

They Paved Paradise



HOME IN THE SKY

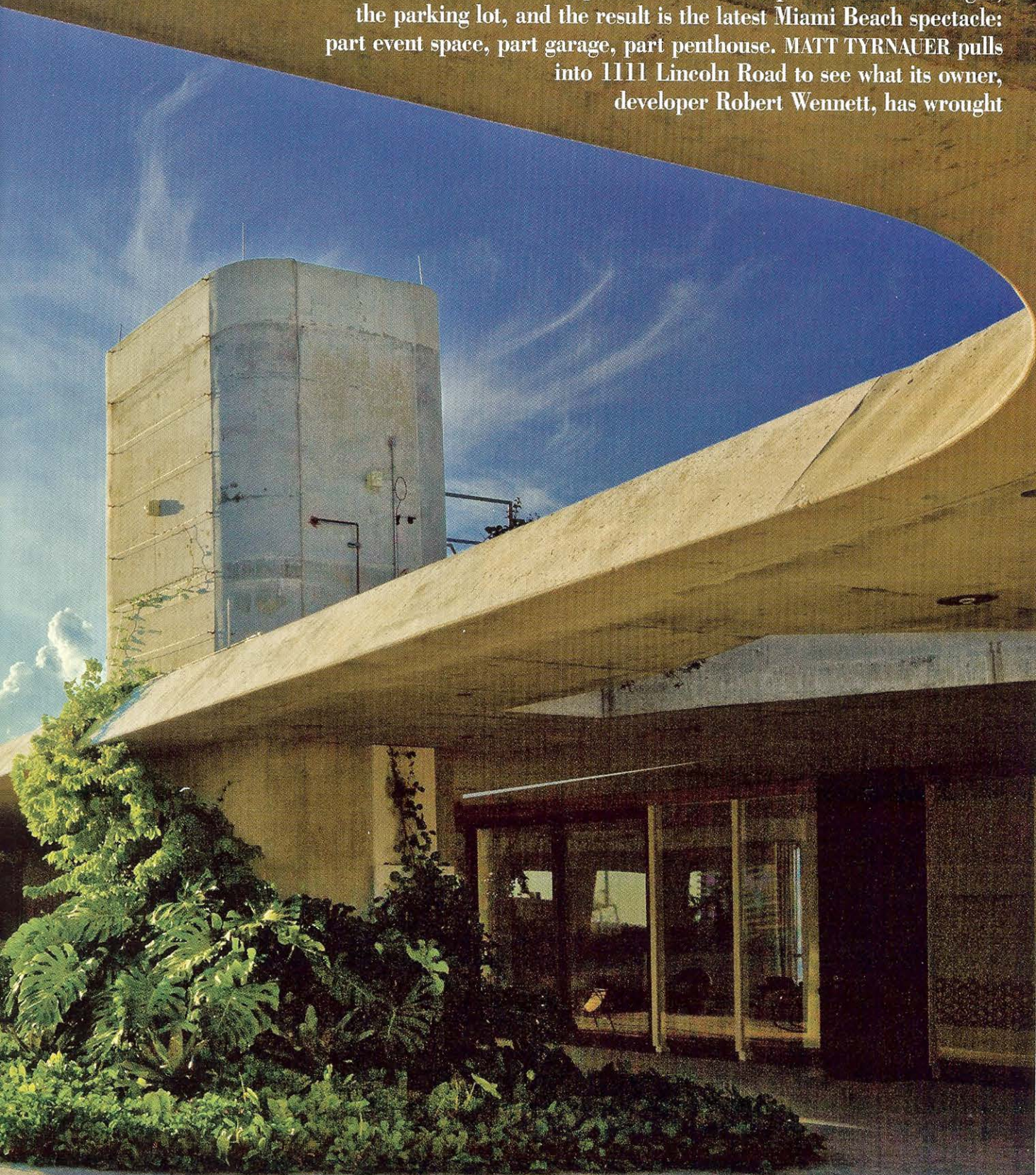
The sloped garden and south façade of the house at the top of the parking garage, with the elevator tower extending above it.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY TODD EBERLE

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and Live in a Parking Lot

Take the Pritzker Prize-winning architecture firm of Herzog & de Meuron, point them at that epitome of urban blight, the parking lot, and the result is the latest Miami Beach spectacle: part event space, part garage, part penthouse. MATT TYRNAUER pulls into 1111 Lincoln Road to see what its owner, developer Robert Wennett, has wrought



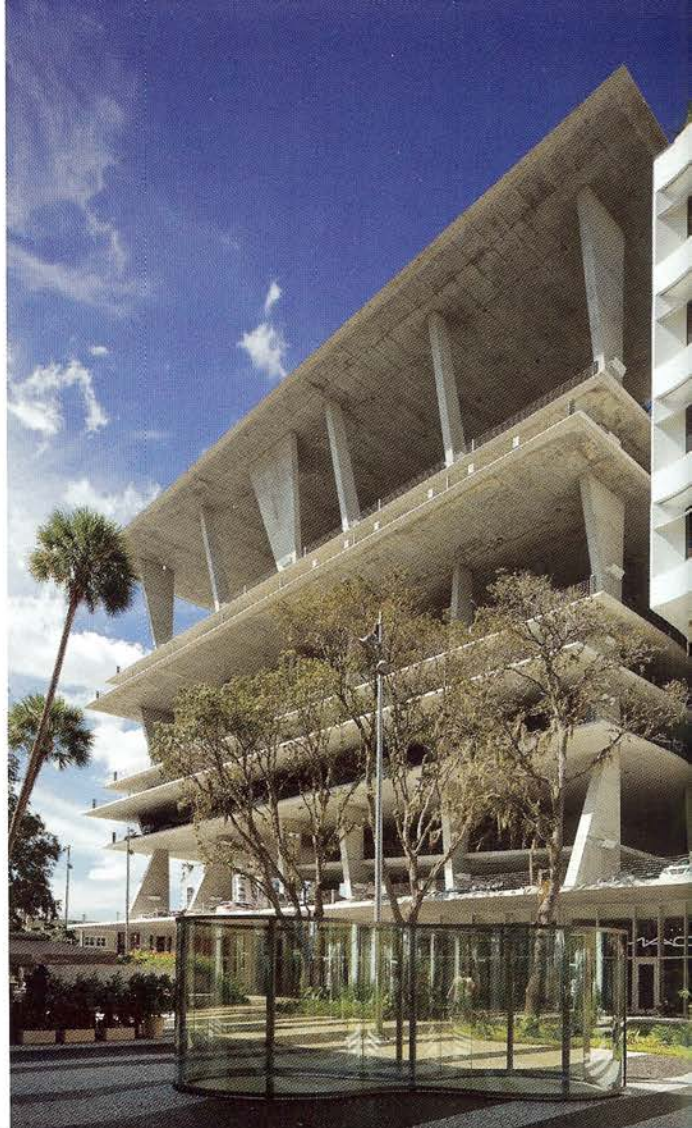
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or months Miami Beach was buzzing with rumors about a massive concrete structure going up on the corner of Lincoln and Alton Roads, next door to the brutalist 1968 SunTrust Bank Building. The new structure's skeleton, even in the early phases of construction, seemed more refined and formally interesting than most projects at that stage. The air of intrigue about what in time would become recognizable as a strikingly beautiful and very costly parking structure was exactly what the developer, Robert Wennett, wanted. "It was counter-intuitive," says Wennett, who made his fortune in malls and gentrification projects in places such as Dupont Circle in Washington, D.C., and Manhattan's Meatpacking District. "But I didn't want to market what I was doing. It was more fun to let people figure out something major was happening architecturally in a city that could use some great buildings."

Six years ago Wennett showed up at the offices of the architects Herzog & de Meuron in Basel, Switzerland, for a meeting about a very unlikely project. The firm's Pritzker Prize-winning founders, Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron, are renowned for intellectually rigorous museums such as the Tate Modern, in London, and the de Young, in San Francisco. "They were just coming off the Beijing Olympics, for which they had designed the Bird's Nest stadium," recalls Wennett, who brought with him a preliminary model of a parking garage that included a penthouse pavilion in which he was planning to live with his partner, MTV executive Mario Cáder-Frech.

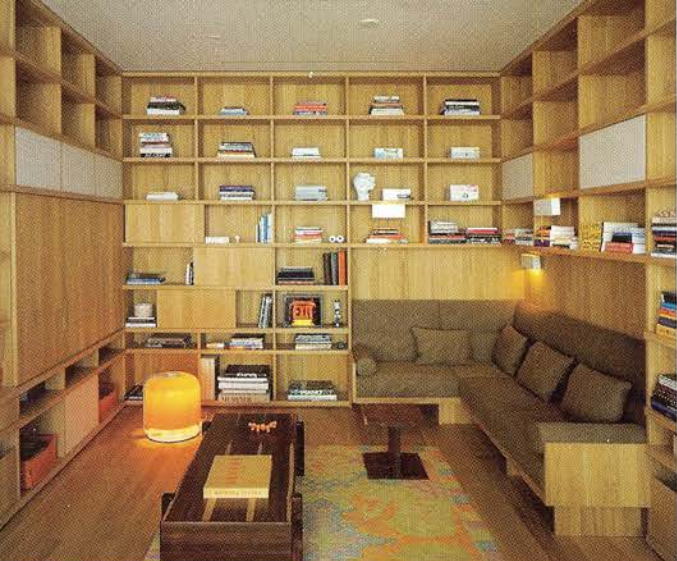
In 2005, Wennett had bought the SunTrust office building with the intention of revivifying what had been the western entrance to the Lincoln Road Mall. "Most people were begging me to tear down the SunTrust building," says Wennett. "It's an emblem of another time. But I was going to make it work, and that's why I went to Herzog & de Meuron, because they approach projects as parts of urban plans."

Somewhat to Wennett's surprise, they took the job, assigning partner Christine Binswanger to design it. Wennett says Binswanger came back to him with an imperious ultimatum: "The only solution that they thought worked for the building was

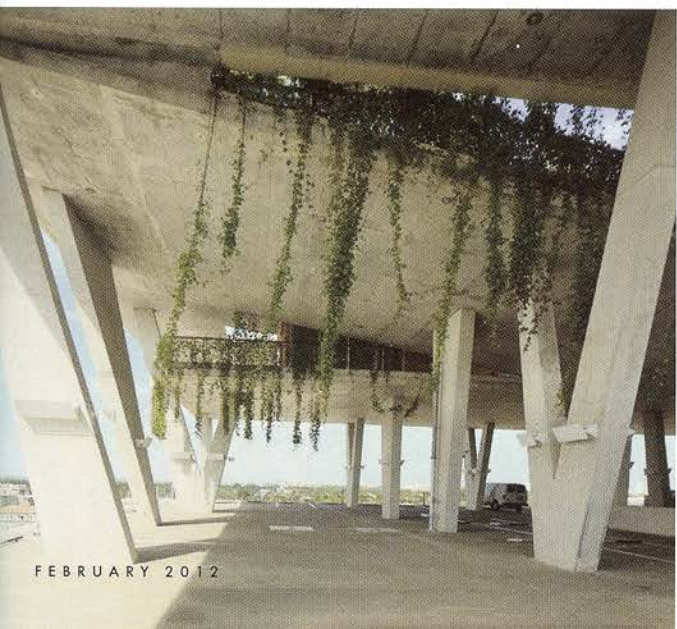


FINALLY, A GARAGE THAT VALIDATES

Clockwise from top left: the parking garage, as seen from Lincoln Road, with a Dan Graham sculpture in front of it and the white SunTrust building rising beside it; the library in the private house; the south façade of the house and the garden at night; the seventh level of the garage, with vines from the sloped garden extending down into it; the concrete roof over the house and garden, open to the night sky.



“HERZOG CALLED THIS A BUILDING THAT’S ALL MUSCLE, WITHOUT CLOTHES—LIKE MIAMI BEACH.”



50 feet higher than was allowable by law. They said if I couldn’t get the variance, it would be better if I got a different architect.” What Binswanger wanted to do—and *did* do, once Wennett had fought for and won the height variance—was make the garage equal in height and mass to the SunTrust building. As she explains, “The key is the *contrast*: buildings of almost identical volumes and similar materials playing against each other—an open building and a very closed one.”

The garage, with its vast and open knife-edged floor plates and soaring wedge-shaped buttresses, has become an instant icon. Wennett says proudly, “Jacques Herzog called this a building that’s all muscle, without clothes—like Miami Beach, with everyone walking around with muscle bodies and no clothes on. . . . He also described this building as the most radical thing they have done.”

If it’s not the *most* radical, it is certainly the most uncharacteristic, in part because Wennett got the firm to design one of the very few private homes it has ever built. Binswanger describes the 5,200-square-foot house as “woven into the building, not something that was stuck on the roof with a little balustrade at the edge. We kind of *hung* the house underneath the top slab, so it’s cut into the volume.” She adds, “It’s not a place that is obviously a good place to live. There is noise, dirt, cars, and public foot traffic.” But there is a certain thrill to the idea of a house in an unexpected place, hidden in plain

sight, yet with clear clues to its existence. Vines from the garden, planted on the top of the garage (which serves as front yard), dangle down into the public parking level below. What is, in effect, the backyard—the roof of the SunTrust building—has a sizable swimming pool.

There were several minor clashes of will between the architects and the clients. “Herzog & de Meuron wanted it so that if, in theory, we didn’t want to install central air-conditioning, we could survive. *Very*

Swiss,” says Wennett, adding, “Of *course* we have central air—this is Miami, after all.” Wennett fought for two Carrara-marble sinks in the main bathroom. “They thought two sinks and two toilets were *outrageous*,” he says. Binswanger initially attempted to ban TV. “I *did* have an issue with the televisions, especially the number of them,” she admits. The solution was to hide everything offensive in bespoke white oak cabinets. “Herzog & de Meuron became really fascinated with the project,” recalls Wennett. “They designed everything—every hinge, every door, every vent. We even have Herzog & de Meuron toilet-paper holders. Probably the only ones in the world.” □

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