

Q&A with Heidar Sadeki, Brickell City Centre's residential designer

"When we design a project, we think of it as temporal stages in a cinematic progression"

By [Doreen Hemlock](#) | March 08, 2017 12:45PM



Brickell City Centre. Inset: Heidar Sadeki

Sometimes, business relationships can take you across the seas. Clarissa Richardson and Heidar Sadeki worked so well with developer Swire Properties in Hong Kong that Swire asked them to work on the \$1 billion-plus Brickell City Centre project in Miami. Their Richardson Sadeki firm designed the public spaces for Brickell City Centre's residential towers, Reach and Rise, and now, is talking with Swire about work on more Miami projects.

The duo met at Princeton University and had already crossed oceans to study. Sadeki grew up in Iran and Richardson in Singapore. Their boutique firm, founded in 1998 and known for modern design, is based in New York City and now has offices in Los Angeles, Hong Kong and Miami.

Sadeki came to architecture from film and takes a cinematic approach to design, focusing on narrative rather than form or proportion. He spoke with *The Real Deal* about his firm, working in Miami and the notion of "architecture as brand." The interview has been edited for space and clarity.

Q. How did Richardson Sadeki start? What drew you to each other?

A. Clarissa and I met doing our master's in architecture at Princeton. We had rather different backgrounds. Historically, Princeton's architecture school has been very open to cross-disciplinary dialogue and a conceptual approach. I'd studied cinema in New York at SUNY Purchase, and to date, my knowledge of cinema and pop culture is a more significant influence on my work than architectural history. Clarissa had studied architecture in London.



Clarissa Richardson

What drew us together was our projects. Clarissa had designed these kind of "hotel-pods" in the Nevada desert for viewing UFOs, dug into the ground and set at an angle, so when you're lying in bed, you're looking into the heavens. I had a project after the First Iraq War for a helicopter-hotel, which had four living pods attached, and you could be dropped off at specific sites for 24 hours to visit war zones.

So, both of us moved away from this classical notion of proportion, what is beautiful and the polemic of taste. We came to look at “architecture as brand.” We now refer to ourselves as creative directors and look at our practice as being somewhere between an ad agency, creative agency and architecture. Our One Tomato unit even designs websites and logos for projects.

Q. What distinguishes your design from other firms?

A. We use a vocabulary that is minimalistic and modern, but we don’t cut and paste. Each project talks to a different cultural construct. We look at culture like a filmmaker does; we interact with it and critique it.

In Hong Kong, for instance, the Chinese culture is into light, happy colors — instead of evening. In one of my early projects there, an extremely expensive three-bedroom apartment, I decided to rip out one bedroom, make a very large master bedroom and essentially, design a bachelor pad. My colors were grays and blacks, not yellows and oranges — colors that might work well in New York or London. There was a lot of resistance, that it was too dark and morbid. Actually, the apartment sold in record time and for more than Swire expected.

Q. How does designing for Miami differ from Hong Kong or elsewhere?

A. There are elements in common between Hong Kong and Miami. They’re both transient cities and hubs for countries nearby. Both also have a presence of conservatism and a metropolitan culture that creates an interesting tension.

In pop culture and cinema, Miami is often seen as a party place with a bunch of wealthy visitors and a shallow culture. But the fact is visitors come from places with incredibly rich art, literature and design. So, my approach at [Brickell City Centre](#) was to celebrate the richness of the visitor culture with art and sculptural elements. Because when I go to Buenos Aires, it’s as sophisticated as Paris.

Our approach is different than the puffy, modern, white design you often see in Miami. For the lobby entrances, for instance, we went to some of the most sophisticated, expensive chandelier manufacturers worldwide. A lot of furniture was customized, including the sculptural stone benches in the [Reach tower](#) lobby.

Q. Are you a disruptor? In Hong Kong, you went metro, not Chinese. In Miami, you went heavy, not ephemeral.

A. It’s not only about heavy. When we designed the sales center for Brickell City Centre, I wanted to make it iconic. So, I wrapped the 10-story building in fabric and put lights in the corners, so the entire building would light up like a lantern. We also bought a super-powerful projector and started projecting artwork onto the building, art that we primarily acquired from YoungArts Foundation.

When we design a project, we think of it as temporal stages in a cinematic progression: What is your first impression when you see the object, when you walk into the space, when you turn right.... We don’t think in terms of form. We think of how one space creates a narration compared to another. It is all experience.

Q. Were there any other particularities about designing for Miami?

A. In my opinion, the relationship between the automobile and the pedestrian is the measure of civility of any city. So, the approach to the residential units was extremely important to me. Downtown Miami hasn’t been pedestrian-friendly. So, I wanted to bring in that element of public space where you can walk and enjoy art and cafes.

My approach was to make the public space useful, instead of decorative. I designed the ground-floor lobby to be kind of a sculpture garden, where it’s pleasant to sit, look at original art and meet people, with a certain level of formality. The lobby spills out into the street, the way a café does. For the sixth-floor residential lobby, instead of a corridor, I designed a 12-foot wide gallery with an arts library and tea lounge among six sitting areas. On the seventh floor, the sophisticated social room called Fete can be rented out to host even a small wedding.

Q. What's next for you in Miami?

A. We're looking forward to working on the next phase of [Brickell City Centre](#) soon.

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