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Miami a mecca for luxe furnishings



Jonathan Adler's Mrs. Godfrey Collection features the "Mrs. Godfrey Sofa", left, with Venice peacock fabric, and the "Reform Temple Screen", right. . **Carl Juste** - MIAMI HERALD STAFF

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If there's any doubt that the uber-rich like to hang out in Miami, in an appropriate ambience of opulence, consider these telltale examples of the explosion in the high-end furnishings market:

- Luxury Living opened a second Fendi Casa location in Miami's Design District in 2014, 10 years after it opened its first showroom in the U.S. Raffaella Vignatelli, Luxury Living USA president, said the company chose the district for both locations because it has "the capacity to attract the most fashionable and luxurious world brands in furniture, fashion and jewelry..."

- Jonathan Adler moved his eponymous showroom from Lincoln Road to the Design District, opening a 6,000-plus square foot store in 2012 – his largest yet and bigger than his stores in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Dallas and other major U.S. cities. Miami, he writes in an email, has "a unique creative energy."

- Visionnaire, an upscale Italian furniture brand, opened a store on Biscayne Boulevard last week. It's the furniture maker's first entry into the U.S. market, though it has a presence in more than 50 countries, with 18 stores in such far-flung locales as

Milan, Beijing, Moscow, Istanbul and Shanghai. Eleanor Cavalli, the company's creative director, calls Miami "a natural choice" for its first U.S. location.

- Anima Domus, founded in Coral Gables in the late 1990s, is doubling one of its showrooms by moving out of the Design District to Biscayne Boulevard. The 7,000-square-foot location in the MiMo District marks the second Biscayne Boulevard store for founders Marconi and Silvia Naziizeni, who also operate a showroom in Aventura.



Jonathan Adler's Mrs. Godfrey Collection features a hand sculpture from his lucite collection. | CARL JUSTE / MIAMI HERALD STAFF

Interior designers say the entry and expansion of upscale furniture and furnishing makers into the South Florida market underscores a larger trend toward luxury: The area has become a shopping destination for everything from homes to jewelry for the discerning – and wealthy – consumer.

“Miami has cachet, and that’s only going to continue to grow,” explains Judi Male, who has been designing residences for high-end clients all over the U.S. for 40 years. “International buyers are coming and buying and they want labels, they want names, they want quality.”

Today’s luxury buyers are different from those 20 or 30 years ago. Eric Dyer, creator of the Arthur Collection in Hallandale, a made-to-order luxury line, recalls the high end market was mostly local – and limited – in the late 1990s, when he first got here. Foreign buyers tended to be exclusively from Latin America.

“Now what’s driving the growth is money coming from the outside,” Dyer says, and it’s not just from Latin America. His clients include Russians, Asians and British. In fact, his four most recent clients were from the United Kingdom.

Others concur with that assessment. “Miami is an international hub,” according to Fendi Casa’s Vignatelli.

And Adler calls his customers “a frothy mix of locals and international jet setters. Miami is flashy, fantastical and fabulous, and that’s reflected in our customers’ shopping habits.”

The driving force behind the growth in furniture and furnishings has been the proliferation of luxe real estate, multimillion-dollar residences that need to be furnished. These homes have attracted buyers looking for a safe harbor to park their cash, but they also double as second – or third and fourth – homes. Male, for instance, is working on a 5,000-square-foot apartment for a family who plans to spend only three weeks of the year in Miami.

What's luring them here? In part, starchitects.

In an effort to up their game, developers have brought in celebrity architects – Richard Meier for the Surf Club, Norman Foster for Faena House, for example – to design buildings. Just like designer labels help sell cars and handbags, a big name can go a long way in selling a penthouse to the hard-to-get and the hard-to-please. Think Gil Dezer's Porsche Design Tower in Sunny Isles, and the Chateau Group and Fendi collaboration at the Fendi Chateau in Surfside, Fendi's first branded real estate project.

Miami's luxury trend has garnered a lot of media attention. The New York Times has written about it, as have The Associated Press and Forbes magazine. Even the network Bravo premiered a new network show, *Million Dollar Listing Miami*, hoping to emulate the successful New York and Los Angeles versions.

What's more, Knight Frank, a global real-estate consultancy, ranked Miami 6th in its 2015 survey of the most important global cities to the world's wealthy. Miami beat out Paris and Dubai and, along with New York, was the only other North American city to break the top 10.

"In New York, they trade stocks," says Anima Domus's Naziazeni, "in Texas, they trade oil and in California they trade tech. Here in Miami we trade real estate."

The most recent stamp of approval came in the form of the U.S. version of a renowned Parisian interior design show. *Maison & Objet Americas*, which was at the Miami Beach Convention Center last week, featured high-end decor and furniture dealers for architects, decorators and others in the interiors trade.

Why Miami? The proximity to Latin America is, of course, important, as is the tropical climate. But the city that was labeled a paradise lost by Time magazine in 1981 is now considered Paradise Found. Miami is, in one word, *cool*.

"We've become a more sophisticated city in every respect," says Jackie Soffer, who as co-chairman & CEO for Turnberry Associates oversees Aventura Mall and knows a thing or two about luxury retail. "We've always had the beach, but now we also have the arts, the restaurants, the nightlife. We're the whole package."

For some, this recognition has been a long time coming. Before the advent of the Maison & Objet show and the brand-name real-estate skyscrapers, there was a real-estate visionary. Back in the 1990s, a young developer named Craig Robins looked at a beaten down patch north of downtown Miami and envisioned what others didn't. Robins began buying buildings, repairing sidewalks, displaying artworks and planting trees. More importantly, he persuaded luxury design companies to move into the then-moribund wholesale furniture district.

"At that time," Robins recalls, "design wasn't merchandised to customers but to professionals."

He wanted to change that. In 2005 he launched an annual fair, DesignMiami, to run at the same time as Art Basel Miami Beach, then three years old. The move was prescient. The international show now also runs in Switzerland's Art Basel in June. As a satellite fair to Art Basel Miami Beach, it now attracts, along with Art Miami in Midtown, thousands of visitors as part of Miami Art Week. Under Robins' company, DACRA, the Design District has become the epicenter for upscale furnishings.

"Miami is a booming city," Robins adds. "There's an incredible demand for furnishings."

But as the Design District expands to include more ultra-luxury brands, some of its older furniture and furnishing tenants have had to move to the outskirts to make way for the big boys. Anima Domus is one of them. Owner Naziazeni says the price-per-square-foot was “going nuts. Space in the district is becoming a rare commodity.”

In addition to Biscayne Boulevard, the smaller luxury brands looking to move close to the Design District are now scouting out Wynwood, Edgewater and Midtown. That’s what Max Alcalay, president and CEO of Addison House, plans to do when he adds another showroom to his collection in Aventura, Doral and Panama City.

“The growth is just incredible,” Alcalay says “When I think what it was like when I started [in 1984], the market has changed dramatically. People want to be here.”