

Havana Riviera

"Havana in the Grand Manner!"

—Havana Riviera slogan, 1957

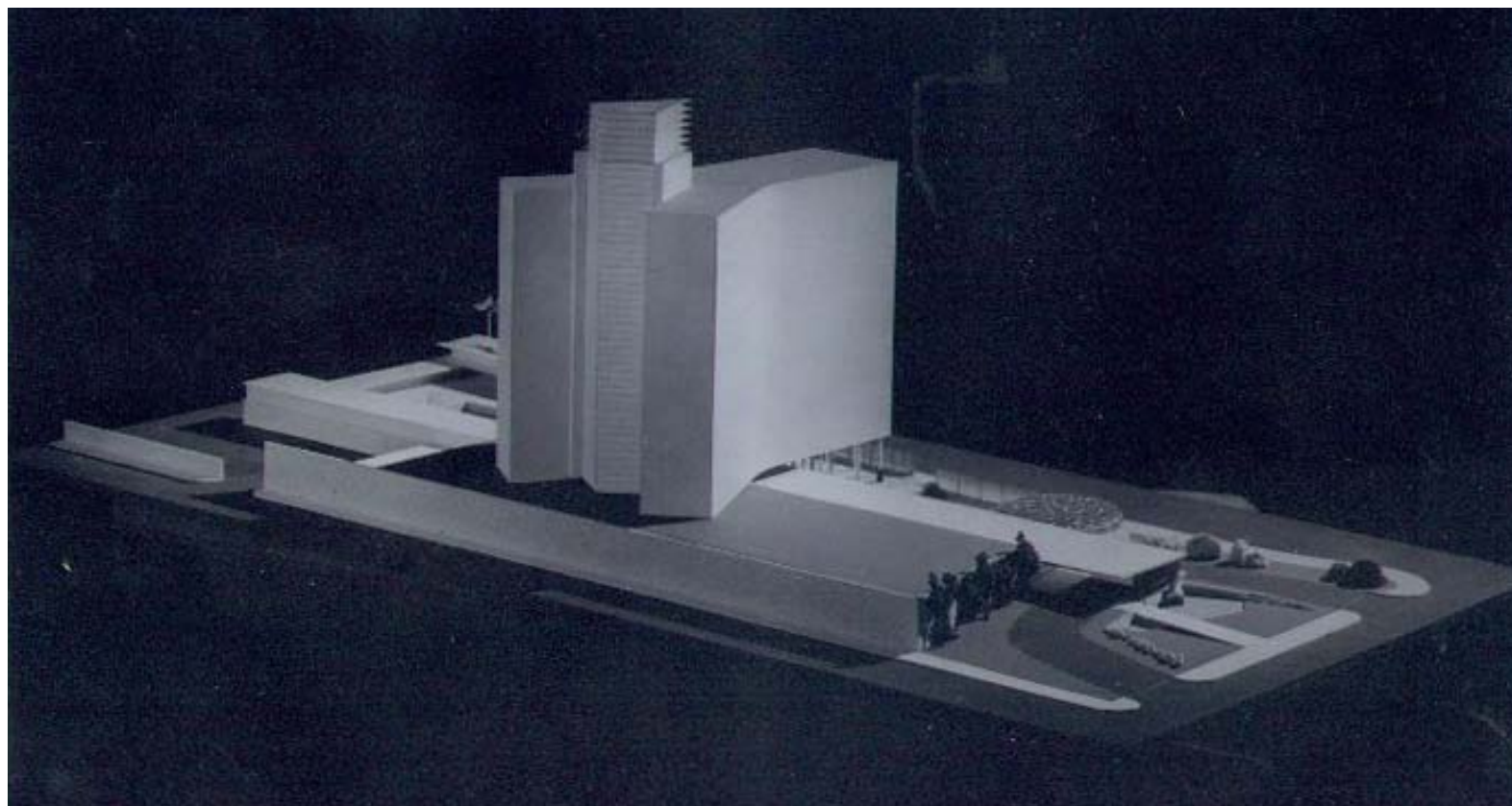
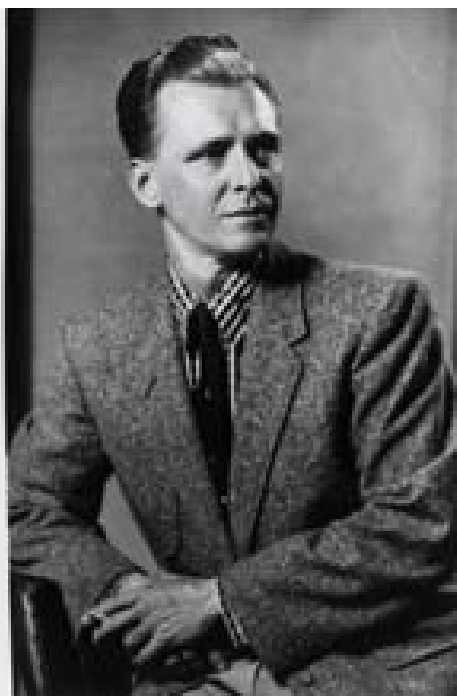


Under the terms of Cuba's Hotel Law 2074 passed in 1955, Meyer Lansky rapidly arranged the financing of his dream project—the Havana Riviera—which would be the most extravagant and sophisticated high-rise resort hotel-casino in the Caribbean, rivaling

A B O V E :
The hotel's slick 1958 brochure.

R I G H T :
Havana Riviera in 2007.





the great pleasure palaces of Miami Beach and Las Vegas. In financing the project, \$8 million came from Lansky and his associates; \$6 million came from Batista government loans. Lansky's investment partners included some of Las Vegas's biggest power brokers, among them his old friends Moe Dalitz, Morris Kleinman, Sam Tucker, and Wilbur Clark of the Desert Inn (and of Lansky's Hotel Nacional casino); Edward Levinson of the Fremont Hotel; and Hyman Abrams and Morris Rosen of the Flamingo (of Bugsy Siegel fame). As with all of Lansky's dealings, he and his underworld associates' ownership of the Riviera was hidden behind layers of managers and front men.

In selecting an architect for the Havana Riviera, Lansky initially approached Wayne McAllister, who

was the prolific Los Angeles-based designer of Las Vegas's stylish Desert Inn, Fremont, and Sands hotels—all properties controlled by Lansky's associates in the "Cleveland Gang." According to historian Chris Nichols as reported in his excellent book *The Leisure Architecture of Wayne McAllister*, Lansky's insistence that the hotel be completed in less than six months led McAllister to respectfully decline the commission. Instead, Igor Polevitzky, one of the deans of Miami Modern architecture, took the job. Irving Feldman served as the project's general contractor.

Russian-born Igor B. Polevitzky (1911–1978) arrived in Miami in 1934 after receiving his architecture degree from the University of Pennsylvania. He, along with a handful of young innovators such as

ABOVE LEFT:
Architect Igor Polevitzky.

ABOVE CENTER
Polevitzky's seminal Miami Beach Shelborne Hotel of 1940.

ABOVE
Riviera architectural model.

FACING RIGHT:
The Riviera's rear elevator core in 2007.

Thomas Triplett Russell (who was Polevitzky's architectural partner from 1936 to 1941), drew inspiration from the Streamline Moderne and International Style in creating a new tropical Modernism that responded to the challenges of the intense sun, wind, and humidity of southern Florida. Of the firm's pre-World War II buildings, the 1940 Shelborne Hotel had the greatest impact on the direction of Miami architecture in the postwar period, influencing Morris Lapidus's Eden Roc and Fontainebleau hotels in its extensive use of plate glass windows, horizontal window bands, and sculptural qualities.

With his new partner Vernon Johnson, Igor Polevitzky approached the Havana Riviera project with gusto and creativity. Situated on a broad stretch of the dramatic seaside Malecón roadway in

the city's chic Vedado district, the twenty-one-story hotel tower was designed in a Y configuration, raised on thin columns to take full advantage of magnificent views of the Gulf of Mexico from the guest rooms and the vast lobby area. By extending the floor slabs beyond the exterior walls and scalloping the end of the building's cantilevered ocean-facing wing, the architects gave the design an exciting sculptural quality while providing welcome shade to the guest rooms. Soothing turquoise-colored Italian-glass mosaic tile covers the tower's surfaces (the cost of which Meyer Lansky bitterly complained), linking the building to the adjacent Caribbean Sea. As Havana's first major building with central air conditioning, the Riviera was a cool refuge from the often-sticky tropics.

For the Riviera's interiors, Albert Parvin of the Parvin-Dohrman Company of Los Angeles—the premier decorating firm for Las Vegas's newest resorts—completely furnished the hotel, designing custom pieces for the lobby, restaurants, cocktail lounges, Copa showroom, and guest rooms. Enhancing the Riviera's splendor were unique sculptures, wall pieces, paintings, and murals by some of Cuba's best artists of the 1950s. The renowned sculptor Florencio Gelabert designed two of the



CLOCKWISE, ABOVE:
Albert Parvin of Los Angeles designed the hotel's furnishings: suite, lobby as seen in 2007, and guest room.

FACING:
Rolando López Dirube's magnificent abstract mural covers the casino's entry wall.



hotel's most prominent semiabstract masterpieces: a white marble sculpture of an intertwined mermaid and swordfish that fronts the entrance porte cochere, and *Ritmo Cubano* (*Cuban Rhythm*), a large lobby sculpture that depicts twirling male and female dancers rendered in bronze. An astounding abstract bas-relief mural rendered in plaster, metal

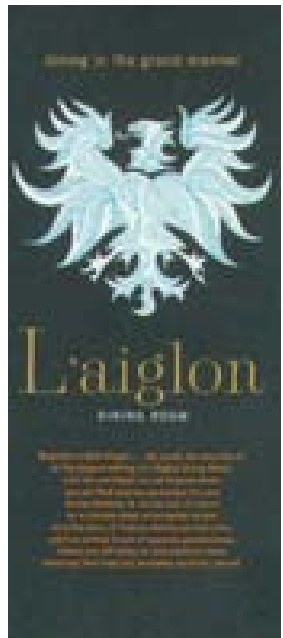
wire, and backlit resin, designed by Rolando López Dirube, covers the entire wall surface of the entry hall leading from the lobby to the casino. And centering the lobby's grand circular staircase that descends to the hotel's Primavera Coffee Shop is a spectacular two-story abstract metal sculpture by Cundo Bermúdez.





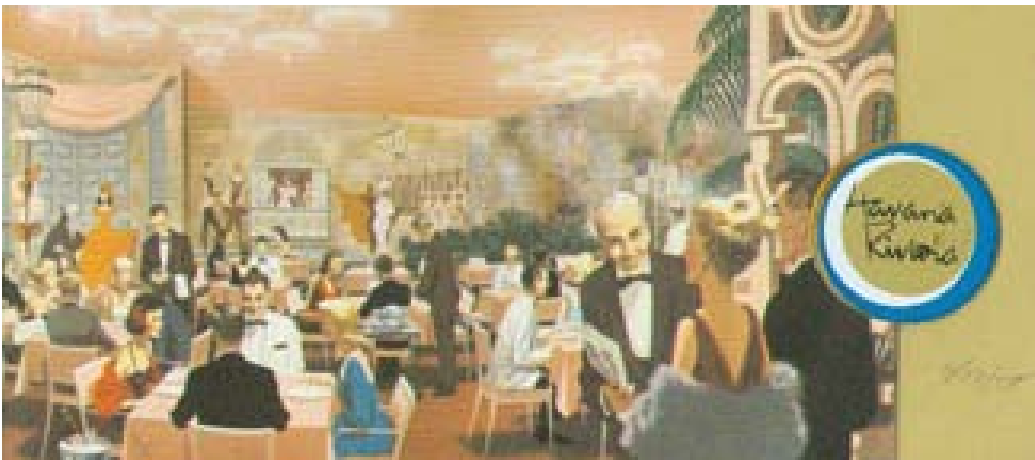
Renowned Cuban sculptors filled the hotel with custom artwork. Florencio Gelabert designed the mermaid and swordfish entrance sculpture (above left) and the lobby's *Ritmo Cubano* (*Cuban Rhythm*, left). A two-story abstract metal sculpture by Cundo Bermúdez (above and right) centers the lobby's circular staircase.





Albert Parvin's dazzling design for the Riviera's L'aiglon Restaurant made "Dining in the Grand Manner" a singular event. Promotional literature boasted that at L'aiglon, "The atmosphere is cosmopolitan; the décor tropical; the service continental; the food superb!" Beneath fantastic crystal chandeliers, guests were surrounded by Regency-style candelabras, gold-veined mirrors, and whimsical murals by artist Hipólito Hidalgo de Caviedes, depicting Cubans celebrating carnival. The exceptional quality of L'aiglon's cuisine was due to Lansky's obsession with serving the finest food, based upon his years of experience in managing upscale "carpet joints" (illegal nightclub-casinos) in New York and Florida. In his official role as the Riviera's kitchen manager, a position that Lanksy took quite seriously, he oversaw the menu selection and demanded that only the finest Midwest corn-fed beef be served at L'aiglon.

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:
Frozen in time, L'aiglon's interior in 2007;
"Dining in the Grand Manner"; L'aiglon in 1958; sophisticated entertainment; artist's rendering in 1957.





A B O V E :
L'aiglon's festive carnival mural by Hipólito Hidalgo de Caviedes in 2007.



A B O V E :
Enjoying preshow libations
at the Riviera's L'elegante
lounge in 1958.

R I G H T :
L'elegante's sparkling metal
and colored-glass hanging
lamps in 2007.

Given the Riviera's dual role as an entertain-
ment showcase and high-style casino, the
entrances to these key venues were to the
immediate left and right, respectively, of the
hotel's main lobby doors. Beneath an enor-
mous egg-shaped dome lit by custom-
designed gold and crystal chandeliers were
the casino's table games—roulette, blackjack,
craps, *chemin de fer* (baccarat)—with a row of
slot machines lining the curved perimeter
wall. The sunken "Doble o Nada" ("Double or
Nothing") bar off the casino floor was just
one of the hotel's three venues providing live
entertainment. The fabulous Copa Room
(modeled after Vegas's Sands showroom of
the same name) was inaugurated on
December 10, 1957, when Ginger Rogers was the

hotel's opening night headliner. Of Miss Rogers'
performance, Lansky complained, "She can wiggle
her ass but she can't sing a goddamn note."
Magnifying the new hotel's prestige was the
live television broadcast of NBC's popular *Steve
Allen Show*, beamed to a huge American audience
from the Havana Riviera on January 19, 1958. The
show opened with Allen on the Copa Room stage,



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When Cuba Was a Tropical Playground

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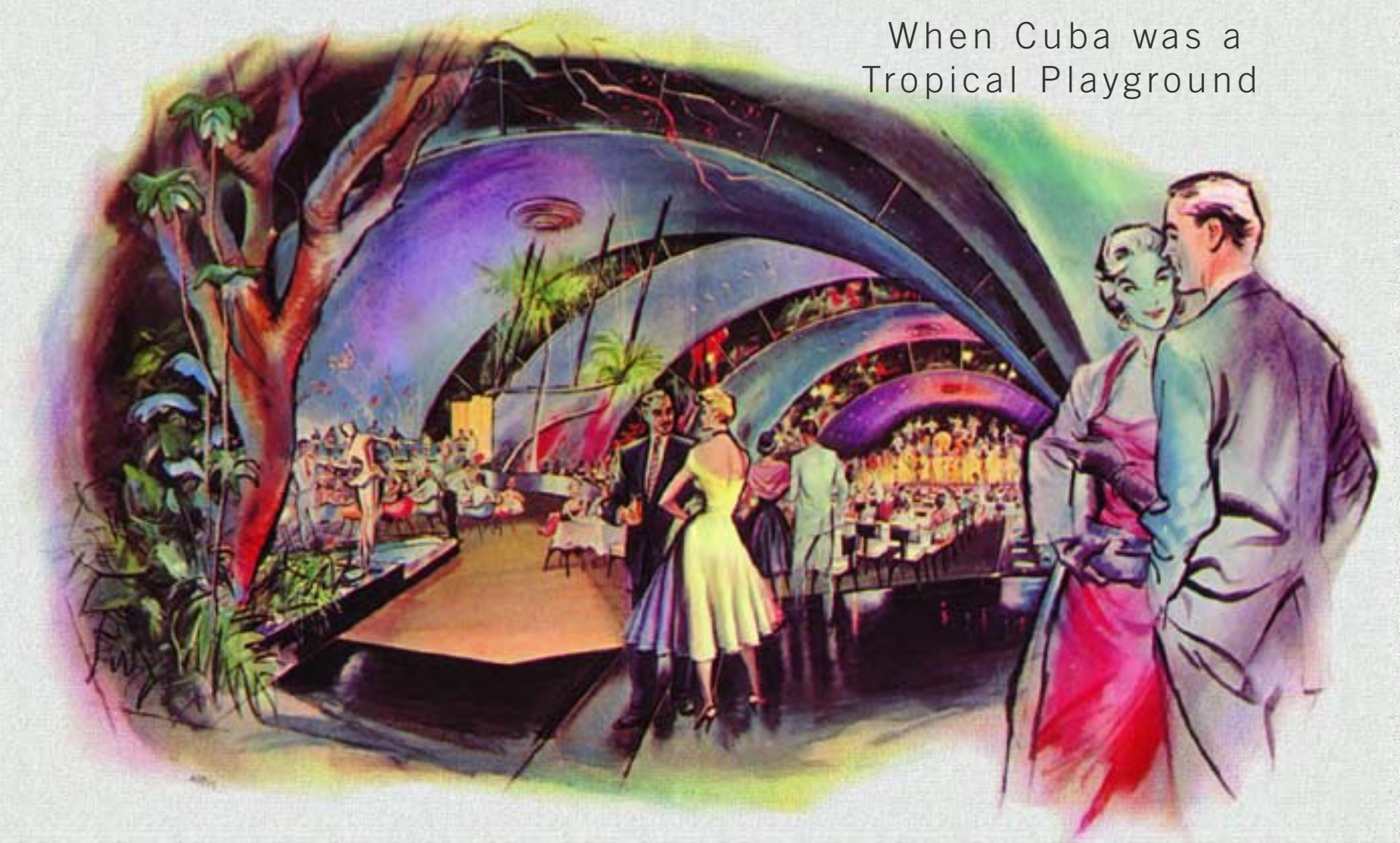
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