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Boutique Rising: In South Florida's Tower Wars, The Newest Luxury Is A Smaller Building

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South Florida has always struggled with its identity.

When I first came here in the early 1990s, vast swaths of it were still firmly anchored by Jimmy Buffett and Miami Vice. I only stayed for five years that time around. But every chance I had to come back, not much had changed, which was one of things I appreciated most: progress felt like a subplot to the lifestyle, not the other way around. Yet, South Florida's history has also been guided by a relentless cycle of real estate booms that have remade other swaths of it seemingly overnight.



Historically, this whipsaw has created unique challenges for real estate developers. Towns and neighborhoods are hyperlocal. Buyers arrive with vastly different priorities. And deals happen fast.

Timing “the cycle” is also paramount. The best developers know how to get in and out of a project quickly because they’ve learned how to avoid the backside of a boom the hard way. The neophytes and out-of-towners are the easiest to spot because they end up on the cover of *The Real Deal* for all the wrong reasons.

Not surprisingly, the gap between the real estate developments that get launched in South Florida and the ones that actually get built — especially at the primo-luxury end — says a lot not only about which companies know how to execute, but also where the market is heading. When good developers with

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strong track records drift into new areas — geographically, architecturally, or otherwise — it usually means something in the market is shifting and it's wise to pay attention.

Which is why I've been wondering if the recent rebellion of lower density, human scale buildings in the middle of South Florida's relentless tower wars right now is less an 'if-you-build-it-they-will-come' strategy and more about meeting buyers where they already are.

What if — after all the [supertall announcements](#), [five story penthouses](#), and [shiny, new stadiums](#) — the next big thing in Miami and South Florida real estate is a return to smaller, more boutique buildings?



Boutique Is The New Black

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At opposite ends of South Florida, three new developments are testing this idea out.

On face value, the projects don't have a lot in common with one another. The first is the 19-story [Maison d'Or](#) on West Palm Beach's South Flagler Drive, which launched in January this year with only 39 residences in the middle of an affluent residential neighborhood directly across the Intercoastal Waterway (ICW) from President Trump's Mar-a-Lago resort.

The second — the [Kempinski Residences Miami Design District](#) — is the storied European hotel's first foray into the U.S., featuring 128 condominiums spread across two mid-rise towers steps from one of the most concentrated ultra-luxury shopping districts in America.

The third, the [Ritz-Carlton Residences Fort Lauderdale Beach](#), is tucked into 400 linear feet of ICW waterfront and will offer 83 bespoke residences across two, 13-story buildings with edge-to-edge Atlantic Ocean views a few blocks from the beach and MAASS, Fort Lauderdale's only Michelin-starred restaurant.



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By any other cities' standards, none of these buildings is a cottage.

But by any measurable metric — floors, unit count, or resident density — all three projects are borderline reductionist compared with the other buildings being developed across South Florida at the moment, many of which feature upwards of 300+ units, colossal amenity complexes, and multi-million dollar engineering tricks to keep them from swaying in a hurricane.

What these boutique buildings are selling is something more elusive: the feeling that your home *actually matters*. And, more importantly, that it was built by someone who doesn't see you as just another line item in the capital stack.

"South Florida's sophisticated buyers these days are increasingly shopping for a life rather than just a piece of the boom," says Ed Jahn, Senior Vice President at Kolter Urban which is co-developing Maison d'Or. "They're not necessarily looking for the biggest building or the most recognizable brand name on the façade. They're looking for a home that reflects how they want to live. Boutique is not simply about having fewer residences; it's about a more personal, residential experience and what that smaller scale allows you to do."



All That Glitters Is Getting Smaller

To be clear, none of these buildings are ‘small’ when it comes to price point and attention to detail.

Boutique ‘small’ in the ultra-luxury real estate sector means Patek Philippe, Paganini small: artisanal craftsmanship, tight supply, elite buyers, and a limited window to be one of the precious few. It means carefully-curated locations, mansion-sized residences, Michelin-level service, and a building that feels more like a collection of interconnected private islands than a glass box of residences.

“A smaller project gives us the opportunity to be very intentional about every aspect of the development, from the residences themselves to the overall character of the building,” adds Dan Riordan, Director of Sales and Senior Partner at Perko Development Partners which is building Maison

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d'Or with Kolter. "We can prioritize larger floor plans, meaningful separation between homes, and distinctive architectural details and amenities that serve residents rather than simply adding to a checklist. With fewer residences, you can't rely on scale alone to deliver value. Every home matters."



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As part of that value pitch, Kolter has also prioritized milieu in addition to the design sizzle. Maison d'Or translates into "House of Gold" in French and the project draws inspiration from both Mediterranean and Regency styles, boasting finishes that simultaneously channel the glory days of Palm Beach along with vibrant accents of pink, green, and blue that infuse the common areas and amenity spaces with a playful, Lily Pulitzer touch.

"Maison d'Or is the pinnacle of elevated, contextual living in West Palm Beach. From the moment residents arrive, they are welcomed into an environment that feels refined and almost Gilded Age," continues Riordan. "Every detail defines the Maison d'Or experience and underscores our commitment to delivering a truly unmatched standard of luxury in an intimate residential enclave where you can experience the generosity of a waterfront estate without the work of managing one."





This idea of context is not a minor one. A big benefit of boutique buildings is that they can squeeze onto smaller lots that most 300+ unit luxury developments can't. By design, they're also frequently more palatable to neighbors and NIMBYists. That means developers can park them in locations where buzzwords like "community" and "connection" are at least plausible propositions.

Case in point is Maison d'Or's location in the middle of a neighborhood of established homes, yet within walking distance of downtown West Palm Beach, which is steadily acquiring the daily routines of a city that no longer closes up after dark and shuts down when the winter crowd leaves. Stephen Ross's CityPlace is germinating a year-round, full-time office-and-residential ecosystem that's become the envy of Florida's other mid-sized cities, while the fast-evolving Nora District ('North of Railroad') is quickly becoming one of the most talked about neighborhood revitalization projects in America, featuring a brand new, 13,000 sf Pastis by restaurateur Stephen Starr and the new [Nora Hotel](#) developed by the same group that opened The Bowery, The Mercer, and Hotel Chelsea in New York.

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“Buyers today aren’t looking at South Florida as just as a seasonal destination, but also as a place to build a life and invest for the long term,” says Riordan. “Many of them are established business leaders or entrepreneurs with families looking for a primary residence. And as that buyer base evolves, expectations around residential design, privacy, service, and quality are evolving with it. As a result, we’re seeing a greater appreciation for the difference between ‘markets’ and ‘neighborhoods’. West Palm Beach has its own identity and history, just as Naples and Fort Lauderdale have their own appeal. Successful development means understanding those distinctions and creating something that belongs in its location, rather than applying the same formula everywhere.”



The Best Things Still Come In Little Boxes

Seventy miles south of West Palm, the Kempinski Residences Miami Design District is embracing the boutique blueprint in similar fashion to Maison d’Or. But the 129 year-old, Swiss-based hotel brand chose a polar opposite neighborhood to introduce itself to the U.S. and test the model.

As a matter of geography, the Miami Design District is a fitting location for a hotel of Kempinski’s caliber and pedigree to jump into the branded real estate game. Unlike Brickell, Miami WorldCenter, or

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Edgewater next door, the neighborhood's scale has always been more human, dating back to the 1920s when the entire area was one family's pineapple farm. More importantly, its modern identity has been built on top of a luxury retail ecosystem that only a handful of people have the resources to participate in, which, commercially speaking, is the very essence of boutique.



The Miami Design District's evolution in the city is well known. But outside of South Florida, it's still dropping jaws for people who stumble around the corner and feel like they've just discovered 5th Avenue or Rodeo Drive.

Twenty years ago, a local named Craig Robins began snatching up every warehouse and lot in the neighborhood he could get his hands on at prices that would barely add up to a few months' rent for his current tenants today. During the Great Recession, he managed to convince several top furniture and textile designers to open studios and showrooms in the newly renovated spaces, which, in turn, helped him court other public and private investors to the area just as the economy was recovering.

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Eventually, Robbins pivoted that upmarket momentum all the way to the top, founding a partnership to develop the Miami Design District into the city's premier ultra-luxury retail and lifestyle destination, featuring design by world renowned starchitects, two Michelin-starred restaurants, and flagship stores for brands like Dior, Hermes, Patek Philippe, Louis Vuitton, and Cartier (the district boasts one of the highest concentrations of jewelry and watchmakers in the world).



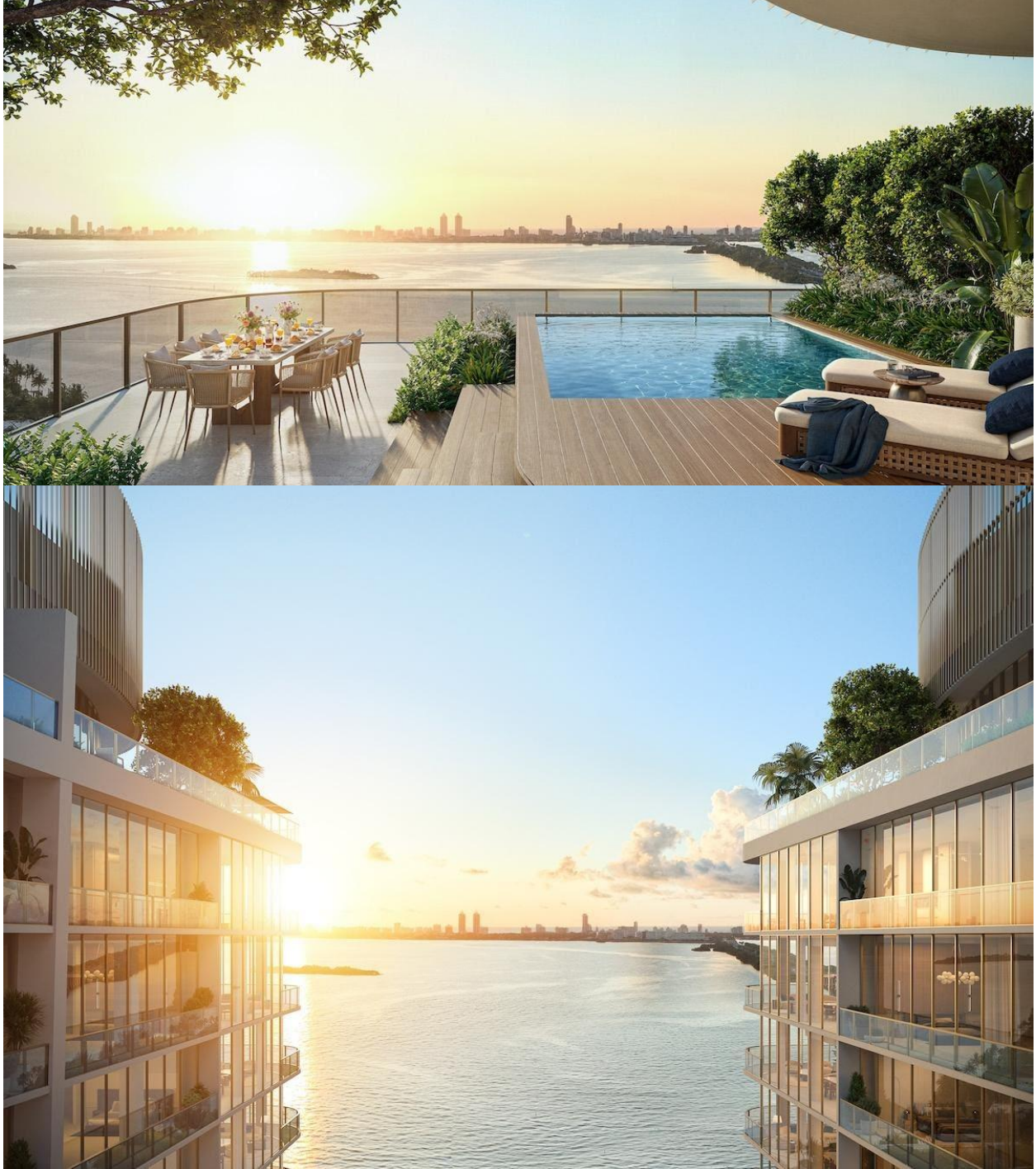


Not coincidentally, the Miami Design District's emergence as an ultra-luxury shopping enclave parallels almost exactly the explosion of South Florida's luxury branded real estate obsession. Which makes it all the more surprising that it took so long for someone to realize that a thoughtfully revitalized neighborhood which houses the world's most coveted retail brands might also be the kind of place extremely wealthy and sophisticated people would want to live.

The fact that the Kempinski brand chose a boutique building in the Miami Design District to plant its first American flag, however, makes perfect sense. Developed by DaGrosa Capital Development Partners and designed by Arquitectonica with interiors by Rockwell Group, the project's two, 23-story towers feature four corner residences per floor, ranging from two- to four-bedrooms priced from \$3.7 million, along with six townhomes and 18 guest suites exclusively for sale to residents.

At the top of both towers, two full floor, upper and lower penthouses feature massive, mansion-style, four- and five-bedroom, family-friendly layouts that share the roof terrace in equal halves (the water facing roof deck belongs to the upper penthouse and also features a private plunge pool).

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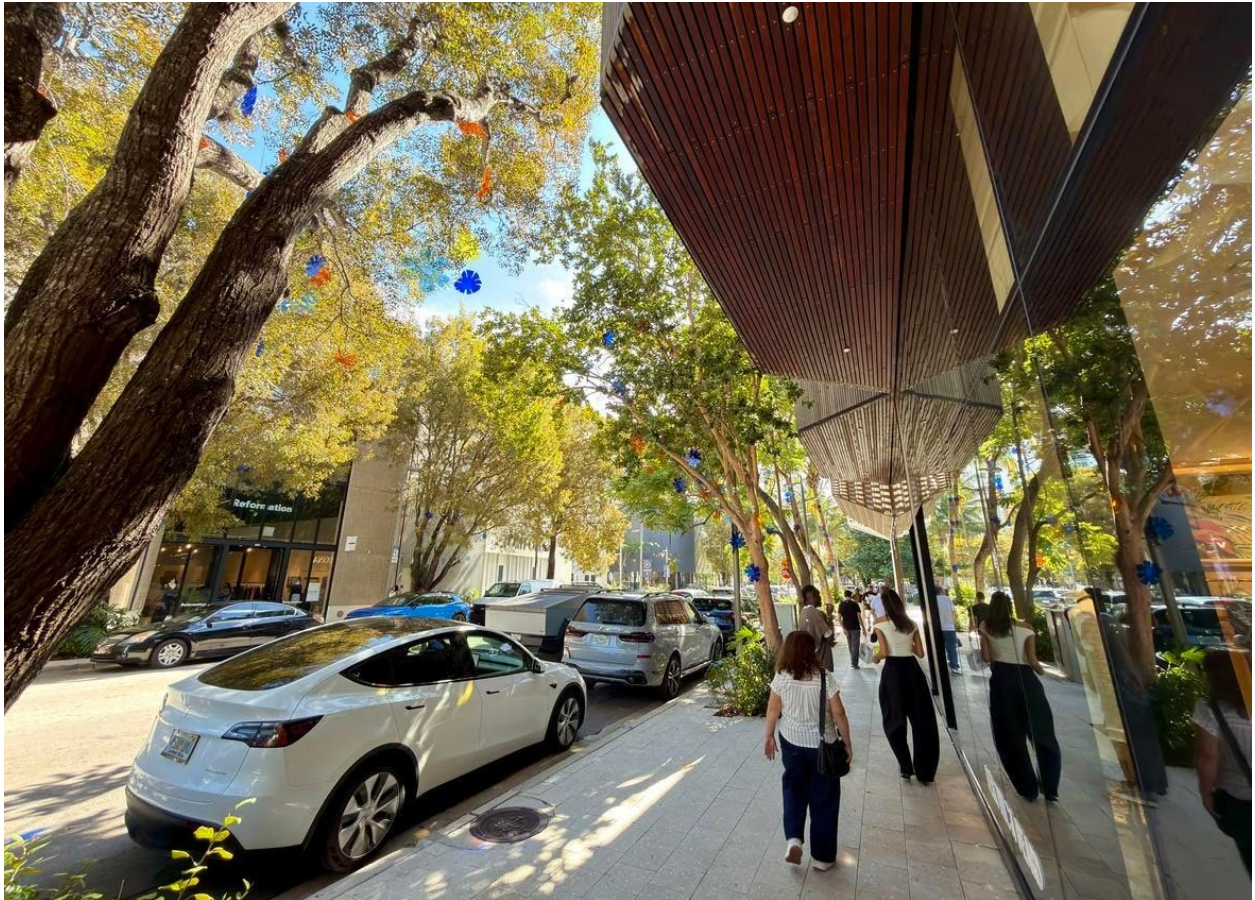
The Kempinski Residences Miami Design District's local geography is also unexpectedly useful to the boutique blueprint: turn one direction and you get all of the Miami Design District's glam and bling two blocks away. Turn the other and you have 180-degree, unobstructed Biscayne Bay and skyline views that

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are as close to permanent as you can get in Miami because of two public parks that are located between the site and the water.

That increasingly unique alchemy — refined, bespoke living in the middle of Miami's Formula 1 pace — was hardly a credible luxury-residential proposition when Robins began assembling the neighborhood two decades ago.

"It wasn't obvious 10 years ago," Antonio Primo, a senior partner at DaGrosa, told me as he recalled the project's evolution. "It wasn't even obvious five years ago."



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Which is why before Primo and the rest of the DaGrosa team could sell Kempinski on this particular corner of the neighborhood, they had to sell one of the Europe's oldest hospitality companies on the city and the Miami Design District itself, a months-long courtship in which both sides were looking for something more than just a licensing deal.

Kempinski wanted a consequential U.S. entrance in neighborhood defined by premium place-making. DaGrosa wanted a brand partner willing to shape the building around the Miami Design District's subtle maximalism, materiality, and thoughtful urban integration instead of stamping another template onto the city. As Ben DaGrosa explained to me, all of Kempinski's properties are "boutique and very specific to the location. That's what has generated intense brand loyalty for 150 years. And that's what we want to build here."

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That sounds like marketing language until you look at the Kempinski Residences Miami Design District's floor plans. At one point in the design process, for example, the team considered adding one-bedroom residences to the tower's lower floors, a move that would have dropped the entry price, widened the buyer pool, and appealed to more investors.

"But that would have also changed the essential thing we're selling," adds DaGrosa. "Someone buying a large family residence would have said, 'This is no longer a boutique building.'" Scarcity, in other words, had to be designed into the project itself from the start and remain a guiding ethos. (Ask any of the jewelry or watch brands in the Miami Design District and they can tell you a thing or two about this principle as well).



This Time It Will Be Different

Cynics and critics of Miami's current real estate market and the luxury branded real estate space in general likely will sneer at the idea of a boutique building boom, branded or not. The conventional luxury playbook says that more is more and no place other than Dubai has reinforced that idea more convincingly since the pandemic than South Florida.

Yet, the economics of modern exclusivity also work in the other direction. Arte in Surfside put only 16 residences on the beach and [attracted residents like Ivanka Trump and Jared Kushner](#). Meanwhile, Kolter's Olana development across the Everglades in Naples is planned with just 16 homes as well *starting at \$30 million*.

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For buyers, there are practical reasons these days to gravitate towards a smaller project too, from fewer residents competing for the private dining room or a staff member's attention to having floor plans large enough to accommodate children, work, and guests at the same time. The questions people ask are changing as well. Buyers who can park money anywhere now want to know when the building will *actually* open, who lives next door, what happens on a random Wednesday, and whether the neighborhood has enough depth to make staying feel better than leaving.

"The growth of ultra-luxury boutique residences in South Florida ultimately reflects an increasing demand for a more intimate residential experience," says Diana Ulis, CEO and Founder of Admire Capital which is developing the Ritz-Carlton Residences in Fort Lauderdale Beach.

"Buyers want the independence of a private home without giving up the service and convenience of a luxury hospitality brand, and Fort Lauderdale is particularly well suited to this evolution because it offers a distinctive waterfront lifestyle with a residential feel already. As the market continues to evolve, developments that prioritize privacy, thoughtful design, and personalized service will play an important role in shaping the next chapter of luxury living in South Florida."



Time will tell if the downsizing trend has staying power. Boutique buildings don't offer much in terms of tamping down South Florida's housing or affordability crises and no one's certain how deep the bench of super rich people actually is. AI will also continue to shift the wealth map in unimaginable ways.

But every so often, luxury real estate stumbles back onto an idea more durable than another record height or a new logo. And right now, that idea seems to be that the most valuable thing a building can offer is the space to create a real life inside of it — and just enough neighbors to make that life feel like it belongs somewhere.