

# Havana Riviera

*"Havana in the Grand Manner!"*

—Havana Riviera slogan, 1957

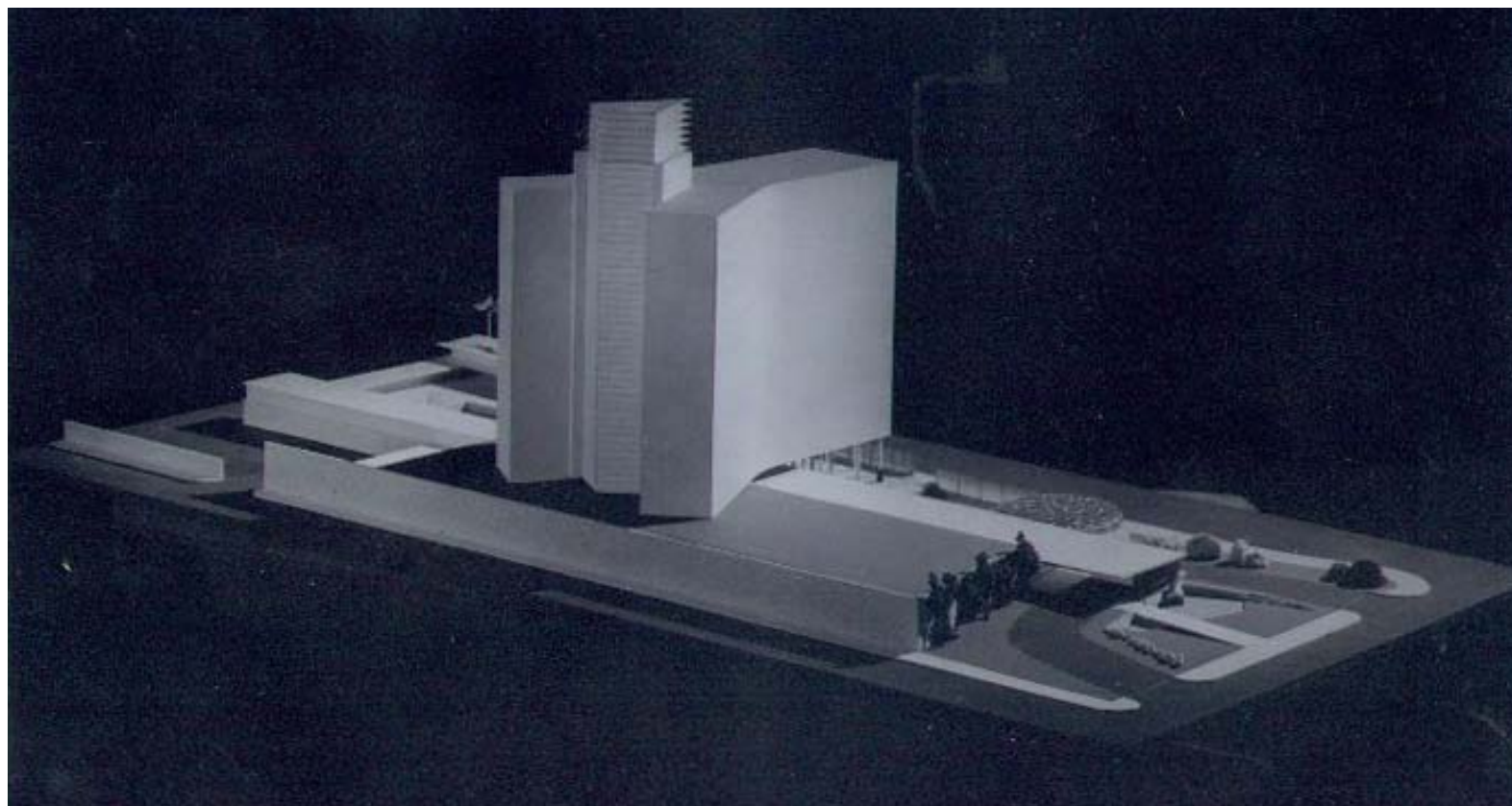
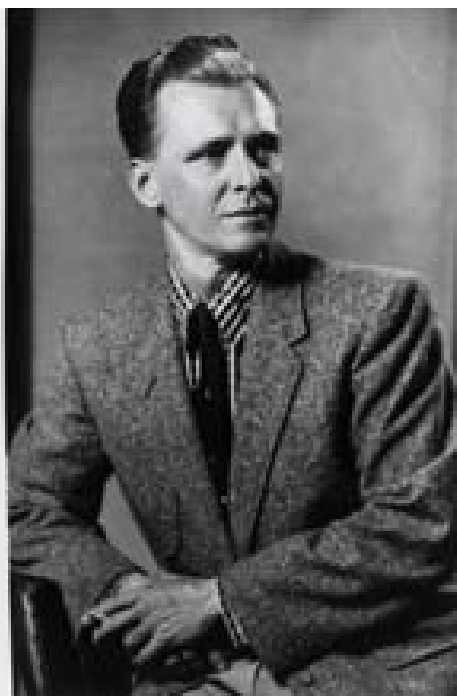


*Under the terms* of Cuba's Hotel Law 2074 passed in 1955, Meyer Lansky rapidly arranged the financing of his dream project—the Havana Riviera—which would be the most extravagant and sophisticated high-rise resort hotel-casino in the Caribbean, rivaling

**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.



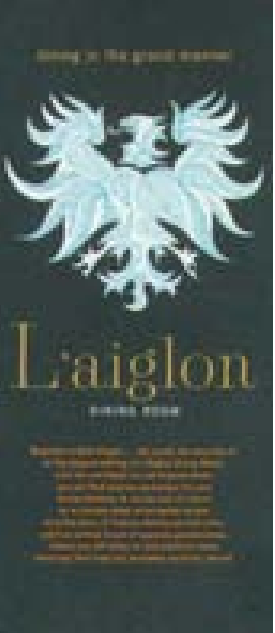




*Renowned Cuban sculptors* filled the hotel with custom artwork. Florencio Gelabert designed the mermaid and swordfish entrance sculpture (above left) and the lobby's *Ritmo Cubano* (*Cuban Rhythm*, left). A two-story abstract metal sculpture by Cundo Bermúdez (above and right) centers the lobby's circular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

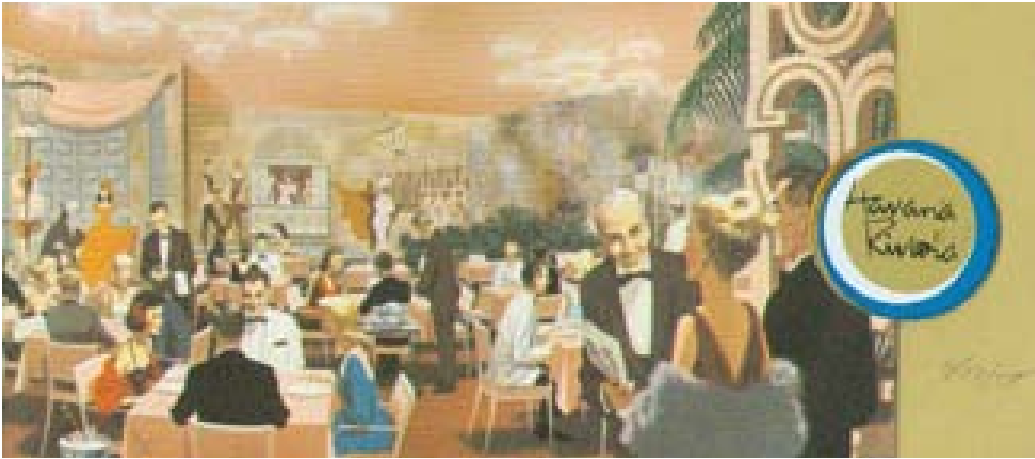






Albert Parvin’s dazzling design for the Riviera’s L’aiglon Restaurant made “Dining in the Grand Manner” a singular event. Promotional literature boasted that at L’aiglon, “The atmosphere is cosmopolitan; the décor tropical; the service continental; the food superb!” Beneath fantastic crystal chandeliers, 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.

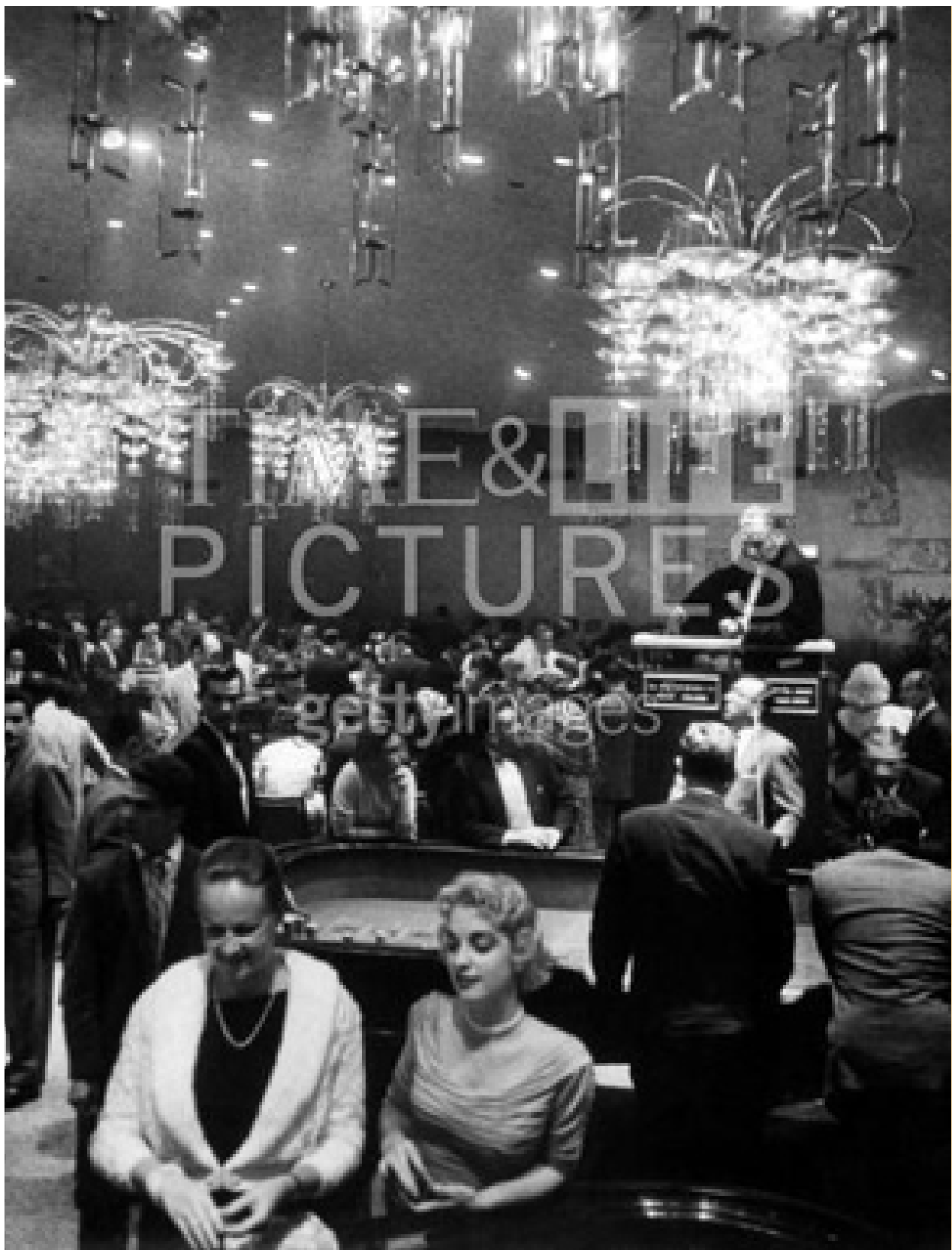
**R I G H T :**  
L'elegante's sparkling metal  
and colored-glass hanging  
lamps in 2007.

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,







*Riviera glamour* in the casino (left),  
Copa Room (above), the casino's Doble o Nada lounge  
(far right), and L'elegante lounge (right).



quipping, “Here we are in Havana, the home of the pineapple and Meyer Lansky and it’s wonderful to be here,” followed by comedy routines featuring Lou Costello, Edgar Bergen, and the bug-eyed Don Knotts; a continuous lip-synching musical stroll through the casino, lobby, and outside to the swimming pool by crooner Steve Lawrence; and some poolside cavorting by blonde bombshell Mamie Van Doren. The value to Cuban tourism of Steve Allen’s live broadcast was incalculable, as millions of viewers witnessed Americans like themselves packing the

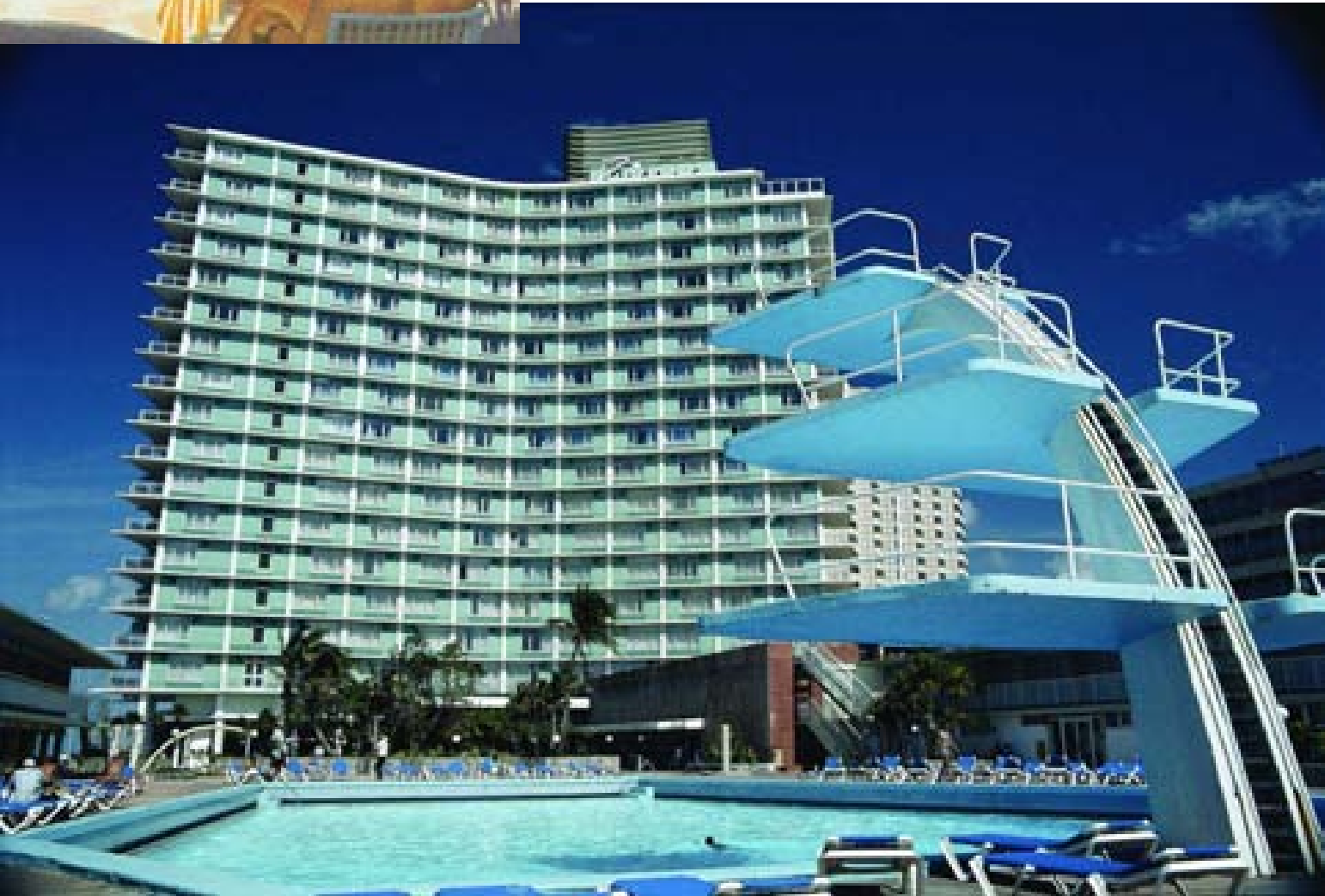
**BELOW AND RIGHT:**

The Copa Room in 1958; a dazzling Copa Room dinner show.



**ABOVE AND RIGHT:**

The Riviera’s pool area as imagined in 1957, and as seen in 2007.



casino and wandering the lobby, obviously having a grand time in naughty Havana.

In the 1950s, renting a luxury poolside cabana for sun-bathing, card playing, and lounging with a cocktail was a popular status symbol, particularly in Miami Beach. The Fontainebleau’s enormous serpentine double-decked cabana row (long gone) was probably the most renowned in its day. In Havana, the Hotel Nacional’s early-1950s makeover introduced the poolside cabana concept to the city. When Lansky commissioned the Riviera, his Cabana Club included seventy-six individual rooms, one of which was his personal cabana for afternoon games of gin rummy with his cronies.





Immediately following the widely acknowledged architectural and financial success of the Havana Riviera, with rooms booked through the 1957-58 winter season, Polevitzky, Johnson & Associates was commissioned by the Habana Biltmore Yacht and Country Club to design an ultramodern replacement for its original 1920s-era facility. What would have been a spectacular tour de force of seductive curves rendered in thin-shell concrete—clearly influenced by Cuban architect Max Borges’s Tropicana nightclub and Nautical Club buildings of 1952 and 1953, respectively—was never built when the revolution intervened.

Almost five decades have passed since Castro took the city, yet the Havana Riviera remains virtually unmolested in its original 1957 splendor. Indeed, due to benign neglect, the Riviera is undoubtedly the best-preserved example of midcentury Las Vegas-influenced Miami Modern resort architecture



## *Havana Riviera* Then and Now



### ABOVE AND BELOW:

Time travel to 1957 is still possible at the Riviera, the best-preserved midcentury Vegas/Miami Modern resort hotel in the world; exteriors, interiors, fixtures, furnishings, and custom artwork.



in the world. No other hotel of its vintage retains its original high-style exterior architectural elements—including mosaic tile veneer, molded concrete panels, double-deck cabanas, and a three-tiered diving platform—or its interior decor. The original Albert Parvin lobby furnishings (from credenzas to marble coffee tables to low-slung settees that have been merely reupholstered over the years), bronze sculptures and



wall art, pierced screens, terrazzo floors, light fixtures, decorative sconces, door pulls, directional signage, elevator doors, chandeliers, murals, place settings, flatware, dining chairs, and even L'aiglon's original carpeting continue to exist at the Havana Riviera.

Entering the hotel's revolving lobby door magically transports you—without needing to avert your eyes or pretending to ignore historically inappropriate intrusions—back to the height of pre-Castro

glamour as it once existed in the “Monte Carlo of the Caribbean.” The period atmosphere that Miami Beach's Eden Roc has attempted to restore and that the Fontainebleau and Americana have sadly lost—not to mention the callous destruction of Las Vegas's Rat Pack-era hotel-casinos—actually survives in its original splendor at the Havana Riviera. For how much longer? Who knows.

Of Meyer Lansky's commitment to Havana in 1958, his biographer Robert Lacey concluded, “Meyer had staked his personal bankroll solidly on the success of the Riviera—to the exclusion of almost everything else. His spectacular hotel-casino was to be the culmination—and ultimate vindication—of his career. Meyer Lansky might never be able to operate openly in Las Vegas, or anywhere else in America. But here, standing tall, and glinting magnificently over the straits of Florida, was his Xanadu, grand, profitable, and legal. . . . Meyer Lansky invested much more than his money in the Havana Riviera.

He invested himself.”

**A B O V E :**  
Astonishingly, even the L'aiglon's china and flatware are from 1957.

**R I G H T :**  
A contemporary view of the casual Al Fresco terrace cafe that looks out onto the pool and the sea.





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# *Havana* Before CASTRO

When Cuba Was a Tropical Playground

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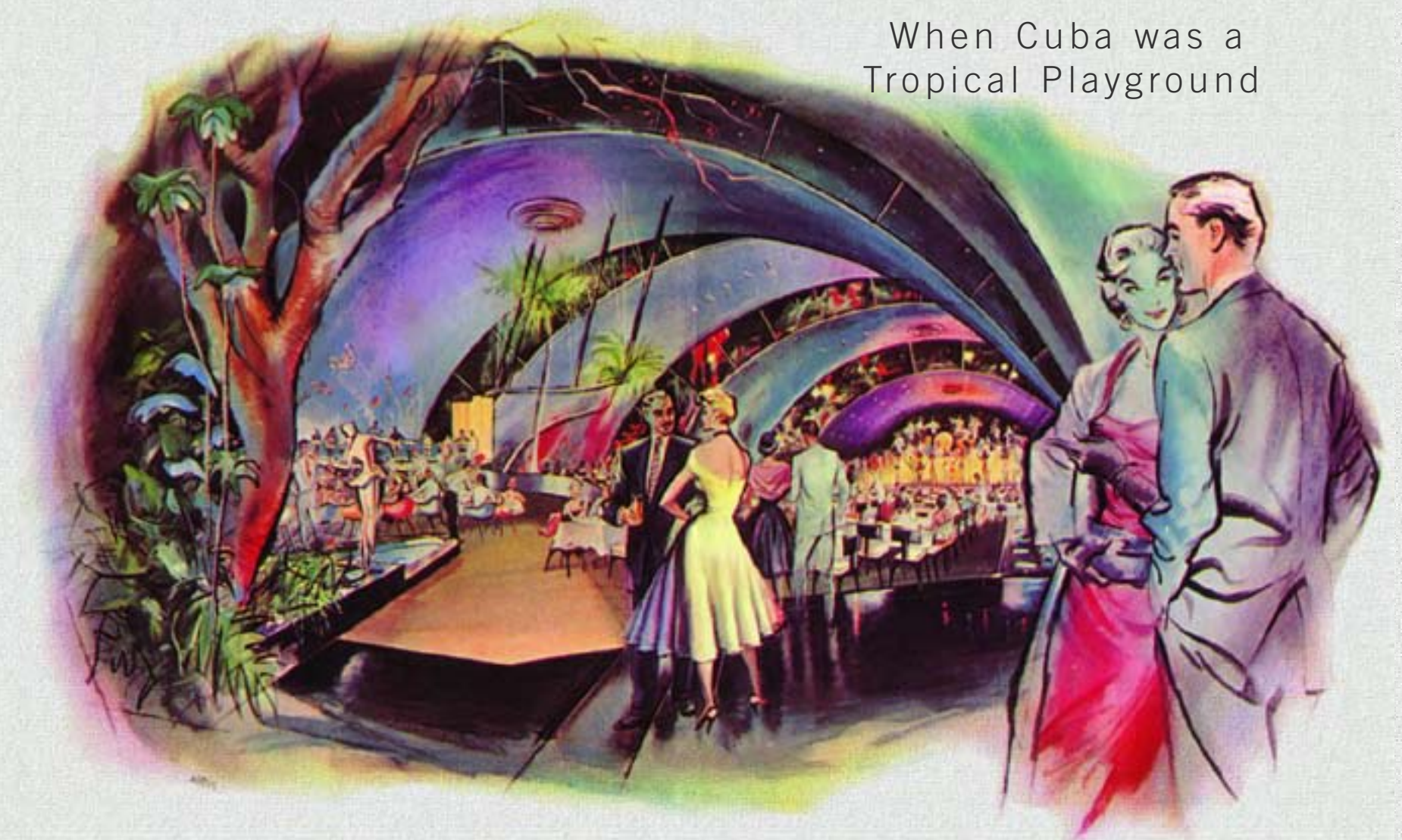
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