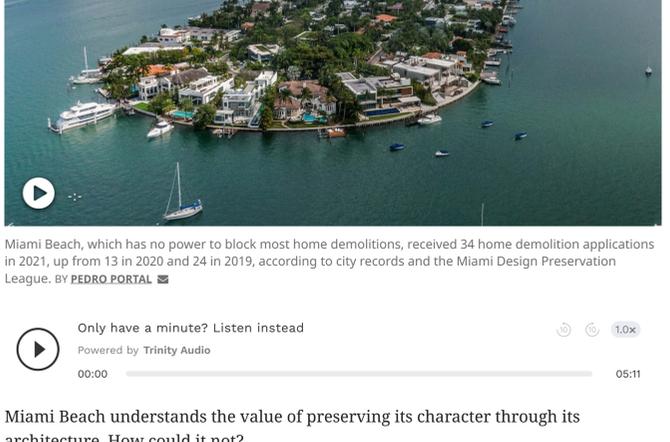


HOME PAGE

Historic-home teardowns risk washing away Miami Beach's character in a flood of cash | Editorial

BY THE MIAMI HERALD EDITORIAL BOARD
 UPDATED JANUARY 11, 2022 3:07 PM

Twitter Facebook Email Share



Miami Beach, which has no power to block most home demolitions, received 34 home demolition applications in 2021, up from 13 in 2020 and 24 in 2019, according to city records and the Miami Design Preservation League. BY PEDRO PORTAL

Miami Beach understands the value of preserving its character through its architecture. How could it not?

One of the Beach's biggest draws is its historic Art Deco district. Visitors from around the world come to marvel at it, and those tourists benefit all of South Florida. The annual Art Deco Weekend, which begins on Friday, is a celebration of those world-renowned buildings.

It wasn't always that way. Preservationists had to band together back in the '80s to keep those buildings, now considered architectural gems, from being mowed down by bulldozers. And the fight to save Miami Beach's landmarks continues. Just this week, the news of the [possible demolition of the Deauville Beach Resort](#), where the Beatles taped their 1964 performance on "The Ed Sullivan Show," caused an outpouring of anguish and outrage from the citizenry.

TOP VIDEOS



Calvary Christian rolls to second straight state title

That makes it all the harder to understand why the city hasn't come up with a way to safeguard the charm of its residential neighborhoods. Coral Gables does. So does Palm Beach, and the city of Miami. They all have found ways to protect homes with architectural or historical importance. By doing so, they are valuing their history. They're also saving what makes them unique and desirable.



The Beatles performed on "The Ed Sullivan Show" at the Deauville Beach Resort in Miami Beach on Feb. 16, 1964, to 70 million TV viewers. BY MDC'S WOLFSON ARCHIVES

MIAMI BEACH IS CHANGING

[That lack of protection is becoming an issue](#) in part because the pace of change in Miami Beach's residential neighborhoods is accelerating, with 34 teardown applications in 2021, 13 in 2020 and 24 in 2019, as the Miami Herald reported. The city has almost no means to stop those plans, and all too often, the result is the much-decried "white box" of a mansion replacing a lovely old home that helped give Miami Beach its distinctive style.

City leaders have started talking about this issue, and that's good. It's time for them to come up with a way to protect single-family homes of architectural or historical importance, while also taking into consideration the needs of homeowners. That won't be simple; those two things may be at odds. Home owners should not be forced into historic designations that hurt their ability to sell their properties for top dollar. But neither should the city allow significant homes to be torn down as a rush of new money hits the city.

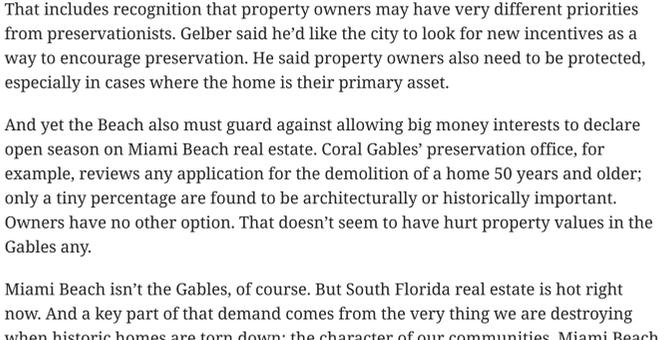
A Miami Herald story offered some examples of the problem. A 1937 Mediterranean villa on Miami Beach's Hibiscus Island designed by August Geiger — the [Herald called him](#) "perhaps the most important local architect of the early 20th century" — will be replaced by a vast, glass-and-concrete mansion. City planners said the Geiger home was architecturally significant — but in the end, that didn't matter.

Gangster Al Capone's Palm Island residence, where he died in 1947, may yet be demolished, too, after a close call last year. It's a 1922 Mediterranean estate with a 60-foot-long swimming pool. Purchased by developers in 2021 for \$10.5 million, it was flipped a month later for \$5 million more, amid a backlash from preservationists.

STUNNING MONEY

The money being thrown around is stunning. Orlando Bravo, a private equity firm co-founder and managing partner, spent \$40 million for a 1929 Mediterranean home in Miami Beach previously owned by singer Phil Collins — and then applied to tear it down. A New York couple, Alex Kleyner and Diana Ullis, spent \$44 million for two homes on Sunset Islands, including one considered a residential landmark. They've applied to tear them down, too.

One luxury home developer, Todd Michael Glaser — who was part of the initial Al Capone home purchase — told the Herald that, even if there is a fight, eventually "you can knock anything down."

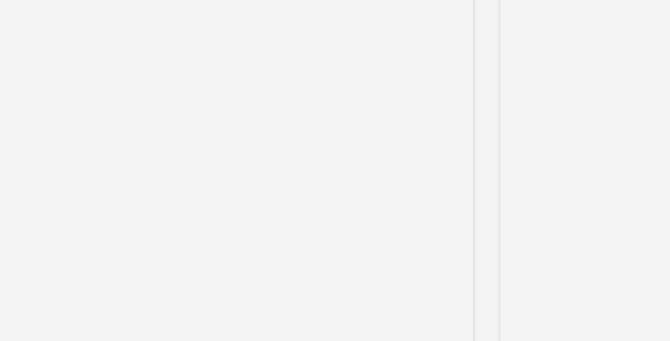


Miami Beach, which has no power to block most home demolitions, received 34 home demolition applications in 2021, up from 13 in 2020 and 24 in 2019, according to city records and the Miami Design Preservation League. BY PEDRO PORTAL

That's a sad commentary, and it should worry city leaders. Miami Beach Mayor Dan Gelber told the Editorial Board the city is "trying to navigate this issue thoughtfully." That includes recognition that property owners may have very different priorities than preservationists. Gelber said he'd like the city to look for new incentives as a way to encourage preservation. He said property owners also need to be protected, especially in cases where the home is their primary asset.

And yet the Beach also must guard against allowing big money interests to declare open season on Miami Beach real estate. Coral Gables' preservation office, for example, reviews any application for the demolition of a home 50 years and older; only a tiny percentage are found to be architecturally or historically important. Owners have no other option. That doesn't seem to have hurt property values in the Gables any.

Miami Beach isn't the Gables, of course. But South Florida real estate is hot right now. And a key part of that demand comes from the very thing we are destroying when historic homes are torn down: the character of our communities. Miami Beach leaders need to take steps to slow down the demolitions until they can figure out a way to keep their most precious asset from slipping away.



Miami-Dade College history professor Dr. Paul George reveals his favorite spots inside Al Capone's Palm Island mansion, the home where he passed away in 1947. BY NICK SWYTER

This story was originally published January 11, 2022 1:02 PM.