

## Jack Johnson Interview

**Kathy Hersh** 00:00

It is July 22, 2022 and I am Kathy Hersh, Jack, my first question is what brought you here to Miami Beach? What was the lure.?

**Jack Johnson** 00:22

Okay. What brought me here was a promotion. I had been working in the New York office of the US Department of Housing and Urban Development for most of my career. And I was able to, to get a job at in the Miami office in 1999, as Director of Community Planning and Development, and so I came to Miami, determined that I was going to live in South Beach. And so I looked at about 30 apartments in South Beach with a realtor. And the last apartment that I that I looked at was this one. And that was that was it. I had found my place.

**Kathy Hersh** 01:23

Was it the Art Deco district? That was the attraction?

**Jack Johnson** 01:27

Yes. Yes. Primarily, although I knew very little about art deco at the time, having not been involved with the, with the with the Miami design preservation league as yet. And really, you know, was more or less unconscious of the, of the Art Deco style. Even though there's a lot of art deco, of course, in New York City, I just thought they were beautiful buildings, you know. But it was that and it was also the reputation of South Beach. You know, I really wanted to live in a neighborhood like New York, where you could go out anytime of the day or night and there would be people on the streets. That was important to me.



**Kathy Hersh 02:31**

What did you encounter in the way of planning the planning department when you got here? 1999 What was the atmosphere like what was going on?

**Jack Johnson 02:40**

Well, it met my expectations, which was that is to say there was always activity on the streets. You know, there were there were clubs and nightclubs available and and I was I was planted here in the middle of South Beach in a relatively quiet neighborhood, but within walking distance of, of Ocean Drive, and the beach, and Alton road and Fifth Street and Lincoln Road. It was heaven, basically, you know, the weather was was fantastic. And I had come here with the intention of going back to New York after retiring. But four years later, I was involved in the community and already a member of the Board of of MDPL. And so I've been here ever since.

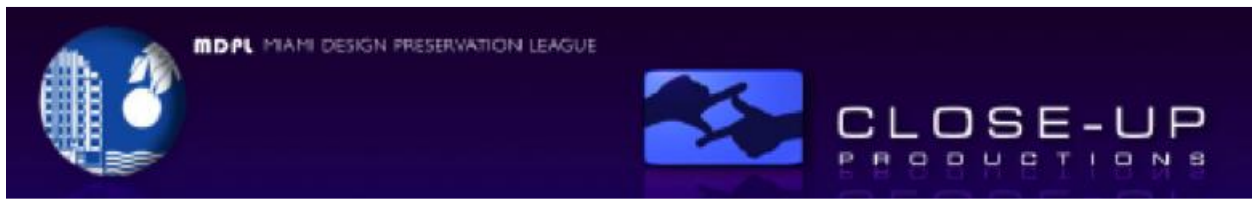
**Kathy Hersh 03:58**

So tell us about your interest in the Miami Design Preservation League and how you came to be involved there.

**Jack Johnson 04:07**

Okay. Have you interviewed Richard Hoberman? Yes. Okay. I met Richard in New York City. He and I both worked in the same office, the New York office of HUD. And in 1980, he resigned from from that position and came back to Miami Beach. He had been born and raised in Miami Beach. His intention at the time was to open a restaurant, his family within the restaurant business. That didn't happen. But he got involved with the Miami Design Preservation League and was at various times, the executive director and the chairman of the board. I'm not knowing anybody else in Miami Beach, I looked him up. And and he got me involved in MDPL.

**Kathy Hersh 05:11**



Did you go kicking and screaming? Or no,

**Jack Johnson** 05:13

I was very interested. Yeah. And became a member of the board within just a couple of years. I think the fact that I was working at HUD at the time, was one of the attractions for MDPL. So I, you know, I became more and more interested in MDPL, and what it was doing, and within a couple more years, I was a tour guide, as well as a member of the board. And, you know, took the course, to become a tour guide and learned a great deal more from that, and, and then have continued you still, ever since I haven't given tours in a while, I used to initially gave it gave a lot of tours, at all hours of the day and night whenever someone wanted to tour. But then more recently, because of the heat, and my advancing age, I started doing Thursday evening only tours, which are not being done now. Our tours are all at 10:30am.

**Kathy Hersh** 06:45

So what were the Thursday night tours?

**Jack Johnson** 06:47

It started at 630. And it was similar to the, to the day time tour, but I tended to concentrate on neon lighting, and taking people to the roofs of the buildings so that they could see the lights come on. So it was it was different in those regards.

**Kathy Hersh** 07:17

So what kind of people were attracted to that kind of tour?

**Jack Johnson** 07:20

Oh, well, the tours generally attract seem to attract foreigners, more than locals and even more than Americans. I think foreigners, especially Europeans tend tend to have a habit of of taking tours when they travel.



And and a lot of people, you know, especially those who came here in the summertime, preferred evening tours to daytime doors.

**Kathy Hersh** 08:02

So what would you say are the most significant changes that you've seen?

**Jack Johnson** 08:10

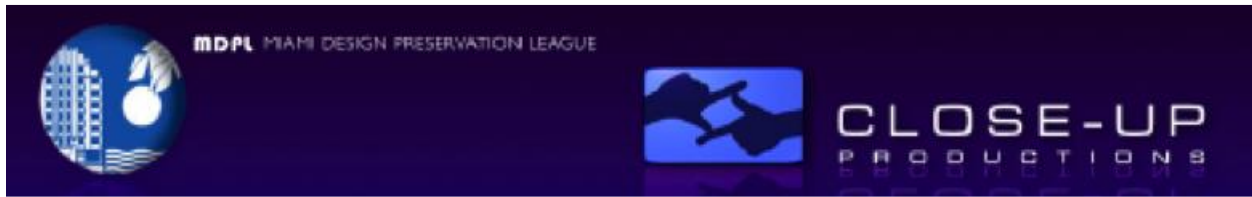
Well, a lot of gradual changes. I mean, the most significant changes to Miami Beach, of course happened before 1999. But a number of changes, I think the city has grown -- by the city, I mean, both its residents and its government have grown less interested in historic preservation over that, over that period of time. The the population has aged along with me but we still have a lot of young people coming here of course, but they are mostly transients, you know, who come here to live for a few years and then if that and then move on. It's become in some ways, more sedate, and in other ways less sedate. But, you know, there are fewer clubs and bars along Washington Avenue than there used to be. And that scene has largely moved northward along Collins Avenue. And of course, more recently, the mayor has which is very, very positive development, I think. Tried to deemphasize the, the wildness of the, of the, the MFC district and emphasis emphasize arts and culture. And so that is beginning to have an effect as well. So, you know, as I've become more sedate, so has the neighborhood.

**Kathy Hersh** 10:31

Why do you think there was diminished has been diminished interest in the historic aspects?

**Jack Johnson** 10:41

Well, I don't know that it's entirely true that that there has been diminished interest. But I think the powers that are pro development have gained influence in the city over the years.



**Kathy Hersh** 11:08

You mentioned that Miami beach in Miami Vice, the television show had an impact here. We were talking visually, but could you talk a little bit about the impact of that show?

**Jack Johnson** 11:20

Yes, it mainly goes back to first of all the wildest days of Miami Beach in the 1980s. When there was a lot of crime, and a lot of immigration and the the historic preservation movement was really kicking in, to a large extent. And so Leonard Horowitz, one of the founders of Miami Beach, who was also an interior designer, had developed a palette of pastel colors, which he used in his interior designs. And he had the idea of using those pastel colors on the exteriors of buildings, in order to emphasize the features of the Art Deco buildings, and get people interested in them. And he had some success getting building owners to repaint their buildings in the pastel colors. But then, along came Miami Vice. And the Miami Vice television program was filmed largely in Miami Beach during the heyday of color television, and so they really loved the pastel colors. So before they would use a building as a backdrop, they would repaint the building in the pastel colors. And that really is what is one of the things that made that style take off, and really dominate South Beach for a long period of time. More recently, fewer buildings are being painted in the pastel colors. I'm fortunate and lucky to be living in a building that is painted in pastel colors, as are the walls inside this inside my apartment. But building owners have found that it's cheaper to paint the buildings white than to paint them in multiple colors. And therefore, the pastel colors are not as prominent as they used to be.

**Kathy Hersh** 14:24

Some people have the idea that once an area has been designated historic that that's the end of the story. You don't have to worry.



**Jack Johnson** 14:31

Would that that were the case?

**Kathy Hersh** 14:35

Explain why that is not the case.

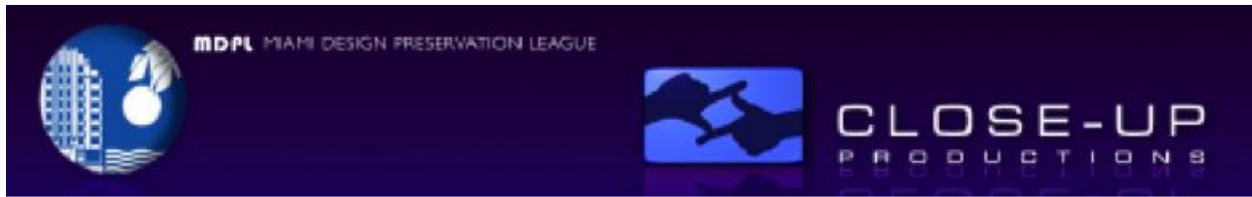
**Jack Johnson** 14:37

Well, it's not the case because you know, the wealthier the city gets, and the more valuable the real estate gets. The more the land value increases. And the less the value of these beautiful old -- even restored -- Still, they're small, you know, they're, they're on a human scale, they're there two or three storeys high. And it's, it's far from the maximum possible use of, of the these properties. And so real estate interests want to tear down and replace these buildings. That's always been the case since the founding of MDPL in 1976. But more recently, it has become more prominent especially in areas that have not been designated. But even even in areas that have been designated. The influence of the development community on the city of Miami Beach is such that from time to time, unfortunately, the city proposes and goes along with proposals to either demolish or substantially change historic buildings. Sometimes by replacing them, sometimes by building new glass towers next to the next to the historic buildings, keeping the facade or sometimes just keeping the facade, yes. There's a couple of examples of that on Washington Avenue now, where new hotels have been built, just keeping the facades of the one store the old one storey commercial art deco buildings and building towers behind them. And, you know, at least they kept the facades, but but it's certainly changing the face of Miami Beach in ways that I think are not positive.

**Kathy Hersh** 17:22

There is a design review board, is there not?

**Jack Johnson** 17:25



There's a historic preservation board, which has to approve all such projects in historic areas, yes. And a design review board, which has to approve projects outside the historic districts. But even the historic preservation board, you know, the board members are appointed by the City Commission. And the City Commission is understandably influenced by development pressures, because they want the city to be prosperous. And so from time to time, you know, developers come along and want changes and and sometimes they get what they want. There's a proposal right now, that would affect the very heart of the Art Deco district in in the Ocean, Drive, Collins Avenue area, and would allow increases in F.A. R. in that area -- Floor Area Ratio. That is to say, the volume of the building and increases in height. In areas like that, that are, as I said, the very heart of the historic Art Deco district in Miami Beach.

**Kathy Hersh 19:18**

And do you think they're going to prevail in this?

**Jack Johnson 19:24**

I don't know, remains to be seen.

**Kathy Hersh 19:27**

What's MDPL's position on that?

**Jack Johnson 19:29**

Our position is against it. We don't want floors being added to the tops of historic buildings. We don't want new glass towers built in between, you know, or behind Art Deco buildings. Sometimes we allow that. Because as part of the process, we get historic structures restored, but that's on a case by case basis. He says, When the city comes along and proposes these, these kinds of changes for whole districts that I think is very destructive to the, to the very nature of Miami Beach and \ the very features of the city that have led to its prosperity. You know, without Miami Beach was in ruins.



In 1976, when my when MDPL was founded, the buildings, the Art Deco buildings that had been built in the 1930s, primarily, were in terrible condition. People thought that they were just, you know, old dingy beat buildings that needed to be torn down and replaced.

**Kathy Hersh** 20:54

Well, part of that was there was demolition by neglect, was it not because there was...

**Jack Johnson** 21:00

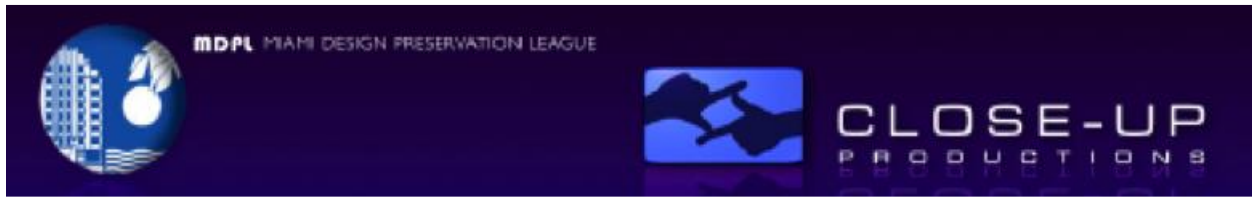
Demolition by neglect is, I think, a more recent, a more recent phenomenon. At the time, the buildings were all deteriorating, because there was no economic activity here. The buildings were providing very cheap even though even on Ocean Drive, the buildings were providing very cheap housing for elderly people and, and immigrants, that's fine, but it didn't generate enough profits, that the owners of those buildings could maintain them. And then MDPL came along and saw the the importance of preserving these buildings, and in a way that economic dysfunction was an advantage because there was no investment available to replace the buildings. And that's why they survived to the extent that they did. The preservation movement began to gain steam. The buildings began to be restored, tourism began to come back to Miami Beach, whereas it had been almost non existent. And today's prosperity in Miami Beach is due in very large part to historic preservation. If it weren't for that. We would just be another Atlantic coast down. But because of because of that, we are the place on the Atlantic coast for people to vacation. In fact, we are one of the places in the world for people to vacation.

**Kathy Hersh** 23:03

What role do you think that Tony Goldman played in this?

**Jack Johnson** 23:08





Oh, he played a very important role. Yes, Tony came here and fell in love with the place he had been a successful developer -- a historic preservation redeveloper in SoHo in New York City, and he came here and began buying up buildings and restoring them. And he had been successful enough that he was able to, to sustain those buildings. Earlier, building owners had limited resources and and weren't able to, to maintain their buildings adequately. If they if they can afford to restore them in the first place. Tony Goldman came along and was able to buy up a substantial number of buildings, restore them as they should be restored. And as a result, attract greater tourism and other developers, historic preservation developers, like Saul, gross, for instance, and others as well. And they came together as a group and really contributed a great deal to the the prosperity and the beauty of the city and the predominance of tourism.

**Kathy Hersh** 24:56

It sounds as if Tony Goldman showed that how money could still be made through historic preservation rather than tearing down and putting up something new.

**Jack Johnson** 25:07

That's right. And people is still proving that every day here here in my in Miami Beach. The Delano is currently being being restored to its original condition. And they aren't building a tower behind it, they aren't adding floors to it. They are restoring the building. And you know, the same can be said for other buildings as well. What about the Betsy? The Betsy is a prime example of that. Absolutely. Yes.

**Kathy Hersh** 25:46

They did a fantastic job there. Yes,

**Jack Johnson** 25:48



indeed. Yes, indeed. And, of course, more recently, they have taken over the building behind them and made it part of their operation. A beautiful art deco building, which they have also restored.

**Kathy Hersh 26:05**

That was a stroke of genius, I think.

**Jack Johnson 26:07**

Absolutely. Yes.

**Kathy Hersh 26:09**

Did you know Tony Goldman?

**Jack Johnson 26:11**

I met him once. Yes. That was actually before I became chair of the board of MDPL, I was chair of the board of the the Miami Beach Community Development Corporation. And during that time, I had occasion to meet with Tony at his offices. Very engaging and gracious person and very much interested to the end of his life in Miami Beach and in promoting Miami Beach and and restoring its historic properties.

**Kathy Hersh 27:00**

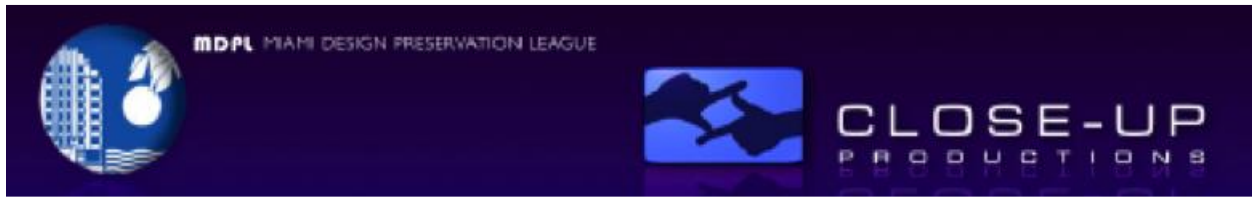
I read that they had his funeral here in Miami Beach at his request, and he's buried here.

**Jack Johnson 27:11**

I don't honestly know where he's buried . The funeral was held at the Temple Emanuel at 17th and Washington, which is in its own right, an extraordinarily beautiful art deco building.

**Kathy Hersh 27:30**

So what are the challenges that you have a ringside seat being Chair of the Board of MDPL? What are the current things that MDPL is fighting for?



**Jack Johnson 27:44**

Well, we're currently fighting for the preservation of the e Deauville Hotel, which is not an Art Deco building. It's a Miami modern building. Mid-Century Modern, or as we call it, Miami modern or MIMO. It's a very important building historically. It was the home of The Ed Sullivan Show. And it was the place where the Beatles gave their first televised concerts in the United States. It was, I think, the largest hotel along Collins Avenue. Originally, the Deauville was a another building on the same site in the in the Mediterranean Revival style, which had a huge pool, which I think at the time was considered to be the largest swimming pool in the world. That was demolished and replaced by the current Deauville in I believe the 1950s and now that Deauville is is threatened and we've already lost the beautiful porte cochere, which which drew attention to the Deauville to everyone driving up Collins Avenue.

**Kathy Hersh 29:29**

How was it that that I got lost?

**Jack Johnson 29:34**

Basically, the the owners of the Deauville and that isn't exactly a clear example of demolition by neglect, by the way. Years ago there was a an electrical fire in the Deauville Hotel, which the owners never adequately addressed. That was followed shortly by a hurricane, which damaged the building. And the owners never made a any effort to invest the necessary money to to keep the Deauville even to reopen the Deauville, let alone keep it operating. So, finally, that the owners last year, hired an engineering firm to come to the building and assess the condition of the building. And the engineering firm which was paid for by the owners found that the building needed to be demolished. In addition, very unfortunately, the Champlain towers collapse happened. And that led to an atmosphere where there's a lot of fear in South Florida, of that kind of tragedy



happening again. And although the Deauville is in much better shape than the Champlain towers. Nonetheless, the owners used that as an excuse and when it when it came to the courts, the judge used it as as part of his reasoning for ordering the demolition of the Deauville.

**Kathy Hersh 31:55**

A judge ordered it.

**Jack Johnson 31:56**

A judge has ordered the demolition of the Deauville. That's right. So, once that order was in place, the owners proceeded with partial demolition. They haven't done a complete demolition as yet. But they are preparing to to implo de the building.

**Kathy Hersh 32:20**

Imploded it. That's right.

**Kathy Hersh 32:23**

And MDPL is fighting that.

**Jack Johnson 32:25**

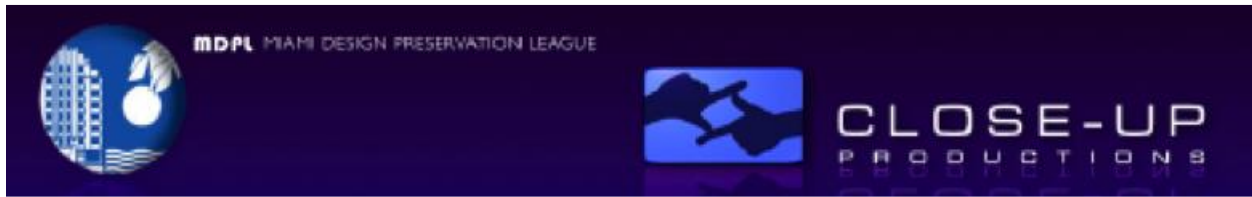
We're fighting that. Yes.

**Kathy Hersh 32:27**

Do you have support in the community?

**Jack Johnson 32:29**

We have support in the community? There's been a lot of support. We've raised money from the community at large. Tanya Baht, one of our board members, has been very active in, in setting up, you know, go find a GoFundMe site that has raised money for the saving of the Deauville. Of course, we can't hope to raise the multi millions that would be necessary for us to do it. But, but it has it has financed our legal our legal battles. As I



say there is a court order for demolition. This is not the first time that MDPL has lost a preservation battle. We fought this before my time. So I'm saying we institutionally fought the loss of the senator which was demolished. And the loss of which some say was the thing that killed Barbara bear cabman. In fact, it was congestive heart failure. But but that loss may have contributed to it. We lost the New Yorker. L. Murray Dixon's masterpiece. So we have we have wins and we have losses. Our latest win is the preservation of the of the murals on the old bank building at the southwest corner of South of 17th and or is the 16th the 16th and in Alton road beautiful mosaic murals depicting historical scenes from US history including as recently as the landing on the moon and as early as the the design of the first The American flag. The flag murals, and there were four of them, including the raising of the flag at Iwo Jima. Those and the and the murals on the front of those who are on the side of the building and the murals on the front of the building, as well have all been removed from the building and are in storage now,

**Kathy Hersh** 35:28

Where are they in storage?

**Jack Johnson** 35:30

They are in storage in a nearby vacant building. And the city has pledged to take ownership of them and find a new a new home for them. But it was largely the efforts of mtpl with the cooperation of the hotel company called Citizen M. Which is demolishing that building and is going to replace it with a new hotel. Fortunately, once they obtained ownership of the hotel, they they are good people, what can I say they were as interested as we are in preserving those murals and they spent the money to make it happen. That's the kind of developer we'd like to see in this city. So that's a recent success that we've had,

**Kathy Hersh** 36:45



What would you say is MDPL's current standing with the community? Is there a lot of support or do people not know the history?

**Jack Johnson** 37:02

Both, there's a lot of support and a lot of people who don't know the history and you know, that's I think that's the case in any city there are there are people who are very civic minded and and take the trouble to to learn about the place they live in and its history and its architecture and and you know what makes it different from other places. And then there are unfortunately the majority of people who take advantage of of of what's available in in our in our city without thinking twice about what it is that makes this city so utterly livable you know, the human scale of its of its historic buildings. You know, some of them live in glass towers and, and others live in these buildings but don't don't really know the history or even or even appreciate the architecture.