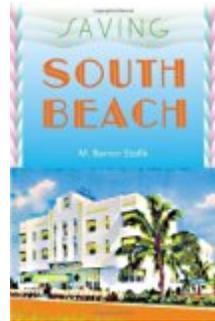


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

M. Barron Stofik. *Saving South Beach*. University of Press Florida: Gainesville, 2005. xviii + 303 pp. \$27.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8130-2902-3.

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Published on H-Florida (September, 2006)



Developers, Deco and Development

M. Barron Stofik, a journalist and historic preservation activist has in this book chronicled the story of South Beach's efforts at historic preservation and its resurgence as a cultural center and popular tourist destination. In fact, the preservation efforts themselves were what caused South Beach's cultural and economic revival. Throughout this book Stofik hammers away at this theme, describing how, for instance, the artist Christo chose a restored Art Deco hotel as his base of operations in 1983 when he shrouded eleven islands in Biscayne Bay in pink, or how cheap rents on Lincoln Road in South Beach lured hordes of artists as well as the Miami City Ballet into the area. Countless other examples follow of this process and Stofik does an admirable job explaining how cheap rent, hip locations and old restored buildings acted as a magnet for artists, and later money and tourists. The author compares South Beach's efforts at preservation and revitalization to those of other cities around the country, thereby placing Miami Beach's resurgence within a wider context.

She also chronicles the local opposition to preservation efforts. Real estate developers, eager to demolish old, crumbling buildings and replace them with high-rise condominiums, vigorously opposed any efforts at historic preservation and scoffed at the notion that buildings only 50 years old were somehow historic. Developers such as Abe Resnick also served on the Miami Beach City Commission and used their political posts to stymie any efforts at preservation. This economic and political elite, blind to other success stories and examples of how preservation could revitalize an area, pushed for-

ward with their own plans to develop the beach. These plans largely failed, however, due in part to the extravagance of their plans and to the success of activists in their preservation efforts.

The irony that developers and politicians who opposed the means that eventually served to bring forth the very economic revitalization they sought is central to Stofik's narrative. This book, written for the general public, successfully explains the value of historic preservation, showing that it is very much more than saving old things simply because they are old.

Throughout *Saving South Beach*, Stofik narrates the struggles that a core group of activists braved in order to save the Art Deco buildings on the South side of Miami Beach. The coming together of like-minded people to save these structures is chronicled in detail as they as transformed from a loose-knit group of activist into several sophisticated preservationist societies. Particularly illuminating are Stofik's accounts of these societies' campaigns to save individual buildings. As soon as activists heard the rumblings of the first bulldozers a complex network of activists sprung into action, filing petitions at city hall, protesting at the demolition sites and organizing media campaigns.

Saving South Beach is a basic narrative history. Stofik begins by briefly telling the early history of South Beach and its decline before she begins the story of its preservation and revitalization. The book moves forward chronologically and lacks any overarching thesis or analytic narrative. That is not to say the book is not intelligently

written, however.

Throughout *Saving South Beach*, Stofik scratches the surface of many areas ripe for historic exploration. For example the ethnic makeup of South Beach was a strange mix of elderly Jews, Cuban refugees, and later Central Americans and New Yorkers. The cultural contributions they made to the distinct flair of South Beach and the interactions between these diverse groups has yet to be told. South Beach was, and still is, a center a gay culture in the United States, and although Stofik does touch on the role of the gay community in various preservation efforts, the larger impact of this population on the Beach's economic revitalization is not told here. Neither is the

role of artists and musicians, many of whom flocked to the Beach in the early days of its resurgence. Stofik explains why these groups first relocated to South Beach, but does not address the continued impact they had on the culture of Miami Beach.

Despite its flaws, this book serves as an excellent starting point to the history of South Beach's economic and cultural renewal. It highlights the relationship between historic preservation and economic and cultural revitalization and tells the story of a small group of passionate activists dedicating to saving the Art Deco buildings of Miami Beach.

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Citation: Chris Wilhelm. Review of Stofik, M. Barron, *Saving South Beach*. H-Florida, H-Net Reviews. September, 2006.

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