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Art Deco Weekend: Celebrate the Roots of Miami Beach's Architectural History — Virtually

TYLER FRANCISCHINE | JANUARY 14, 2021 | 8:00AM



Art Deco Weekend, pictured here in 2020, will be held January 14-17 — entirely virtually. / Photo courtesy of the Miami Design Preservation League

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What would the night sky be without its bright stars? What would Miami Beach be without the art deco buildings that line its oceanfront avenues?

Art Deco Weekend, held virtually this year January 14-17, offers a series of lectures, house tours, dance lessons, and variety shows that drive home the importance of preserving the century-old architectural form of *arts décoratifs* as it is inextricably linked to Miami Beach's initial development and continues to define the city.

Daniel Ciraldo is the executive director of the **Miami Design Preservation League**. His organization has hosted Art Deco Weekend for the past 44 years as part of its mission to preserve and protect the architectural, cultural, and environmental integrity of Miami Beach.

“Art deco is a key part of Miami’s visual identity,” Ciraldo tells *New Times*. “The neon buildings along Ocean Drive, next to swaying palm trees and crystal blue beach waters, form the basis of our postcard image that attracts millions of visitors each year.”

The theme for this year’s event, “There’s no place like home,” is borrowed from a 1939 cinematic classic whose Emerald City set designs were replete with art deco elements: *The Wizard of Oz*.

Ciraldo says designs of the past may carry implications for the present moment.

“Art deco and modern architecture’s birth in the early 20th century was born in part as a response to the 1918 pandemic. More open spaces, courtyards, cross-ventilation, and other design typologies grew from that. So, in many ways, past is prologue,” Ciraldo explains. “Another theme of the program is how we’re all connected even though we are virtual this year. The world is in a challenging time with COVID-19 as well as divisiveness in our country. We looked at how we might bring together people who may have political differences but who share common values in their support of Art Deco. It was also an opportunity to connect with our colleagues from around the globe in celebration of this design style.”

Events kick off tonight, January 14, with a talk from Silvia Barisione, chief curator of the Wolfsonian-FIU, a museum housed in the heart of Miami Beach's Art Deco District. Barisione will highlight 1920s and '30s art and design objects from the collections of the Wolfsonian and its sister museum, the Wolfsoniana in Genoa, Italy, that show a gradual transition from the ornamental to the simple and functional.

Barisione says the shift in design sensibility paved the way for a new, more egalitarian, and inclusive way of living after Americans recovered from the Great Depression, a way of living that the art deco hotels along Ocean Drive preserve like postcards from the past.

“The art deco architecture is more democratic, using local materials like limestone and terrazzo floors. You rarely see Italian marble floors in art deco hotels on Miami Beach. They are very beautiful but not spectacular styles,” Barisione explains.

Other events include a talk on Bombay’s art deco boom in the 1930s with Mustansir Dalvi, a professor of architecture at Sir J.J. College of Architecture in Mumbai; tours of lauded art deco homes like the Hollyhock House, Frank Lloyd Wright’s first Los Angeles project, and the Saarinen House just outside Detroit; dance lessons in styles popular during art deco’s heyday like the Charleston; and speakeasy-themed variety shows on Friday and Saturday evenings featuring live jazz, magicians and swing dancing. Those who tune in are encouraged to “dress deco” and pour themselves a cocktail or mocktail.

Says Ciraldo: “These free events are a fun way to celebrate and help establish a deeper understanding of the many elements of arts and culture derived from this period.”

Barisione hopes Art Deco Weekend participants gain a deeper appreciation for art deco architecture, which not only formed Miami Beach’s identity as a seaside resort in the 1930s but continues to draw the awed gazes of visitors and residents alike.

“I would like people to be more aware of the beauty of this historic style. It’s a very resistant architecture; more buildings can be preserved. How many houses have been demolished to build these cubes with no character?” she says. “I’ve been in Miami for almost ten years, and I’ve seen these art deco houses demolished, and I think, “How can this happen?”

Art Deco Weekend. *Thursday, January 14, through Sunday, January 17;*
artdecoweekend.com. Admission is free.

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