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Four Seasons Hotel at The Surf Club
Richard Meier and Joseph Dirand
revive a Miami institution

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Four Seasons Hotel at The Surf Club

SURFSIDE

Richard Meier and Joseph Dirand join forces to reinvent Miami's legendary Surf Club for local developers Fort Partners.

Words: Guy Dittrich | Photography: Courtesy of Four Seasons Hotels & Resorts

The soft swells of the Atlantic Ocean break gently on the neatly groomed sand of North Miami Beach. Viewed from the water and over the seagrass-covered dunes is the hacienda-style, terracotta-tiled roof of The Surf Club, built in the 1920s. The Russell Pancoast-designed building appears to be in front of three shimmering 12-storey towers that reflect the Miami sky; the reality is that the middle tower is actually cantilevered over The Surf Club in an architectural feat by Pulitzer Prize-winning architect Richard Meier. This combination is now the Four Seasons Hotel at The Surf Club in Surfside, a tiny municipality just south of Bal Harbour.

Meier and Four Seasons are just two of a cast of talents masterminded by Nadim Ashi, CEO of Fort Partners, a Miami-based, privately-held real estate ownership, development and management company, who bought The Surf Club and a nine-acre plot of beachfront in 2012 for USD112 million. Others in this ambitious collective include interior designers Joseph Dirand and Martin Brudnizki. Renowned chef Thomas Keller will manage the forthcoming Surf Club Restaurant, while La Sirenuse Restaurant & Champagne Bar is run by the Sersale family, for whom this is their first permanent venue outside the Amalfi Coast. Paris-based Le Studio Be-Poles took care of the



Above & Opposite: Public spaces occupy the original Surf Club, designed in the 1920s by Russell Pancoast

branding, incorporating the original Surf Club wave-scene logo, and landscaping was completed by relative newcomer, Fernando Wong. “We have selected the best of what everyone can do and we have pushed them to give us their best,” confirms Ashi.

The Surf Club itself was the realisation of tyre magnate Harvey Firestone as a place to celebrate the progression of the Roaring Twenties, a new era of democratised wealth. Miami today is all about show but even back then it was a place to be seen. The likes of Noel Coward, Elizabeth Taylor and Frank Sinatra regularly made The Surf Club’s guest list. With fashion shows and lavish galas, it developed quite a reputation, evidenced by the period photos lining the so-called ‘peacock alley’ opposite the club’s former ballroom. For a property with such a rich heritage, Four Seasons are without doubt the most appropriate choice of operator.

“The cantilever of the hotel tower was driven by our concern to interfere as little as possible with the historic building,” explains Bernhard Karpf, Design Partner at Richard Meier & Partners Architects. “The structural element for the hotel building above the historic Surf Club is a concrete core containing elevators and escape stairs in the former open courtyard. This core supports a base-slab floating above the roof of the building, creating a new ground plane from which the hotel floors are supported in a more standard configuration,” he adds.

This was achieved by drilling deep pile foundations into the sandbank to support the structure. Connecting all three towers is a basement technical services and parking area, all designed as an open structure meaning that storm flooding, a frequent occurrence in Florida, can pass through without causing any structural damage to the buildings above.

At 77-keys, the hotel is small by Four Seasons standards, which makes the provision of the amenities offered remarkable. Three pools (a fourth is for residents only), five F&B venues, a well-equipped children’s play area, and a spa. Of course, the rates reflect this. In its first month, the hotel operated with occupancy above 50% and an average daily rate of over USD850 according to General Manager Reed Kandalraft.

Paris-based Joseph Dirand was appointed by Fort Partners to design the guestroom interiors, the public spaces, spa and La Sirenuse Restaurant & Champagne Bar, set within the vast pitched-roof volumes of former ballrooms. Dirand explains that he was attracted by the opportunity to “create a dialogue between the contemporary and heritage” aspects of the project, a contrast between the glamour of The Surf Club and the minimal, abstract architecture of Meier. “The Surf Club is The Surf Club, the historical part, but the bedrooms have to be The Surf Club as well,” he notes.

What connects these spaces is the DNA of Miami. “Sources of





Above: Guestrooms features an L-shaped day bed that flows into a desk, topped with a brass lamp by Wästberg and fronted by a lava stone swivel table

inspiration include the beach – the guestroom colours relating to the colours beyond the windows – the sand, the greens and blues of the sea and sky, and the palm trees,” continues Dirand, who was also influenced by the golden era of the 1930s. “I translated decorative elements from the thirties into something modernist,” he adds.

Dirand’s work is typified by a minimalist aesthetic, with largely empty volumes that allow for contrast. In guestrooms, fluted wall panels feature alongside a delicately simple, cross-hatched diamond pattern on the ceiling, offering changing shadows as light streams in through the full-height ocean-view windows.

On a practical level, services in the guestrooms are bang up-to-date and finished to the highest standard. A fully automated 65m² space where all room controls (lighting, air conditioning, entertainment, curtains) are operated by a small tablet that works first time, every time. Clever programming also closes curtains when the room is unoccupied, reducing heat gain in this humid climate.

There is quality at every touchpoint. The lightness of the rattan wall panels at the entrance. The crisp white ultrafine Turkish bed linen. The sturdy slabs of green Connemara stone from Ireland in the mini-bar alcove. Furniute is also top-class, with pieces by Molteni, Walter Knoll and Tribu, along with bathroom fittings from Waterworks and Duravit.

The room layout contains little loose furniture and is dominated

by a fixed, stone chaise longue fronting the windows. This piece is becoming something of standard item for Four Seasons and comprises an L-shaped day bed that flows into a desk, topped with a brass W102 lamp by Wästberg and fronted by a lava stone table that swivels effortlessly on a single leg. The piece hits the zeitgeist of today’s traveller, allowing for multiple uses and is carefully designed for each. Dirand’s biggest challenge was the floor connection for the table; its precise position had to be incorporated into the concrete structure during construction.

The rest of the hotel shows a similar level of detail, from the geometric forms of the rhomboid terracotta floor tiles in the lobby, to the brass hexagonal pendant lamps in public areas.

The hotel’s room stock includes five Cabana Rooms that gently curve in front of the pristine gardens. White wood panelling, window shutters and terrazzo flooring give a more leisurely feel, enhanced by a blue and green two-tone wall finish. The Cabana Rooms directly access their own teak balconies, and beneath are smaller day cabanas, two of which have been appropriated as couple’s treatment rooms by the spa that occupies the North Tower. The small facility packs a calming punch with a transitioning tea gallery, top-of-the-range treatment tables by Gharieni, and a beautiful relaxation area where Dirand has added a discreet shelf for today’s ubiquitous accessory, the smartphone.



Left: The spa is a calming space with a transitioning tea gallery, top-of-the-range treatment tables by Gharieni, and relaxation area with ocean views



The street entrance to the original Surf Club is discreet, right alongside Collins Avenue, but only suitable for a single vehicle. Currently this is being used as the hotel entrance but this will change in due course to the North Tower, where there is more space. The old entrance will be repurposed to access the F&B components of the hotel. First of these is The Surf Club Restaurant for chef Thomas Keller that looks through arched windows to the club's former pool deck. Today this courtyard is studded with Banyan and other trees. The interiors will be by Martin Brudnizki Design Studio and will include an open kitchen.

Meier's striking but minimal architecture that left the original historic structure of The Surf Club largely untouched has been graciously integrated by Dirand with careful consideration. Testament to the resources of developer Fort Partners, Ashi comments: "Our business model is not about real estate, it's about experiences."

EXPRESS CHECK-OUT: 77 guestrooms | 1 restaurant | 1 bar | Boardroom | 3 swimming pools, spa, fitness centre | www.fourseasons.com
Owner / Developer: Fort Partners | **Operator:** Four Seasons Hotels & Resorts | **Architecture:** Russell Pancoast (original); Richard Meier & Partners Architects
Interior Design: Joseph Dirand | **Brand Identity:** Le Studio Be-Poles | **Landscaping:** Fernando Wong | **Construction:** Coastal Construction