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A MAN OF IDEAS, A LEGACY OF GLASS AND STEEL

Ugo Colombo has come to define and dominate a niche, Miami's high-end condo market

By: Risa Chopp Butbul

It's hard enough to land an interview with him. Even harder to get him to admit that he has left an indelible footprint along South Florida's shoreline, one that others have and attempt to follow, but never quite fill. When I asked him about the legacy he will inevitably leave behind, the precedent he has set, the bar he has raised, he responded that Miami's future is bright and that his projects are a labor of love. The two are closely interconnected because he has indeed carved a path for other developers that, along with him, have torn into the Miami skyline with colorful, architecturally innovative structures that redefine the way Miami looks, and is looked at, by the rest of the world. Ugo Colombo is a modest man, but he is also decidedly the most hands-on, inventive, and progressive developer in recent Miami history.

Born in Italy and educated in the United States, Colombo has come to define what refined luxury, fashioned from a meticulous eye, means in residential development. From Bristol Tower to his still unnamed current undertaking, he has given birth to some of the most elegant and exclusive homes in South Florida, ones that represent the ultimate in upscale living and that stand as landmarks that invoke sheer awe.

"His name carries with it a great deal of weight. When you buy into a Colombo development, you're buying into a standard of excellence rarely imitated in the marketplace," notes Phyllis Apple, publicist extraordinaire, who has been working with Colombo for over a decade.

Colombo launched his real estate career as a property manager for absentee owners at The Imperial on Brickell

Avenue, where his family owned a penthouse. Whether by a stroke of luck, shrewd business savvy, or both, the young entrepreneur acquired the remaining inventory in the building through foreclosure, and ultimately orchestrated a highly successful sellout of the property. His participation resulted in returning the Imperial to its place as one of the area's premier condominium developments.

When he began to clear 2127 Brickell Avenue to develop Bristol Tower a few years later, he came up with the concept of creating a curvilinear tower. Bristol Tower's attractive 40-story curvilinear glass design stands as a landmark in the now well-established and highly prestigious area. Its panoramic views of Biscayne Bay and the City of Miami, state-of-the-art security, and an extraordinary interior design, helped propel a record-breaking sellout of the \$80 million, 147-unit property.



Colombo outdid even himself with Santa Maria, Bristol Tower's sister. The twin-cylinder condominium's 54 stories surpassed all other residential developments as the tallest building south of New York City and further distinguished itself with a full-service health-spa-in-the-sky that encompasses the entire 51st floor.

In 1995, Colombo entered into a joint venture with Don and Jeff Soffer of Turnberry Associates in developing Porto Vita, a \$400 million Mediterranean-style village in Aventura. Incorporating Colombo's own sense of style, elegance and privacy, the developers limited building to only 375 homes on an expansive 18-acre development.

Next, Colombo turned his attention to Coral Gables with 4000 Ponce, a mixed-use commercial tower completed in 2002. Before he broke ground on the four-block develop-

ment, he bought up all the surrounding properties to eradicate any possibility of dissension from other property owners. The Mediterranean-style development includes 750,000-square-feet of state-of-the-art, Class-A office space, ground-floor retail, as well as the luxury auto dealership known as The Collection, which he owns.

Last year, Colombo became a partner in Glasswall LLC, taking over a fledgling business because he wanted to maintain total control over product quality, cost and delivery.

According to Colombo, "In this business, on-time product delivery and customer service are top priorities. I could ensure that by having a hand in the entire process."

His involvement alone has propelled the Miami-based glass and window manufacturing company to an in-demand

empire. With Colombo at the helm, Glasswall has developed a number of impact-resistant window systems, which exceed Miami-Dade County's stringent requirements, and has even invented a way to eliminate the need for disruptive and conspicuous sills in residences, while still upholding building codes.

A real estate strategist at heart, Colombo is also a perfectionist. While the two seem paradoxical, the attributes combined have earned him unwavering respect and a cache of inventory worth in excess of \$700 million. Colombo plays an instrumental role in every decision, from the purchase negotiations to the architectural plans and the interior details.

"Perhaps it's my Italian blood, but I prefer to take painstaking measures to ensure that every detail falls into

place than take a backseat because my work reflects me, my commitment to good design; it's the realization of a well-thought-out vision," asserts the 43-year-old founder and president of CMC Group.

For instance, at Grovenor House, Colombo's newest condominium development, taking shape across from the marina in Coconut Grove, includes signature high-tech features like Grovenor Link, a cordless in-residence touch-pad concierge.

"Ugo is involved in every aspect, right down to the light switches," explains Apple. "People, buyers and colleagues alike, recognize this approach and welcome it because it establishes a standard in the industry, and frankly, it's refreshing to see that level of commitment."

Colombo has come to be revered for his ability to structure effective partnerships to help ensure the success of his developments and design signature high-end products. His relationship with Architect Luis Revuelta dates back 15 years, when he lent his expertise to Bristol Tower. Since then, Revuelta has been taking Colombo's ideas and merging them into thought-provoking, visual masterpieces. Revuelta describes his and Colombo's relationship as a mutually beneficial one. "Together we have been developing a vocabulary over the years," explains Revuelta. "Like myself, Ugo is hands-on and detail-oriented, which not only makes it easier during the design process, but also allows us to truly hammer out the shared vision as we progress. Working with him is truly an architect's dream."

At Grovenor House, in which Revuelta again is serving as architect, Colombo commissioned fellow Italian Michele Bonan, an internationally recognized designer based in Florence to create an enchanting lobby. He ushered him over land and sea to ensure the space represents a radical departure from traditional condominium developments.

Colombo is now teaming up with the Lionstone Group, which bought the Dupont Plaza property in 2001, to build a new city landmark in downtown Miami. The \$225 million mixed-used development is Colombo's largest and most dramatic addition to the urban Miami skyline, located on one of the city's choicest parcels of real estate, the site of the aging Dupont Plaza.

The expansive waterfront development in downtown Miami, which overlooks the Miami River and Biscayne Bay, will likely take shape as two glistening towers on the north bank of the river. This time, the design calls for a two-story pedestrian bridge connecting the two buildings at the 14th floor. In addition, the city is planning to extend its public Riverwalk along the bank of the Miami River, creating another amenity for hotel guests and residents.

Before he hangs up, Colombo makes sure to remind me that he never intended to leave a legacy; that his purpose was only to build quality projects that attract the affluent from around the globe. The Brickell boom is now extending to other areas with Colombo leading the way. He sees no sign of slowing down, not him, not Miami's real estate scene. "I set out to conceive of and develop livable works of art that are timeless," he concludes. And with that, Colombo unknowingly conceded that he is creating a legacy indeed. ■



Grovenor House