

The New York Times

October 9, 2005

Eden Rocks

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A Miami Beach native is a freak of culture, a mutant strain of generativity that has somehow managed to persist and even thrive in a place where human endurance is typically measured in weekends. Two of these charmed [Miami](#) mutants - a native son and daughter - have spliced their genes together and come up with a book. Mitchell Wolfson Jr. (known as Micky) is the son, Michele Oka Doner the daughter, and the splice is called "Miami Beach: Blueprint of an Eden," published this month by Feierabend Unique Books. What will they try breeding next? Flamingos and towel boys?

Perhaps you did not realize that Miami Beach is a city. It has a city hall and everything. Michele and Micky - it would be unfriendly to refer to the authors of so personal an album by anything other than their first names - are each the child of a former Miami Beach mayor (Mitchell Wolfson in 1943, and Kenneth Oka from 1957 to 1959, and again from 1961 to 1963). They've got Coppertone in their blood and a long, leisured lineage of vivid Caribbean skies.

The two have also made substantial contributions in their own right. Micky is the founder of the Wolfsonian, one of America's most remarkable museums. Located in a renovated storage building on Miami Beach's Washington Avenue, the Wolfsonian is largely dedicated to the dark art of political propaganda. There exists no institution similarly equipped to teach us about the ritual washing of brains. Michele is an artist who deploys plant forms in sculptural constructions of astonishing delicacy and strength. She also makes art you can walk on. "A Walk on the Beach," a 22,000-square-foot work created in 1995, adorns the floor of Miami International Airport. They love their city, not as an escape from somewhere else, but as home.

"Blueprint of an Eden" presents history as scrapbook, a social chronicle by collage. In this volume, recipes, sheet music, snapshots, newspaper clippings and personal correspondence are more telling than the book's written narrative. The visual jumble is well suited to a city evidently concocted from the gleanings of beachcomers. They've come in waves, the makers of this culturally fluid strand - farmers, land speculators, show-biz impresarios, Jews, Cubans, old folks, gays, European fashionistas. Each swell of the communal tide has laid down its own layer of signs, code of etiquette, architecture, cooking, fashion and popular pastimes. The layers may be thin, but like coral they have built up to form pieces

of a great American city, perhaps the only one whose fortunes can still be charted on a rising curve.

Miami Beach is no longer a southern city of North America but a northern city of the Latin South. That helps to account for the rise. But the city's present allure is also a consequence of its relationship to the changing world around it. The ephemerality of its population, the allegiance to amusement, the fundamentalist reverence for all matters of style and image: these qualities no longer suffice to set Miami Beach apart from the rest of the [United States](#). They are existential earmarks, rather, of the national psyche. In this altered state of mind, the Eden Roc becomes equivalent to Plymouth Rock: the cornerstone of an identity that has become a new social norm.

Leafing through the book, then, is like sifting through the results of an archaeological dig of contemporary imagination. Here are the fabled mink stoles, worn in the pastel salons of air-conditioned hotels. Here the ladies of the Miami Beach Garden Club pose with shovels as the ground is ceremoniously broken for their new garden center. Orchids line up for a snapshot before their transformation into last night's wilted corsages. An entire chapter is devoted to the design of the Carib, a tropical-modern movie palace that was built by Micky's father in 1950. And here are tons of ornamental ironwork, decorations stripped from Spanish-style buildings and later melted down and recast to make munitions for World War II.

A chapter on wartime Miami Beach reminds us that Micky is the founder of a periodical called *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts*. The title alone won my heart when I saw my first copy many years ago. To slam ornament together with mass psychology was such a superior act of Surrealist engineering that it changed the way I've looked at design ever since. The book gives me a new slant on alligator belts.

What do all the keepsakes add up to? Simply this: Miami Beach is a great city of audiences, perhaps the greatest metropolis to arise, like Tinkerbell, on the strength of applause. Hollywood may be the greatest producer of spectacles, but Miami Beach has no equal as a generator of spectators. Electing an owner of movie theaters to city hall reflected a native logic. Mayor Wolfson practiced the art of gathering people together in space for the pursuit of laughter and suspense. He was an industrialist of the ephemeral occasions from which Miami Beach was built.

"Smile for the camera." That's the chief skill required for those who'd like to follow this colorful blueprint. Beauty queens, movie stars, heads of state and lesser dignitaries, nightclub habituées, odd recipients of keys to the city (I cherish mine as another person might esteem the key to an exotic roadster). The overall tone is set not by the well-known faces, however, but by the unfamiliar grins of the nameless, the expressions of those who will be remembered as the living embodiment of good cheer. As in [Japan](#), the local genius expresses itself

in presentation, but it is the audience that is being presented, not a rare object, an awesome view or an artful arrangement of food or flowers. It is as members of the audience that these individuals are able to see themselves as a community, rather than the scattered fragments of an atomized society. I'll spray my copy lavishly with orange blossom, kiss my key and dive in.

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