

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. Distribution and use of this material are governed by our Subscriber Agreement and by copyright law. For non-personal use or to order multiple copies, please contact Dow Jones Reprints at 1-800-843-0008 or visit [www.djreprints.com](http://www.djreprints.com).

<https://www.wsj.com/real-estate/miami-beachs-historic-art-deco-district-collides-with-push-for-more-housing-a1e88a6f>

## REAL ESTATE

# Miami Beach's Historic Art Deco District Collides With Push for More Housing

Florida law revisions could enable developers to demolish art deco buildings in favor of high-rise towers

By [Deborah Acosta](#) [Follow](#)

May 19, 2025 5:30 am ET

### Key Points

What's This? ⓘ

- Florida's housing crisis clashes with Miami Beach's art deco history.
- Revisions to the state's Live Local Act could allow the demolition of historic buildings.
- Developers say changes are needed to ease traffic and create affordable housing.

MIAMI BEACH, Fla.—Florida's effort to tackle its affordable-housing crisis is crashing into this city's famous art deco history.

Proposed changes to a state law would allow developers to knock down hundreds of Miami Beach's iconic art deco buildings and replace them with rows of taller apartment buildings.

The city boasts the world's largest concentration of this early-20th-century architectural style, including the famous Raleigh Hotel and the Tides Hotel.

Now, a revised version of the 2023 housing law could lead to demolition of many of these low-rise buildings, a number of which have five stories or fewer. Towers rising as high as 50 stories could replace them and dominate South Beach, critics of the law's changes say.

"Our art deco architecture, it's our Leaning Tower of Pisa, our Eiffel Tower, our pyramids," said City Commissioner Kristen Rosen Gonzalez at a gathering of lawmakers on Miami Beach's Ocean Drive last week. The art deco neighborhood near the Atlantic Ocean generates more tourism revenue than any other part of the state but Disney World, she said.

Developers, however, say it is necessary to create more housing for the city's lower- and middle-income residents and to ease the city's chronic traffic congestion, particularly along urban corridors.

"I can tell you, generally, that traffic and affordability on Miami Beach is the worst it's ever been," said Russell Galbut, a real-estate developer who has eight proposed workforce-housing projects in Miami Beach. "You cannot save every single building that you want to save. Some of them are not salvageable."

The legislature approved these revisions earlier this year, and it now awaits the governor's signature.



Art deco buildings are seen along Ocean Drive in Miami Beach, Fla. PHOTO: REBECCA BLACKWELL/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Florida's severe lack of affordable housing reflects a population boom that exceeded most every other part of the U.S. since the beginning of the pandemic, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. The state in 2023 had the highest rate of cost-burdened renters in the country, or renters who spend more than 30% of their income on housing costs, according to the Joint Center for Housing Studies at Harvard. Fifty-nine percent of Florida's rental population were cost-burdened.

Florida lawmakers enacted the Live Local Act two years ago to address the housing shortage. It is one of the most powerful tools in the U.S., offering developers tax breaks and allowing them to bypass certain local-zoning rules if enough workforce housing is built. Middle-income renters who earn between 80% and 120% of an area's median income are eligible.

While developers have proposed hundreds of new projects under the act, [local communities are pushing back](#) and tying up a number of the projects in court. Many local politicians and residents

object to giving up control over their neighborhood's zoning rules, or don't want more density in their communities.

But the recent revisions to the Live Local Act threaten to stoke the biggest controversy yet by putting Miami Beach's architectural identity on the line.



The Raleigh Hotel complex is planned as a Rosewood Hotel & Residences and preserves the facades of the three original buildings. PHOTO: DEBORAH ACOSTA/WSJ



The pool at the historic Raleigh Hotel in Miami. PHOTO: GOTTSCHO-SCHLEISNER COLLECTION/LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Before the new changes, developers met with multiple boards and presented their cases for demolishing a historic structure at hearings. Now, those hearings have been eliminated from the process, and the municipality must administratively approve these demolitions.

Other historic Florida municipalities, including St. Augustine, the oldest continuously inhabited city of European origin in the U.S., are also concerned.

“Once a historic building is demolished, there’s no putting Humpty Dumpty back together again. It’s gone,” said Isabelle Lopez, the city attorney of St. Augustine.

One recent weekday on Miami Beach, tourists aimed their cameras at the art deco architecture on Ocean Drive that lines the famed boulevard.

“This is the biggest art deco district in the world,” said a guide, gesturing at the pastel-colored hotels built nearly a century ago. Patrons ate lunch below matching umbrellas, and tourists rode past in bicycles while turning their heads to admire the geometric structures.

Art deco got its start a century ago at the World Fair in Paris and quickly became popular in the U.S. After a major hurricane devastated Miami Beach in 1926, the city rebuilt by embracing the art deco style and now has the world’s largest concentration of this architecture.

Kobi Karp, an architect known for renovating Miami’s historic buildings while adding modern towers, believes there is room for change while still preserving the area’s history. Karp oversaw the renovation of the Four Seasons Hotel at Miami Beach’s Surf Club, adding tall glass towers while preserving the main clubhouse built in the 1930s.

He also is working on the historic Raleigh Hotel complex in the center of South Beach, which is planned as a Rosewood Hotel & Residences and preserves the facades of the three original buildings.

“The solutions we’ve been using in the historic district in Miami Beach have continuously proven themselves as successful, architecturally and economically,” said Karp. “Maybe freedom will create more creativity.”





Ocean Drive in Miami Beach, Fla. PHOTO: GIORGIO VIERA/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Write to Deborah Acosta at [deborah.acosta@wsj.com](mailto:deborah.acosta@wsj.com)