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ALASTAIR GORDON'S SKYLINE

Vanishing point

Glass, a new Miami Beach condo designed by Rene Gonzalez at 120 Ocean Dr., celebrates the enigma of glass and seems to merge sky and sea.



Rene Gonzalez-designed
condo celebrates
enigma of glass

Miami Beach building
merges sea and sky



MICHAEL STAVARI

BY ALASTAIR GORDON
alastairgordonwalltowall.com

"It's a building that tends to disappear," said architect Rene Gonzalez, leaning over the seventh-floor balcony of 120 Ocean Drive, an 18-story residential tower that recently came to completion in South Beach. This is not just another building wrapped in glass, but rather a nuanced celebration and reappraisal of a material and its inherent virtues of transparency, reflectivity and enigma.

Indeed, the official name of the building is "GLASS." It evokes the *Glasarchitektur* of Bruno Taut and the Crystal Chain of German architects in the early 20th century, in which the magical qualities of the material were treated with a cult-like obsession. Taut and his circle envisioned an all-glass architecture that dematerialized itself through a kind of alchemical process. Buildings would become aerial hovering elements that, in turn, could liberate humanity from earth-bound gravity and all the tragic weight of the past. "Caryatids can be seen summoning hope," wrote Herman Finsterlin, poet-mystic of the Crystal Chain. "Clouds carry away their burdens."

This is more or less the ideal for a waterfront architecture in Miami Beach in which the illusion of preternatural suspension — a limitless merging of sea and sky — is the desired effect and has been for

developers and architects since the 1920s. (Tourists and part-time residents really don't want to know about sea-level rise or social unrest.)

Approaching it from the north, 120 Ocean Drive casts a pagoda-like silhouette, rising as a distinctly cool presence among a jumble of architectural styles, mostly older Deco and post-modern buildings with eclectic roof lines, jutting balconies, pastel-colored slabs. In contrast, the 18 stories of 120 Ocean Drive convey a quality of "least resistance" to both the street and surrounding buildings as they reflect the gray-blue hues of sky and an occasional passing cloud.

David Martin, president and COO of the Terra Group, which developed Glass, is standing on the verge of the balcony, smiling like a gleeful child with a sparkling new toy. Martin has been making a bid to be Miami's leading curator-developer with a string of projects by brand-name architects like Rem Koolhaas, who designed Terra's Park Grove towers in Coconut Grove; Bjarke Ingels of BIG, who designed Terra's twisting glass towers for the Grove at Grand Bay; and Renzo Piano, the Italian architect who recently completed plans for Eighty Seven Park on Miami Beach. Considering such an all-star lineup, it's encouraging to see a developer like Martin reach out to a locally based but accomplished firm such as Rene Gonzalez.

The building is set back from the street in deference to the historic context of the neighborhood. The Century Hotel, a Deco gem from 1939 designed by Henry Hohauser, lies just to the north of 120 Ocean Drive. The 1915 Brown's Hotel, considered the first lodging in Miami Beach, lies to the south.

While sheer and crystalline, the exterior surface of Glass is surprisingly active, even agitated in places. Glass panels are suspended from minimal metal brackets and work something like translucent veils that alternate with vertical aluminum louvers designed to conceal the garage level. Indeed, some of the building's finest moments are the painstakingly rendered details of the outer membrane and how it attaches itself to the structural core.

Glass panels have been etched or "fritted" with as many as 60 variations of vertical patterning that resemble streaks of rain. While this pattern is quite dense near the bottom, it opens up as the building ascends, further accentuating the dissipation of mass and the sense of a vanishing perspective.

Horizontal lines on the lower floors were calculated to match the roof lines of adjacent buildings and help anchor the tower to its site, but the mass of the building is broken up with an asymmetrical treatment and a kind of lateral shifting. Eight of the floors have been pulled to the south, like sliding drawers, and propped on slender columns. This releases the sense of load pressing down on the lower levels and keeps the whole structure in a state of perpetual reverie, floating and dreamlike on its narrow plinth. The lobby area is clad in a coquina limestone that contains fragments of shell and coral, interspersed with rectangles of smooth blue Macauba quartzite from Brazil. The sub-aqueous theme of the lobby is carried throughout the rest of the interior, something like a wave receding. Mirrored walls on every entry level reflect views of the ocean, while video installations in the ceilings show underwater imagery.

The average unit size is approximately 3,500 square feet; 10 of the units command an entire floor. Each apartment enjoys a sweeping, open-floor plan,

360-degree views and wrap-around balconies. Interior walls have recessed baseboards so that the wall planes hover, and floors are made from maple, oak or walnut. Kitchen counters and cabinetry are made from white Calacatta marble imported from Italy with pale gray veining. Prices range from \$5 million to \$11 million.

While Glass, the build-

ing, may do little to alleviate Miami's housing shortage, it offers an alternative to the recent crop of beachfront high-rises that scream for attention with architectural gimmicks. Glass is subtle and restrained while holding its own in a neighborhood of historic structures. It is a building that, at times, seems hardly there, a building that changes

mood and character depending on the angle of light and the time of day.

My only complaint: the fussy sequence of a sculpted water feature at the main entry on Ocean Drive that seems to overstate the obvious. This may be nit-picking, as the overall effect of 120 Ocean Drive remains one of hovering disbelief, an artful mediation between sea and sky.

