



# MOMENTUM

International residents and businesses alike are helping mold the Magic City's fashion and design scenes.

**BY JENNIFER LESLIE KRAMER**

WHETHER YOU'RE ONE OF THE FEW AND FAR BETWEEN Miami natives or have recently relocated to our sunny shores, it's impossible to miss the energy pulsing beneath the city streets and carrying it forward at warp speed ahead. From the influence of Art Basel and the myriad shoulder festivals that have sprung up around it to the booming businesses found along the Downtown corridor and its environs, most noticeably in the art, design, fashion and architecture worlds, Miami is growing by leaps and bounds, and much of it is thanks to the international influx of residents—both old and new—that call the Magic City home.

Specifically, the fashion and design scenes are two fields that have experienced a large majority of this global growth. Interior designers, furniture designers, fashion designers and architects have figured out that Miami is the place to be, and not only did many of them begin their business endeavors here, but it also happens to be where they've built their lives. Their commitment to the city and innate understanding of what makes it tick help them better pursue a varied local clientele, and perhaps more importantly, make Miami one of the most respected global business centers in the world.

## MIAMI: FASHION RUNWAY TO THE WORLD

Long before there was Miami Fashion Week and Swim Week, there were *Miami Vice*. Say what you will about the Don Johnson vehicle that made every girl aged 20 to 40 across the country swoon, but it directed all eyes to Miami, not to mention the pastel suits worn by Crockett and Tubbs. The 1984 premiere of the show coincided with the time that the Miami fashion scene was entering the national consciousness. According to Beth Sobol, founder of Miami Fashion Week and Beth Sobol Enterprises, "The 1980s is when Miami's fashion industry began to surface and become part of the international scene through the many photographers and production crews that came here for catalog and fashion shoots, commercials, etc., but it wasn't until the 1990s that the actual designers began coming to Miami as well."



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: The Indian Creek home designed by Rene Gonzalez set a record for the most expensive residential sale ever in Miami-Dade County when it sold for \$47 million in 2012; Beth Sobol, founder of Miami Fashion Week, helped bring Miami to the forefront of the fashion world with Miami Fashion Week; Rene Gonzalez is currently working on Glass, a super-luxe residential project in South Beach (left).







In fact, many of the designers here are actually homegrown talent, and after emigrating from countries like Peru, Cuba and other various South, Central and Latin American countries, attended Miami International University of Art & Design, now part of The Art Institutes, to earn degrees in Fashion Design, Fashion Merchandising and Accessory Design. Charlene Parsons, the university's fashion director for more than 40 years, reports there are currently about 640 students studying fashion under 11 full-time and 23 part-time instructors, many of whom are directly involved in the industry. Parsons, like Sobol, has witnessed Miami's role in the fashion world change over time. "I remember back when there was a booming children's wear industry here. Once that ended, it was quiet for a while, and now swimwear is huge," she says. "Originally, the scene wasn't as international as it is now, but we've always had a very diverse student body, mostly from South America and the islands, but we've also got some European and Middle Eastern students, many from Saudi Arabia."

Alums of the program read like a who's who of the Miami fashion world—and beyond—and include names like Julian Chang, Rene Ruiz, Adriana Castro, Danny Santiago, Gustavo Cadile and Victoria Lopez Castro. Ruiz, a Cuban-born designer who arrived in Miami in the late 70s, has enjoyed witnessing the city come of age. "At that time, there was a lot of manufacturing here—thousands of factories in Hialeah that did all sorts of beading and fabrication by hand—but they've all closed and been driven out of business," he says. "Now, things are more global and outsourced, which is why I'm proud to say that about two years ago we opened our own factory in Hialeah. Not only are there women there that have been working with me for 17 years, but there is a lot of new, young talent interested in learning the trade."

After graduating from Miami International University and interning in Europe, Ruiz returned home to open his business in a place that "always seemed to fit just right." Acknowledging that the city has been very generous to him, he is preparing to relocate his flagship store to Merrick Park and has his eyes on another spot in Boca Raton. "Ten years ago, I was just another Latin designer from Miami, but now, as the city really comes into its own, people stop and take note," he says. "It's someplace that everyone wants to be and attracts talent from all over the world. I'm proud to say I became who I am in this city. It's absolutely formed me and my point of view."

Julian Chang, a Peruvian import who grew up accompanying his mother to her tailoring appointments—"Everything was custom then and fit her exquisitely," he recalls—also opened up shop in Miami and echoes Ruiz's statement. "When I first began showing my collection, people didn't expect much," he says. "They thought of Miami for its tourism and beaches. But now it's done a complete 180, I think in large part due to Art Basel, which has really put us on the international art and design scene. Now there's excitement when they hear I'm from Miami. They have high expectations. The word is out that we have a great fashion scene and everyone wants a piece."

### HOME AND DESIGN: GLOBAL TRENDS

Beyond fashion, the international architecture and design scenes are also booming. A global touch has been present in the Magic City for sometime now, with showrooms from across the country opening their doors years ago in Coral Gables and most recently in the Design District. Think of a country and it's sure to be represented with Brazilian, Spanish, Italian, French, Scandinavian, German and Russian—just a sampling—companies popping up left and right.

One of the most well-known international success stories is that



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Rene Ruiz takes the stage at one of his shows; Julian Chang is known for his exquisite tailoring; Charlene Parsons has been leading the fashion department at Miami International University of Art & Design for more than 40 years; students learn all aspects of the craft in hands-on classes at the University; designs by Victoria Lopez Castro are flirt, feminine and decidedly modern; Gustavo Cadile's collection has been featured in *Women's Wear Daily*.







LEFT: Roche Bobois recently opened a showroom in Aventura, the company's third in Florida; the others are in Coral Gables and Palm Beach.. BELOW: Paolo Bacchi has found success stateside with his Brazilian home décor and design company, Artefacto.



**“PEOPLE IN MIAMI DON’T JUST ACCEPT DIVERSITY, THEY DEMAND IT. THEY WANT TO SEE INTERNATIONAL TALENT IN DESIGN AND ART BECAUSE IT’S PART OF THE CITY’S IDENTITY AS A CULTURAL MELTING POT.”**

— Paulo Bacchi, CEO of Artefacto

of Paulo Bacchi, CEO of Artefacto, the Brazilian home and design company with three stores in South Florida and another dozen in Brazil. “In 2002, I moved to the US and brought Artefacto to Coral Gables, which was the first location outside of Brazil,” says Bacchi. “Because of its synergy with Latin America, we felt the market would embrace our vision and approach.”

This synergy Bacchi speaks of, along with the flood of international residents, has directly influenced the tastes of the city. What was once a wash of pastel pastorals of seaside retreats and tropical foliage framed in painted rattan and bamboo has been replaced with sleek glass, modern shapes and fabrics, and a less-is-more vibe. Rene Gonzalez, a Cuban architect known for capturing the essence of a place in his designs, which include one of SoFi’s latest luxe residential buildings, Glass, along with the Miami Beach boutique Alchemist (which just happens to be set in the fifth floor of the award-winning concrete parking garage at 1111 Lincoln Rd., designed by Pritzker Prize-winning Swiss firm Herzog and DeMeuron who are also responsible for PAMM... spotting the trend here?), has noticed his clients have become more worldly. “They’re truly international—from every corner of the globe—and as a result, they’ve been exposed to sophisticated architecture and are requesting it. The truth is, Miami has always been an important residential market and developers have been looking for a means of differentiation. In order to do that, they reach out to architects from all over the world who in turn are interested in pursuing something here because of all the recent arts, culture and business developments. Now, our city is getting architecture with a capital ‘A.’”

Beyond a growing awareness and appreciation for the art of the structures themselves, the flood of big-name, world-class buildings by architects like Zaha Hadid, Rem Koolhaas and Piero Lissoni are directly impacting other local businesses. Raul

Gutierrez and Alex Xakoustis of Italkraft, the ultra-luxe custom kitchen, bath and closet designers, work with a number of international clients on a regular basis. “Because all of our products come from Italy, our company has been able to capitalize on the fact that this group has a more modern, European taste,” says Gutierrez. “We know history repeats itself and what we’re witnessing now with the Venezuelans, Brazilians and Colombians is very similar to what Miami experienced in the 60s when large groups of wealthy Cubans began arriving. We’re definitely in the right place at the right time.”

Bacchi, too, knows this firsthand, and it’s one of the reasons his company made its North American debut in Coral Gables. “People in Miami don’t just accept diversity, they demand it,” he asserts. “They want to see international talent in design and art because it’s part of the city’s identity as a cultural melting pot and a gateway to the world, especially Latin America. The fact that Maison & Object Americas debuted in Miami speaks to that reputation. Plus, it introduces a higher degree of competition that forces creative professionals like designers and architects to be more innovative and in touch with the demands of a diverse market.”

Nowhere is this more evident than in the design field. Miami boasts showrooms from all over the globe, including the well-known French company Roche Bobois, which was one of the first European companies to arrive in South Florida in the early 80s. Julien Bigan, US communications director, has seen the city become a “diverse, cosmopolitan environment with many international residents who are investing in the real estate market. There’s so much happening here—the arts and culture, real estate and design, museums and restaurants—we call it ‘*l’art de vivre*,’ and it’s one of the missions our company. Miami is the city that is living and breathing it and showing it to the world.” ❗