



# CORAL ROCK HOUSE SAVED AND REVIVED

The Coral Rock House at 900 Collins Avenue was built by Avery Smith in 1916. Smith ran a ferry service to the mainland at a time before there were any bridge connectors to Miami Beach. It is often said that Miami Beach tourism began with Avery Smith.

In the early 1930's, Edward and Margaret Roth took ownership. Roth practiced Internal Medicine at this site from 1933 until the 1960s. He actually opened his practice during a Dengue Fever outbreak. During his career, Roth was a past President of the Staff at Mt. Sinai Hospital and Chairman of the Department of Medicine. He was also one of the first Jewish physicians on Miami Beach and was once the physician for the Miami Beach Police Department.

Jump ahead to the summer of 2004. The historic home was one of the last remaining coral rock structures on Miami Beach and one of only two in South Beach. As chairman of the Miami Beach Historic Preservation Board, I received a call from a neighbor asking, "What's going on at the coral Rock house?" The caller saw Jeri Goodkin who had been recently terminated as Chief Building Inspector standing in front of the home. Then two large SUVs pull up. They were filled with the top brass of the building department and other high ranking city officials. They each kiss Ms. Goodkin on the cheek, and all entered the rock house.

I showed up on the patio, just as Goodkin exited the home, and without so much as a hello, she stated, "Mitch, this building is coming

down in thirty days and there's nothing you can do about it." I decided to accept her challenge.

A suddenly posted Unsafe Structures Board hearing notice appeared on the door which meant that demolition was imminent.

I asked renowned structural engineer Herb Gopman to analyze and evaluate if whether he felt the structure could be saved and restored. He appeared before the Historic Preservation Board and refuted the engineers hired by the now infamous property owner, Michael Stern, and the city's building department.

As Chairman, I made the status of the Coral Rock House a regular agenda item. I often questioned whether the Building Department had a different motive than the public interest. I requested Mayor Dermer take this matter up as an emergency item. The commission by a 5/7th vote decided to allocate funding for the structural analysis to determine if restoration was possible. One dissenting commissioner stated, "This is like beating a dead

horse." Local preservation organization Dade Heritage Trust stepped up to cover those costs and avoid the internal politics involved in securing an independent review.

Structural Engineer Doug Wood concurred with Herb Gopman that the house could be preserved and restored.

Owner Stern and those he influenced at the city continued their push for demolition and I continued to resist. In August 2007, Stern drove a bulldozer through the rear and demolished the inside. The demolition was televised and caused a public uproar.

I hired activist/attorney Kent Harrison Robbins and asked Mangos Tropical Café and MDPL to join me and support the fight to stop demolition. The preservation community held a demonstration at the property.

The H.P.B. under my tenure always voted to seek preservation of the structure. When my term ended, a newly comprised board, held otherwise. They said if it can't be restored, they can demolish and reconstruct it. MDPL, Mangos Tropical Cafe, and I appealed that decision.

With mounting pressure on Stern, a settlement agreement was reached. He shored and reinforced the remaining exterior walls of the structure thereby removing the threat of demolition. Weeks later, in February 2008, two Miami Beach Building Department officials were charged and arrested for taking payments in excess of \$100,000.00 from Stern in his effort to demolish the coral rock house. They plead guilty and were sentenced to prison.

The real estate market collapsed and the house of cards Stern had created came crashing down. The property was tied up in litigation for many years. Finally in 2011, the first mortgage holder took possession of the property and commissioned late preservation architect Les Beilinson to do a highly contextual design. Shortly thereafter, Michael Stern was arrested for fraud in another matter and has been sentenced to several years in Federal Prison. The



The Coral Rock House, today.

investigation of his nefarious activities in South Beach remains under Federal investigation.

Today we have what I consider one of Les Beilinson's best works and Michael Stern still sits in jail.

*This article was written by Mitch Novick, owner of the Sherbrooke Hotel and a MDPL Board member. He spearheaded the effort to preserve the Coral Rock House and reviews the timeline of events that has led to its revival. Mr. Novick currently serves as Chairman of the Miami-Dade County Historic Preservation Board.*



Photo courtesy of Mitch Novick

The Coral Rock House, circa 1930s.



Photos by Amanda Bush