

HOME + DESIGN

# DEPARTURES

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Clockwise from left:  
A rendering of Glass  
by Rene Gonzalez; a  
rendering of Renzo  
Piano's Eighty Seven  
Park; developer David  
Martin; a rendering of  
Park Grove by Shohei  
Shigematsu of Rem  
Koolhaas's OMA



# THE KING OF MIAMI

David Martin, a boundary-pushing, urbanism-loving son of Cuban immigrants, is changing American architecture for the better.  
By Rima Suqi



# DAVID MARTIN IS TAKING ME ON A TOUR OF MIAMI. IN THE HOUR OR SO WE'VE BEEN IN HIS

chauffeured black SUV, the 39-year-old, who's been called everything from the city's hottest developer to one of the most enlightened (more on that later), has been talking about the internationally renowned architects he's worked with—Renzo Piano, Bjarke Ingels, Rem Koolhaas—as well as local ones such as Rene Gonzalez, Chad Oppenheim, and Carlos and Jacqueline Touzet. In the future, he says, he'd like to do something with Jean Nouvel, Herzog & de Meuron, and Diller Scofidio + Renfro.

"Developers in Miami hire starchitects the way some people buy Vuitton bags," an industry insider said when asked about the city's seeming boom in soaring residential skyscrapers designed by boldfaced names that include Zaha Hadid, Richard Meier, Foster + Partners, and the aforementioned Piano, Ingels, Koolhaas, and Herzog & de Meuron. But when pressed specifically about Martin, the same source had only kind words. In fact, not one of the dozen or so people I interviewed for this story had anything negative to say, even off the record, about Martin, who founded Terra Group 16 years ago with his father, attorney Pedro Martin. This is astounding given that radically altering an area's look and feel is such a hot-button topic. And that's exactly what Martin, who says he doesn't want to be a traditional developer, is in the process of doing in several neighborhoods—most notably Coconut Grove, where he grew up, where his company is based, and where he's currently building his family's home. It's also the neighborhood that a *Miami Herald* poll of real estate professionals last year identified as both one of the most undervalued in the city and one of the top emerging markets to invest in now.

Martin's first big project there, the Grove at Grand Bay, debuted last year: two 20-story twisting glass towers. They were designed by Ingels, a 42-year-old Dane who, when tapped by Martin five years ago, was a relative unknown, and who is currently architecture's It Boy. He landed the commission for 2 World Trade Center in downtown Manhattan and recently completed Via 57 West, a residential building in Midtown that, when viewed from the Hudson River, looks like an urban pyramid. Ingels says Martin has "a local patriotism. He's not just

interested in flipping a few condos for profit. He's interested in selling condos and making money doing so, but he's more interested in elevating the neighborhood for the long term, looking at the big picture. He is in it for the long haul."

"Every once in a while we get an environmentally enlightened developer," says Walter Meyer, of Local Office Landscape Architecture (LOLA), "or someone who is interested in both profit and long-term thinking about the planet and culture."

This wasn't always the case. Martin, a father of two who has both an MBA and a law degree but considers development his true calling, admits to having had a "big philosophical shift" after the Great Recession, and in conversation will refer to projects as being either "pre" or "post" 2008. The "pre" outlook, according to his father, was "a desire to max out all the properties," or build what in real estate parlance are "high-density" buildings. The "post" is a more thoughtful approach to building, what Martin calls "intelligent luxury, smart development." In an interview with *Crain's Miami* last year, he stressed that "it's important to respect the context of the community, and overloading the infrastructure with density and intensity is not always the best thing for the community or the developer." His formula seems simple: Find property in areas with high barriers to entry and create distinguished, often high-end products that will benefit both the buyer and the surrounding community. "Social entrepreneurship is bleeding into my industry. In essence, the more we give, the more the community is going to accept what we do," Martin explains as we walk around what will be Eighty Seven Park. The project, Piano's first residential building in the United States, sits on the ocean and borders North Shore Open Space Park. Martin has contributed more than \$10 million toward refurbishing the park through Eighty Seven Park LLC, an entity he manages and helms that controls the property.

Eighty Seven Park is rising on the site of what was the Biltmore Terrace Hotel, built in 1951 and designed by Morris Lapidus. Terra Group intended to restore the building but, after being granted a zoning change, demolished it, much to the anger of local residents. "I built a scale model of the existing building and the new building," Martin says, "and it was so claustrophobic, it did not work."

"I think he wants to do the right thing," says Beth Dunlop, a former architecture critic for the *Miami Herald* and current editor of *Modern Magazine*. "He intellectualizes development way more than anybody else does. He is kind of looking at the architecture as large-scale art."

PREVIOUS SPREAD, FROM LEFT: KEN HAYDEN/COURTESY TERRA; COURTESY TERRA (2); STEPHAN GOETTLE/LOHER

Legally, Martin could have put more than 200 units in Eighty Seven Park, which is scheduled to be completed next year. Instead, there are 66—a “villas in the sky” concept that he is applying to his highest-profile projects. (By contrast, the Meier-designed Surf Club, three blocks away, has 500 residences.)

Glass, Martin’s 18-story, Gonzalez-designed building in the South of Fifth neighborhood, has just ten full-floor units. The Grove at Grand Bay has 98 units, despite being zoned for 440. Park Grove, a trio of curvaceous glass structures designed by Shohei Shigematsu, Koolhaas’s New York-based partner at the firm OMA, is zoned for 800 condos. It will debut with 270 this year.

“Developers like to talk about their vision, and you look at the buildings they produce and scratch your head. Their vision might be something like which vendor they hire to run the spa. That’s not really a vision,” says Terence Riley, an architect and former director of the Pérez Art Museum Miami, who Martin hired to produce and oversee the international architectural competition for Park Grove, culminating in an exhibition of the top four designs at Design Miami. “David is a typical developer in the sense that every developer tries to distinguish their work from everyone else’s. The thing is, David doesn’t rely on glossy ads and charming building names and coming up with the latest amenity. He actually believes distinction can exist on a much bigger level.” Martin, Riley adds, “has an urbanist gene that a lot of developers don’t.”

Martin is a member of Miami’s Sea Level Rise Task Force and brought in Meyer, of LOLA, to help formulate the business community’s response to climate change to complement the city’s policy response. Or, as Meyer—who, like Martin, grew up in Coconut Grove and did his undergrad at the University of Florida—puts it, “How do we hack capitalism to make the city safer?”

“Martin’s special,” Meyer says, “because he works at the district scale. He’s doing multiple city blocks. He can solve the development’s problems and the neighborhood’s problems.” He further insists that Martin “is one of the most egoless developers I’ve met.

David is not just aggregating power.”

“When I first visited his office, he introduced me to a historian,” Shigematsu recalls. That historian, Paul George of Miami Dade College, “briefed me on the whole history and how important Coconut Grove is within the Miami community. It really helped me to



Martin (right) discusses Piano’s Eighty Seven Park project with architect Bjarke Ingels, who designed Martin’s Grove at Grand Bay, below.



develop the scheme. Immediately I felt, Oh, this guy is quite profound and serious.”

Martin himself does not have the demeanor of a professor. While he is clearly smart, curious, and serious about what he does, and is also fluent in Spanish (his parents are Cuban immigrants), he is prone to calling people “dude” and “bro.” His go-to responses are “supercool” and “100 percent.” He affectionately

refers to Ingels and Shigematsu as “the Rembots,” because Ingels did a two-year stint at OMA. He’s the first to admit that he doesn’t know everything and that he asks a lot of people for their opinions.

He will cite urbanist Jane Jacobs one moment and then move on to psychographics before pulling out his phone to show a video created by architect Marcio Kogan for the Venice Biennale. He acknowledges that being the son of Pedro Martin, who represents developers and financial institutions, opened doors for him. He adds that his father is “the kindest, the most respected” person he knows—evidenced not only in his 25 years of law work but also in the way he

cares for David’s mother, who has had multiple sclerosis since her 20s.

David and his wife, Christy, are major philanthropists, though he seems embarrassed talking about it. He does,

however, love to talk about Miami and the influx of people from New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago who now call the city home, and is proud that it has changed in people’s perceptions from “a drink tank to a think tank and a culture tank.”

And he’s done well off the city: He has more than 100 employees, more than 20 current projects, and more than \$4 billion developed since the firm began. But the achievement that pleases him the most is Miami’s Freedom Tower, a National Historic Landmark that was originally the headquarters of the *Miami Daily News* and today is known as the Ellis Island of the South because it functioned as the Cuban Assistance Center from 1964 to 1972, processing more than half a million immigrants. The Martins bought the building in 2005 and donated it to

Miami Dade College, where it now houses a museum. Martin calls it “one of the biggest emotional, honorable things that we’ve done.”

The idea of legacy seems to inform his every decision. “I want my kids, when they walk around, to be proud that their dad had a positive impact on their community,” he says. “I don’t want to be that traditional developer. I want to be the good guy.” ♦