

VOGUE

Miami's Design District Wants to Be the Coolest Neighborhood in America



The new Institute of Contemporary Art building.

This summer, after 12 years of living in New York City, the allure of yearlong beach weather, nearby grandparents for our 2-year-old, and, frankly, the promise of affordable real estate finally convinced my husband and me it was time to relocate to Miami. It was a city where we both had roots but had never seriously considered as a place to live. After all, we were New Yorkers; we liked seasons, we braved the subway, we fell asleep to the sound of garbage trucks, we spent Sunday afternoons at a museum, and we watched indie movies at the Angelika. Sure, there was sunshine in Miami, and perhaps a house with a pool in the near future, but what about *culture*? Miami, we knew, was not known for its culture.

For a long time, New York's relationship to Miami has been that of a patient, distant relative to a sort of flashy, shopaholic, overly tanned cousin—one who's fun to spend short periods of time with (New Year's Eve! Art Basel!) but not someone you ever actually take *seriously*. And, for decades, that clichéd characterization of the city wasn't totally off—after all, this was the place Gianni Versace decided to call home. But these days, with an influx of excellent museums, Art Basel Miami Beach's evolution from a weekend-length commercial fair into a cultural and party blowout called Miami Art Week, and dozens of big-name architects, chefs, and designers with buzzy new projects in the works, Miami is in the midst of a full-blown cultural renaissance—and it's only just getting started.

While much attention has been paid to the rise of the artsy, indie neighborhood of Wynwood—you've definitely seen its colorful, graffitied walls on Instagram more than once—it's the adjacent Design District that has begun to emerge as the

cultural heartbeat of the city. The five-block-or-so radius is largely the passion project of developer Craig Robins and his real estate company, Dacra. Born and raised in Miami, the 54-year-old proved his talent for transforming neighborhoods into hot spots back in the early '90s, when he helped revitalize the seedy beachfront Art Deco district into the stylish, high-gloss South Beach we all know today.



The new Gucci store in the Design District with a façade by Coco Capitán.

For the last decade or so, Robins has been focused on making the Design District into the next best thing. He started scooping up properties in a mostly forgotten downtown area in the late '90s and initially turned the district into a destination for high-end furniture and interior decor stores. An avid art collector, Robins was one of the people who helped bring Art Basel to Miami Beach in 2002, and eventually founded his own fair, Design Miami, in 2005. As ABMB grew in size and caliber, Robins realized a number of fashion brands became increasingly interested in the Design District and started looking into the idea of turning it into a high-fashion hub. His first big tenants were Christian Louboutin, Marni, Margiela, and Louis Vuitton. In the following few years, the Design District has managed to attract Gucci, Dolce & Gabbana, Prada, Rick Owens, and Céline to open flagship stores there, as well.

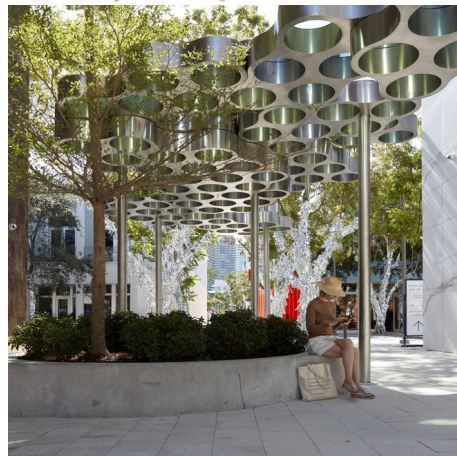
Not content with conquering the design and fashion crowds, the next phase of Robins's vision for the Design District was winning over the art world. Last week's opening of the highly anticipated Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami might just do the trick: The 37,500-square-foot space has a futuristic silver and glass facade, a curating staff with impressive credentials, a slate of ambitious exhibitions, an open-air sculpture garden, and totally free admission. "Free and open access to art in Miami was essential to our mission," said ICA Miami's director, Ellen Salpeter, during a hard hat tour of the museum in November. "We want to continue to elevate the level of art and visual arts literacy in Miami. It's not only inspiring, but it also helps reach people that otherwise might not have come."

Conveniently located next door to ICA Miami is the also free-of-charge private De la Cruz Collection, and a few more blocks away, the Rubell Family Collection, which, with its impressive number of Basquiats, Harings, Koonses, and Kusamas, is one of the world's largest privately owned contemporary art collections. "We are built into a walkable district," Salpeter added. "The hope is people do a little shopping, have a coffee across the street, and then wander into our building and see some art."



Urs Fischer's bus stop in Paradise Plaza.

Even if museums aren't your thing, in Miami's Design District, the art has a way of turning up: In the district's new Paradise Plaza (which currently houses Goop's pop-up gift shop), there's a cheeky Urs Fischer sculpture of a skeleton waiting at a bus stop. In Palm Court, a life-size Le Corbusier bust by Xavier Veilhan is on hand to greet visitors. A steel pergola by Ronan & Erwan Bouroullec provides shade down a central street named after Gio Ponti. A John Baldessari mural surrounds a major parking lot. A historic building houses a permanent installation by the late architect Zaha Hadid. Art is everywhere you turn.



A visitor sits beneath Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec's steel pergola.

These endless visual offerings are perhaps why restaurateurs are betting big on the neighborhood, too. Across the street from ICA Miami, the owners of New York's The Smile have set up OTL, a pink and sky blue café ripe for Instagramming, which comes replete with free Wi-Fi and a reliably well-turned-out clientele. Other New York mainstays like Roberta's and Blue Bottle Coffee have recently opened

outposts in the district, and on the list of things to look forward to in 2018: a new Jean-Georges restaurant and potentially three different projects from Joël Robuchon. How's *that* for culture?

According to Robins, this is only the beginning. "Until now, what everyone thinks of as the Design District is really only half of it," he says during a phone call in December. "Starting this month, it's going to double in scale. We're going to go from a massive construction site to an oasis." When I ask him to compare his grand-scale, multifaceted neighborhood to any other place in the world, Robins mentions Ginza, and Soho, maybe with a dash of Madison Avenue in there, too. But the whole point is that it defies easy comparison. "What's great about the Design District is that it's an immersive cultural experience," he says, "I don't know of an analogy where you have so much art, architecture, fashion, and design all in one place—it's inimitable."