincoln Road who did not want the Walgreens. There's nothing wrong with Walgreens, but there are places for large-scale convenience shops. It was not a drugstore. It was basically a convenience store, but a large one, 6,000 square feet.

It didn't belong where it was, on Lincoln Road. The city commission agreed with that. We were very happy with that. Those are the kind of little issues that come about when you're dealing with districts where you have a vision and certain elements come in and effect that vision. When you have the support of the political leaders of the city, it makes it very important.

Interviewer: Can you articulate what that vision is for Lincoln Road?

Schlesser: Of course, we're dealing now with trying to finalize a plan by James Corner of Field Operations. James Corner is best known for the work he did on the High Line in New York, a raised park. Essentially, it's a park on an old freight line on the west side of Manhattan. It turned out to be an extremely successful endeavor. It is an attraction now for tourists. There are many buildings beginning to attach to the High Line.

He came up with a great concept for it. When James Corner came down here, he was hired. He did a study. It got from study to construction insurance. We are now working with the city to have it funded. It will be a project between \$50 and \$70 million to redo Lincoln Road. Interestingly enough, it will maintain the center spine of the street, which is all the follies that Lapidus designed.

So, again, you're finding all the historic, even fun things that were created during the heyday of the art deco time, and they still, today, are important for us. People come to see it. James Corner's plan involves retaining all of it, adding elements to it, doing new concrete, maintaining the piano keys with black and white stripes



on the road, then new concrete and a new layout for all the restaurants, umbrellas [phonetic] [20:10], etc.

Lincoln Road and even Ocean Drive I'm unfortunately disappointed in now because of, I think, the direction it headed. Most owners on Lincoln Road hope that we don't go in the direction of Ocean Drive, which means, getting back to your question of the vision, of a historic street with retail and restaurants. Most important would be the cultural uses of the road. I strongly support the cultural use of the road.

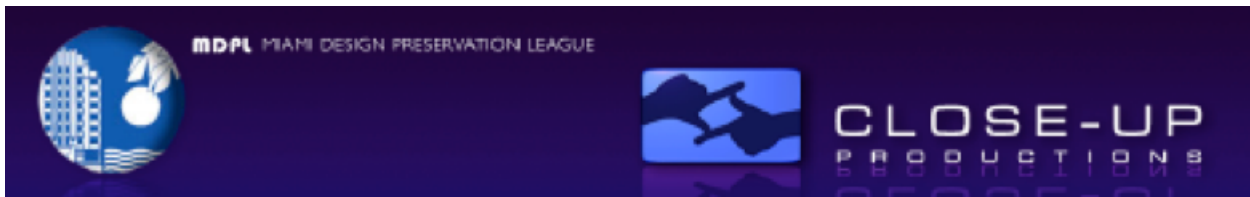
I think that is what will make Miami Beach and Lincoln Roads different from any other place. Other places have restaurants and retail. A shopping center has restaurants and retail. What they don't have is the historic cultural uses of the road. At one time, we had a ballet on the road. You could walk down Lincoln Road, look in the windows and see the performance practicing and rehearsing the ballet right there through the windows on Lincoln.

What is now an H&M building, we had the New World Symphony there. They're still in town, I'm happy to say, but they're not on Lincoln Road. Even the Philadelphia Photo Arts Center, of course, now has moved off of Lincoln Road. They sold their building for an extraordinary amount of money. Good for them. They have a wonderful director now. Of course, he's building a structure for the art center outside of Miami Beach.

All those uses I would like to see come back to some extent, where it's both economically feasible and works with development. Just recently, one of the commissioners had discussed a formulation of a new amendment to the Lincoln Road codes, which would encourage hotel development on Lincoln Road, as a way of bringing people to the road and, again, new revitalization plan.

I spoke recently at a panel discussion with MDPL, the Miami Design Preservation League. We were asked the question of what we can do on the road and some of the questions you've asked me. I suggested that, as part of that incentive program that the city is offering, basically, on certain new construction above an existing historic building, you would not have to provide for parking.

You would be able to make smaller rooms and various other incentives that the city is offering to encourage hotel development. My belief is, as part of that, since a developer should give back, to have cultural space within the structure that is able to be built now



with the city's incentives, whether it's an art studio or a performance area. I think Fianna did a wonderful thing by having a theater in one of his buildings that they did on Collins Avenue. I think that there should be spaces in these hotels for some sort of a cultural use.

Interviewer: The Betsy does that, for example.

Schlesser: Yes, I've heard. Frankly, the Lincoln Center building that we own, on Lincoln Road and Euclid Avenue, was originally a hotel. It was the Lincoln Center Hotel. It was a 66-room, wood-framed building. In 2000, we, of course, saved the facade but gutted the entire building. There was nothing left inside, no floors and no roof. It was just four walls. We recreated it into a steel and concrete structure with open spaces. It's now a successful office building. About four years ago, I sat down with our previous city manager, Mr. Jorge Gonzales.

I think it was about four or five years ago. He and I worked a deal where I was able to renovate Euclid Avenue in front of the Lincoln Center Hotel. Euclid Avenue, at that time, was basically a truck stop. It was awful. The truckers would leave their trucks there sometimes. They would go eat if they weren't delivering. You'd come out of the Lincoln Center, and it was just awful. It was really a dark mark on Lincoln Road, as you walked by.

I reached an agreement for a public/private partnership. I did the renovation of the street. It's only about 150 feet, but it changed that whole Euclid Avenue street end. It's quite beautiful now. The architect, Omar Merino, designed these beautiful, swirling, black and white concrete stripes in front of the building. He picked up on the black and white piano keys. Now it's a lovely spot. It's a plaza.

On Sunday mornings, you find a lot of people. They're doing yoga there. We created something nice from something that wasn't. I'm very proud of it. Our next step was, hopefully, possibly to bring the Lincoln Center office building back to a hotel. With that, I suggested it to the city, and it looks like the MDPL supported it. Obviously, they would.

It seems that the city commissioners are supporting the idea to require some sort of give back, by anybody who takes advantage of those hotel incentives, to actually put in some sort of a cultural use into the program that they do in rebuilding the streets. My vision for the street is to, again, bring back the culture as part of the mix of



retail and restaurant and, of course to get the James Corner project done.

Interviewer: There's the Colony Theater.

Schlesser: The Colony Theater is a wonderful theater. It's a great asset. Now we have the new drama there, and they are wonderful. They do a fantastic job. We want to see people coming to the road for theater and for those uses. Of course, we still have the convention center, and we have the Jackie Gleason Theater. The New World is wonderful. The building that Frank Gehry designed is right there off of Lincoln Road. [The Symphony is] [phonetic] [26:43] part of our Lincoln Road Group. They work with us to manage and market the street. We have all the elements there. We have to, of course, market it. People have to know about it, and we have to support it by, as I said, one of these suggestions, with the hotel cultural initiative.

Interviewer: You think that will do the trick?

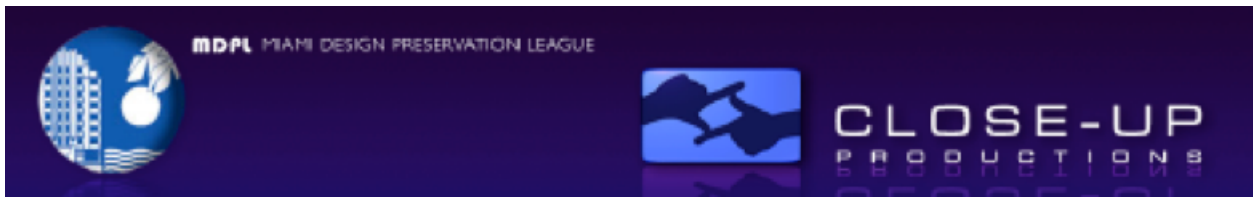
Schlesser: I think that it will add to our uniqueness, as the historic buildings are. Yes, I think all of that adds to the unique quality of Miami Beach. We are always under attack by the forces of American capitalism. You see now you have shopping areas. You have Brickell Center. Wynwood is developing. You have the Allapattah area now, where we have a former wonderful Miami Beach resident and developer who has moved over to Allapattah.

Interviewer: Who's that?

Schlesser: Robert Winart [phonetic] [27:45]. He was responsible for the garage on Alton Road and Lincoln Road, that magnificent garage. Herreshoff and Demora designed the garage. I'm sure whatever he does in Allapattah will be spectacular.

Interviewer: We just did an interview with Raymond Jungles, who did the landscaping there.

Schlesser: Yes, he did. Exactly, Raymond did the landscaping on the 1100 block of Lincoln Road. Those are the kinds of things we need. As I said, James Corner, with a guy like Raymond Jungles, you can't beat it. It's history. It's quality design and, of course, culture that will make Lincoln Road unique, as opposed to what's happening in just the shopping center orientation of other places. Wynwood is an exciting area. It's young. It has to grow, but also, to some extent, all



these areas, vie for the same tourists. Of course, we have the beach.

We have the convention center, but there's American competition out there, and you have to compete. I think, again, one of the things that we offer that no one else can and no one else does is the culture that we can offer people that come here. I don't have to go any further than Art Basel and the success of what Art Basel has done for Miami Beach. Design Miami Project is a wonderful project. So, we have the makings of it. We have the infrastructure. We have the folks here. We have the parties that bring all these great events to us. We just have to use it and market it right.

Interviewer: What's your fix for South Beach?

Schlesser: In terms of what the future is?

Interviewer: Yes, because, earlier, you said that South Beach was a disappointment.

Schlesser: I don't mean to say that. It is disappointing, but South Beach itself is not a disappointment. South Beach is a wonderful place. What I'm disappointed in is the direction that some of the popular areas in South Beach have gone to. As much as I am in love with Lincoln Road, I'm disappointed in Ocean Drive. Interestingly enough, when Tony and I were colleagues and owners on Ocean Drive and active parties in the Ocean Driver Association, we fought a lot of the issues that were causing Ocean Drive to be a problem.

When I was a chairman of the Planning Board here, it used to get me wild with the issues of music. In order for certain people to do certain requirements of the city, they come before the Planning Board to get special use exceptions. We had to, as part of the Planning Department and the Planning Board, monitor. I was always so disappointed because you would have the music blasting from one place. Next door would be a different attitude.

They want to play their music, and next door, you'd have another one. You had this cacophony of sound that hurt me because so much of my vision of Ocean Drive was this lovely seaside cafe area where people could stroll down the street and have a drink without being accosted by somebody who's showing you a plastic bottle of water or a plastic set up of food.



That's where my disappointment is. It became a party place. Thinking back, when I was more active in the city, with the political part of the city here, the creation of what we did at that time in the Entertainment District on Ocean Drive, I think, really supported the wrong uses. I think it was the catalyst for a lot of the issues and problems that Ocean Drive suffers from now.

At that time, there was an attempt, I believe, to allow the loud music and the partying atmosphere in a certain limited area of Ocean Drive. That was near the Cleavelander. I think it was probably from 11th to 13th Street or something of that nature. I believe it was around 11th and 12th or 10th and 13th Street, in that area, where separate codes allowed for louder music and different uses.

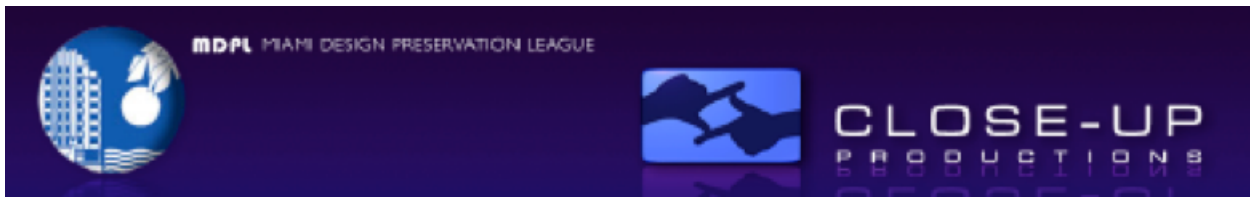
It's called the Entertainment District. Frankly, I think that was a mistake. Yes, it allowed users to do things that, perhaps, since they invested money, they felt they should have been allowed to do. I think there were compromises to allow that to continue. It spread to the point where I think Ocean Drive, today, is an issue, the issue being that it attracts people who want to go there just to party.

There's no sense at all of the historic value of a street like that. There's no sense of, I believe, in the right quality of life. It's just a party place. I'm disappointed in that. I think the city is trying desperately to take some of that back, but when you give something, like an Entertainment District, to an area, you cannot take it back. I think that was the cause and the downfall of what I see as the direction Ocean Drive was heading in.

Now, yesterday, I had an opportunity to walk down Ocean Drive. Frankly, there are a lot of people on Ocean Drive, everybody having a good time, but there still was what I consider a lot of plastic. You did not get a sense that you were in a historic district. You got a sense that you were in a nice party place. It could have been anywhere in the world, but it wasn't unique...

Interviewer: ...like the rest of Miami Beach.

Schlesser: Yes, like the rest of Miami Beach. The residential area in Miami Beach, where we had really concentrated, is lovely. You walk down the streets. The streets are lovely. So many apartments now have been renovated and changed to condominiums. It's a lovely place to live. It's quiet. It's tree-lined. There are sidewalks. Most of the residents on the beach walk. Most do not have cars.



It's not necessary to have a car if you're working or living on a beach. Those that work downtown, many will take the public transportation to a downtown Miami. So, cars are not essential. Miami Beach is not a car centric city, like you have in other parts of Florida. It's a delight. You can work on a beach. You could walk to your work, and you could walk home. You really don't need a car.

We're, interestingly enough, finding that now. When you see the city waving certain parking requirements to incentivize the building of a hotel, the truth is that folks now don't come to Miami Beach with cars. It's kind of like going to Manhattan for a vacation. Very few people take a car into Manhattan, especially in the days of Uber and Lyft now. You really don't need a car when you're coming to these places.

It's convenient, and it's a lovely place to live in. You can walk to the beach from anywhere, on Miami Beach, that you're living in the Historic District. It's an easy walk to the beach. This building here that we were sitting in, the Alamac, I have 45 apartments in. We have mostly a young audience. Everybody seems to be very comfortable here. We have tenants here that have been here for many, many years.

Interviewer: One final question I'd like to ask because I feel that it's necessary to ask, and that is about sea level rise and planning for the future of that. Does that factor much in your thinking?

Schlesser: It does. I think sea level rise has to factor in everybody's thinking. It's amazing how much development is still going on in South Florida in spite of a recognition of sea level rise. It's mind boggling. We have here a historic district. We can't raise these floors. We cannot destroy the floor. You have to raise it. We are stuck with what we have. I think the city is doing what it can to deal with sea level rise. I'm not sure how successful the pumping systems are.

They're controversial, but the city is still working on plans to deal with sea level rise, where other areas are not. Certainly, you do have new building codes now that are trying to deal with raising the buildings, etc. Of course, we can only deal with the consequences of sea level rise. As a city, we're not able to deal with the causes of it, which, unfortunately, too many countries, including ours, are not dealing with adequately, if at all, but yes, I am concerned about it.



I live in Miami-Dade County. Anybody who lives in Miami-Dade County and anybody who lives in South Florida has to be concerned about sea level rise, or they're just closing their eyes, but again, I'm amazed at how many developers enter into construction here, start construction and are blinded. They just don't seem to be concerned. When a building goes on and on and on, they'll deal with the problem by raising the floor or doing what they have to do to meet with the codes, but it doesn't seem to affect very much here, in terms of buying ability and the real estate market.

Interviewer: In spite of all the evidence?

Schlesser: In spite of all the evidence, yes.

Interviewer: Which happens all the time, especially during the King Tide season.

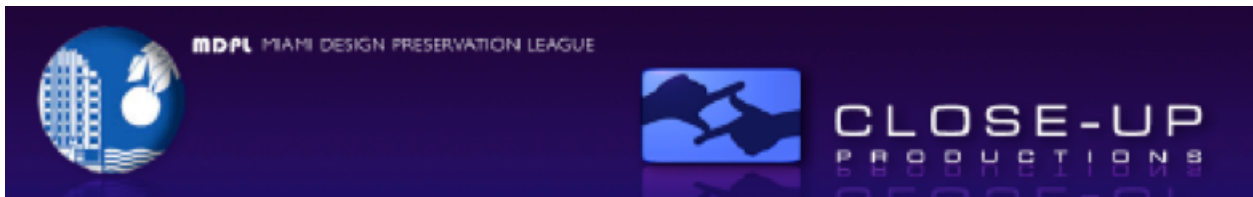
Schlesser: Yes, it does. I also remember, years ago, when I had a lower office in Fort Lauderdale, we couldn't drive down A1A certain times of the year because it was flooded. That was Fort Lauderdale. Here, we have the problems. I think, to some extent, they are alleviated with the pumping system, but we have to do a lot more. I'm hoping that this is really also beyond just the city doing it.

It has to come, first, from the state and from the federal government as well to deal with these issues, but the first thing you have to do is admit that there is sea level rise and that there is climate change and recognize the causes of it. I don't think our country is doing that right now. I think the city is trying to, with the limited budgets that they have. People in Miami Beach and in many other parts of the country, I think, are more aware of the problem of sea level rise.

Interviewer: I just thought of one more thing, and that is if you have any funny stories or anything quirky that you'd like to tell us. [laughs]

Schlesser: It's interesting. I had started here. Here I am a real estate, quote, "developer." Yes, I am a real estate developer, but in almost all cases, it's historic buildings that we are renovating. I don't recall and I certainly would remember doing new construction, and I've never done it. I did do it. I'm sorry. I did several homes that were new construction. One of them was designed to look like 150 to 200-year-old monastery.

The other one was a solar home in Upstate New York, in an area called New Paltz, New York, that I built up there, but primarily, I



grew up in a home where my father directed that I had to be a lawyer, or I had to be a doctor. It was a typical Jewish home. I always wanted to be an architect. My father's direction was, "You'll be a lawyer, and you can play with your architecture, but there is no such thing as a Jewish architect in a profession."

Of course, I pointed Israel out to him and said, "Who do you think is designing the buildings in Israel?" One of the reasons I jumped at the opportunity of getting involved in historic buildings was because I knew they would have to be renovated, and that's what I really loved. So, I more than looked over the shoulders of the architects. I was always in their face. They were good. They understood it.

I think I also was able to do it because they felt that I knew what I was talking about and my sense of detail. In the end, it turned out that here I was designing buildings, and my father came to work for me and was very proud of me. In his last years, he was coming into this very office three or four times a week. He was one of our employees here for many years. I turned out to do what I love to do, and he was working for me. It was a good turnaround, and we were both very happy together.

Interviewer: That's great. I don't know. I want to ask about that synagogue here. That was interesting. You said you found some hymnals.

Schlesser: Of course, myself and my partners were all Jewish. So, we were sensitive. When we came down here and started to work in the building, we found one room that had all the prayer books, the shtetes [phonetic] [41:36] and the other books, that were used during the sabbath prayers [phonetic] [41:41].

Interviewer: Were there any other relics in there? Did it have a bema?

Schlesser: Not of a religious nature, but we always were able to go through buildings and save some of the deco fixtures. I found a lot of wonderful fixtures that, in some cases, I had restored. I remember we found some old fixtures that I now have on my dock. I renovated the fixtures. I took the guts out, put in new electric and restored the exterior of it. There were a lot of relics that we found.

I don't know if we did it on camera, but as I mentioned before, outside here, we had some cracking in the wall around the pool. When we knocked off the stucco that was loose, it turned out that there was a sign underneath that said "The Alamac Hotel -



Saltwater Pool." We used to find a lot of that. When we were doing the renovation here at the Alamac, the lobby area, which is gorgeous and has 18-foot ceilings throughout, the ceilings were glued soundboard, like the type of white perforated ceiling tiles.

Interviewer: Acoustic?

Schlesser: Yes, it was kind of like acoustic tiles. Maybe they used it as acoustic tiles. This old 50s-style fashion, at that time, was the ceiling tiles, and they stuck it onto the ceiling. When we started to tear those down, underneath it, we found pecky cypress ceilings. The entire ceiling of the second floor here is pecky cypress. We took everything down. We restored the same pecky cypress and put it back up again.

Originally, the apartments were part of the dining room of the hotel. We saved all the arches and all the beautiful columns, and we included them in the apartments. So, we have 18-foot ceilings on the second floor, which was part of the lobby and part of the restaurant, with the original arches in the apartments. They're big open apartments. They're really lovely. The ceilings are the original pecky cypress.

Those were great finds. I absolutely love to do those kinds of things and restore that stuff because you just don't do that today. Frankly, it's so costly to do some of the details that we found in these buildings. To do them today, it just wouldn't be cost effective. It's nice to have it and to be a part of restoring it.

Interviewer: Do you have any questions?

Male Interviewer: I was tempted to ask about the days as criminal lawyer and the vibrancy [crosstalk] [44:30]

Schlesser: We're still on, I guess. The red light is on. [laughter] An old friend of mine, who I'm still close with after many, many years, called me. He said, "Did you see the "Sunday Times?" Actually, I do still get the "Sunday Times," of course. On the front page of the "Sunday Times" this weekend was the story of Nicky Barnes. Nicky Barnes was the, quote, "Untouchable drug lord of Harlem" when I was in New York.

I think it was 1977 or '78, and I was involved in his trial. There were about 17 defendants and 17 lawyers. I was one of the lawyers on that trial. It was a three or four-month trial. It was my last federal



trial in New York. I kind of had a flashback when I saw that Nicky Barnes had passed away. I think about 20 years after he was convicted, he turned.

As we say in the vernacular, he flipped and became a witness for the government and testified against some pretty heavy people. They had to put him and his two daughters into the Witness Protection Program. Apparently, he died, I think, in 2012, but it just came out that he had passed away. Being part of that trial was my last great trial in New York.

Male Interviewer: I was just thinking of it because of the history of Miami Beach, where this was a wise guy haven.

Schlesser: Of course, when I came to Miami Beach, it was a Cocaine Cowboy haven. I actually came to Fort Lauderdale, although I tried a lot of cases in Miami, and started my practice in about 1982. It was pretty wild down here at that time, with the Mutiny Hotel, all the drug dealing and the cash that was flying around. I enjoyed the game of practicing law at that time, with all the characters around, but I was very happy to get into the real estate business and architecture.

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