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Tray balconies and breezblock walls studded with multi-colored glass block are just two of McKirahan's signature treatments at the Bay Harbor Continental, built in 1958.

Uncovering McKirahan
{A South Florida Supernova may — finally — be getting some recognition.}

Text Nina Korman Photos Robin Hill

Despite its often-glowing reputation, the 1950s weren't always so "fabulous." In fact, 1958 especially was not a good year for the United States. More than a decade of post-war prosperity came to a crashing end. Unemployment hovered at seven percent. And, even worse, teen idol/singer Elvis Presley was drafted into the U.S. Army! President Dwight D. Eisenhower found himself commanding a country experiencing its first major recession since the Great Depression.

In the state of Florida, which had grown tremendously following the Second World War, the economic outlook was slightly sunnier. At the time, the chief employer was the commercial airline industry, which began shuttling tourists in and out of the state year-round. Enterprises devoted to cement and even armaments were thriving as well. Florida's prosperity rained down on many. And in 1958, the architect Charles F. McKirahan was one of the fortunate ones. He had arrived in South Florida with his then-wife, Lucille, also an architect, nearly a decade before. After a brief stint as chief draftsman in the office of Gamble, Pownall & Gilroy and a few years working with a partner, McKirahan, in 1953, launched his solo career as an architect in South Florida and beyond. The war was a dark relic of the past. Americans were looking squarely toward a brighter future. In Florida, plenty of vacant land was ready to accommodate the droves of eager vacationers who needed places to stay and play, plus the masses of would-be homeowners anxious for a place to settle down. McKirahan was ready to oblige.

Not a pure modernist by any means, McKirahan would create sleek, modern structures tailored to the local, subtropical environment with his personal, whimsical touches. A building was thoughtfully and artfully sited on a lot to take maximum advantage of bright sunlight, fresh air and stunning views. Floor-to-ceiling glass, in the form of sliding glass doors or banks of operable jalousie windows, often took the place of a solid exterior wall. Cast concrete screen block in a variety of shapes would add embellishment and provide protection from the elements. A structure's spatial organization would promote easy access and circulation.

Although innovative designs were crucial to drumming up business, compelling visuals were paramount as well. McKirahan's spouse, Lucille, was renowned for creating impressive renderings that would help clinch the job. And soon the list of McKirahan-designed projects began to multiply at a dizzying rate.

Initially, smaller structures like Fort Lauderdale's Manhattan Tower, complete with a unique jungle gym/bird cage stairwell, sprouted up in 1953 as a corporate retreat for General Motors executives. A few years later,

McKirahan became the go-to architect for the powerful, prolific developer, Coral Ridge Properties, which grew to own a \$50 million portfolio of land in Broward County. It seemed nearly anything with the name Coral in it was his design: Coral Ridge Country Club, Coral Ridge Yacht Club, Coral Ridge Towers, the list goes on.

It is fair to say that other than his prodigious talent, McKirahan had incredible luck. South Florida at midcentury was exactly the right place for a daring, young architect. Modern life was being re-defined. Home ownership, with its nagging responsibilities, wasn't everyone's dream. A novel, carefree model of living was being touted via a new building type: co-operative apartments. Co-ops, as they are known, are said to have originated in New York City and were introduced to South Florida in the late 1940s. In a co-op, as opposed to a condominium, a homeowner does not own his or her physical apartment. He or she, along with neighbors, becomes a shareholder in a corporation that owns the entire building. Shareholders (the larger the apartment, the more shares allotted) are entitled to a proprietary lease in the building and can get a series of tax breaks that condo owners don't enjoy.

Co-ops and Charles F. McKirahan arrived in South Florida just about simultaneously. Also around that time, a few miles south of Fort Lauderdale, attorney Shepard Broad and his business partner, Benjamin Kane, were creating a 300-acre, two-island town in Biscayne Bay from a former mangrove swamp dubbed Bailey's Island. Incorporated in 1947, Bay Harbor Islands was located north of Indian Creek Island and west of Bal Harbour and Surfside. Wisely planned, it would consist of single-family homes exclusively on its West Island and multi-family units, a school, and a small business district on its East Island.

By the mid-1950s, Bay Harbor's East Island was nearly built-out. Modestly scaled garden apartments occupied its center, and taller, more majestic structures were placed on its northern and southern tips so as not to impede views and cast unwanted shadows. Careful consideration was given to the placement of a structure on a lot, allowing for green space in front of and around the property, ample parking areas, and a comfortable distance between buildings. The co-ops and condos were created by an array of internationally known architects, among them Morris Lapidus, Igor Polevitzky, Norman Giller, Melvin Grossman, and Charles F. McKirahan.

Briefly lured south, McKirahan designed a trio of co-ops on the East Island: the Bay Harbor Club, Bay Harbor Towers, and the Bay Harbor Continental. Airy, lighthearted, and intentionally welcoming the outdoors, all three dwellings embody the exuberant elegance that had become McKirahan's trademark. They were completed from 1956 to 1958, respectively, the final structure, the jaunty Bay Harbor Continental, debuting during the gloomy U.S. recession of 1958. Just a year earlier, in 1957, the 10-year-old town seemed concerned enough about its quality of life that it retained the architect and planner Robert Fitch Smith as a consultant. His job was to examine land use and zoning ordinances, plus make recommendations on building heights and the type of structures compatible with the town.

Such worries seem almost quaint now and are a stark contrast to the Bay Harbor Islands of today. Amid an overheated real estate market, little mind is being paid to planning in the town. New buildings are being erected at a breakneck pace. Most are incompatible with the existing architecture, meaning they are either too tall, too dense, take up nearly every inch of their lot, or all of the above. A local government-run program allowing the selling of air rights (also known as transfer of development rights, or TDRs) is being sorely mishandled, resulting in a mish-mash of tall and small buildings alongside each other.

Being demolished just as quickly are original structures which have little protection. The government of Bay Harbor Islands itself does not administer an historic preservation program to shield its worthy structures, and it frequently opposes any effort by others — like Miami-Dade County, under whose jurisdiction it falls on these matters, or the National Trust for Historic Preservation which placed the East Island on its 2014 list of America's 11 Most Endangered Historic Places — to preserve its irreplaceable buildings. Numerous studies have repeatedly shown that historic designation of a property only raises its market value. A legitimate TDR program allows the owner of a historically designated property (donor) to sell its air rights to a developer (receiver); however, the receiving property is always miles away from the donor, not next door or down the block. The money earned from the sale is supposed to be used to refurbish the historic building, helping to maintain the character of the area in which it exists. (The enlightened owners of the Vagabond hotel in Miami's MiMo/Biscayne Boulevard Historic District have used TDRs to great effect.)

Currently, the Bay Harbor Club and Bay Harbor Continental are being considered for historic designation by the Miami-Dade County Historic Preservation Board. Charles F. McKirahan, their architect, died in 1984 at age 44, leaving behind "an astounding legacy of architectural masterpieces," says Diane Smart, former head of the Broward Trust for Historic Preservation. Historic designation would place clearly delineated limitations on any alteration or demolition of these buildings. Instead of wiping out vestiges of the past and ignoring lessons that could be learned from a highly successful planned community, developers could take heed and adaptively re-use historic structures. Sensitively incorporating the buildings or many of their design elements into new construction might result in something entirely unique, highly desirable, and as utterly indispensable as the original structures themselves.