

# ARCHITECTURAL RECORD

Adaptive Reuse

2/1996

SEVEN DOLLARS







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# Propaganda Pieces

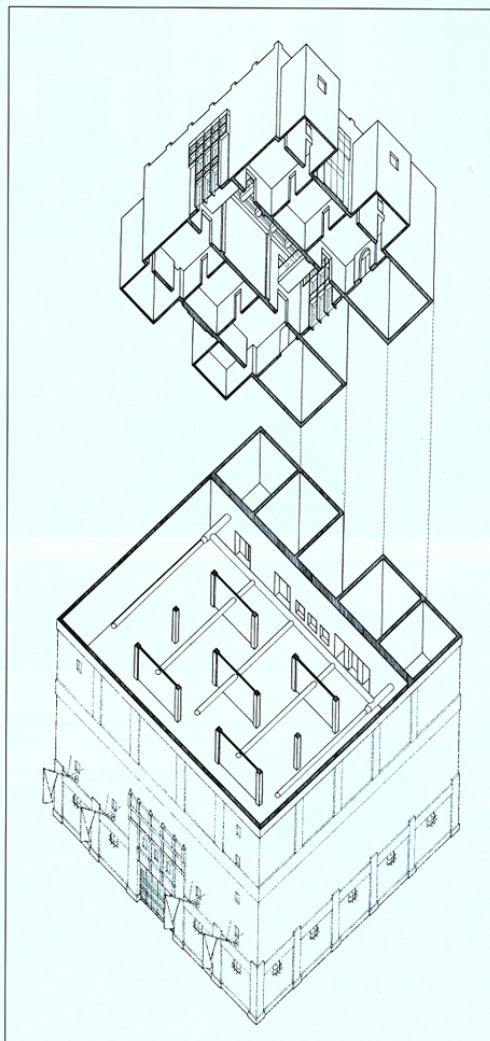
*The Wolfsonian*  
Miami Beach, Florida  
Mark Hampton, Architect  
William S. Kearns, Associate Architect

**T**he Wolfsonian is a happy match of unusual building and client. Arts patron Mitchell Wolfson, Jr., a native of Miami, grew up observing Hollywood make-believe's influence on popular culture, and became an inveterate collector of decorative-art objects designed between 1885 and 1945 to project propaganda into the era's thinking—eventually amassing over 70,000 objects, including Soviet, American, and Fascist political posters and stadium banners, not to mention whole building facades and numerous household objects that convey various governments' messages and fantasies.

Anticipating his storage (not to mention display) problem, Wolfson, together with architect Mark Hampton and associate William Kearns, eyed an initially unlikely solution—an underutilized five-story warehouse on Miami's then seedy South Beach, just two blocks from the Atlantic's treacherous waves, and so close to sea level that even a severe rain washes into the central arcade, where its entrance opens to the sidewalk and streets have no place to drain. But the building had stood through the worst of storms since 1927—as the repository of winter residents' valuables, including their cars, left behind when they boarded trains north for the summer. Earlier users' confidence was inspired by the building's fortress-like character, including massive poured-concrete framing and floors, two-foot-thick walls, and sparse gunport-like windows. Wolfson, Hampton, and Kearns were inspired by more: over 50,000 square feet of flexible open floors interrupted only by a 20- by 18-foot column grid and, on the second floor, the walls of several huge vaults. The exterior character suits its new purpose as well. In typical 1920s Floridian fancifulness, the elaborate cast-stone decoration was copied straight from a 1500s Spanish church.

Renovation has been a catalyst for the neighborhood's renewal. However, the whole transition from storing household valuables to storing, displaying, and caring for valuable art was not that easy. First, 1920s concrete technology was less than ideal at its best. Where structure had spalled, concrete was removed, steel reinforcing cleaned or replaced, and new concrete poured. While client and architects were eager to keep the interior's utilitarian appearance, it too presented problems. Concrete floors send up caustic dust through abrasion and do not block dampness penetration between floors. The solution was a terrazzo-like finish with a large component of sand, which approximates the original floors, poured over a waterproof membrane.

Modern climate control, computers, lighting, and security all require extensive cabling and ducts that normally raise visual havoc when left exposed. The architects organized these elements around the order in the structural framing—thick beams running in one direction and much thinner, closely spaced beams in the other, forming coffers (overleaf). Warm-white bulbs in tubular fixtures bounce ultraviolet-free light from the ceiling and raise its visual height. Rectangular wire molds pass along the bottom vertical edges of the thick beams to clear the slightly higher thin ones and provide cabling access at any point in the building. Polished aluminum air ducts are centered on columns to accentuate the intended design discipline. Total costs for renovation and additions were \$8.5 million. *Charles K. Hoyt*



*Additions include future gallery space in a two-story penthouse over the main public exhibit area on the old top floor; and two new towers on the rear to hold a fire stair; redundant mechanical rooms, and a passenger elevator.*