

So says one Boulevard preservationist to one Boulevard property owner



The only constant, they say, is change. And although the adage applies to nearly everything in life, one group of people make it their business to *prevent* change: historic preservationists. Recently, in the MiMo Historic District along Biscayne Boulevard, one such preservationist has been unusually active. Her name is Teri D'Amico.

D'Amico is outraged over what she considers to be the desecration of the area's most prominent structure -- the Vagabond Motel. Her ire is directed at Eric Silverman, owner of the MiMo gem located at 7301 Biscayne Blvd.

Silverman, whose efforts to turn his property into a marketplace and retail venue were chronicled by *BT* in "Big Man on the Boulevard" (September 2008), kicked off the first phase of a multi-stage redevelopment plan on November 1, with the opening of an indoor farmers market in the Vagabond's former lobby, and a vintage store in what used to be a large guest room. Several outdoor vendors set up shop under white tents in front of the motel, selling books, clothing, handmade jewelry, and other vintage and miscellaneous items.

While the market is becoming increasingly popular with local residents, D'Amico, a member of the nonprofit MiMo Biscayne Association, which promotes and protects the historic district and its architecture, believes Silverman's venture sets a terrible precedent for other historic buildings in the MiMo District. She showed up at the Vagabond Market on opening day, armed with a camera, and later sent pictures and a letter of complaint to neighboring homeowner associations, local activists, and city officials.

Her foremost objection centered on Silverman having removed some of the original, backlit letters from the motel's highly recognizable sign. Letters spelling out the word "Motel" were covered by a canvas banner with the word "Market."

"One of the most important things in the MiMo District is signage," D'Amico asserts. "According

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to the rules of historic preservation, you can cover something up but you can't remove it. Eric is demonstrating his lack of respect for the process of preservation. He needs to follow the proper procedures. He doesn't have a 'Certificate of Appropriateness' from the Historic Preservation Board for his new signage. He skipped that process entirely, and he's in violation."

City of Miami code enforcement officials initially confirmed her allegation.

But when *BT* visited the motel, Silverman protested that he'd been cited in error. The canvas banner he placed over the word "Motel" was stretched so tightly across the sign, and was painted in such a way, that the code enforcement officer who issued the citation didn't realize it was canvas. She believed that new electrical letters had been installed.

Two days after the notice of violation, the city's historic preservation officer, Ellen Ugucioni, wrote a letter to code enforcement on Silverman's behalf, explaining that the Vagabond's current signage is only temporary and that a formal Certificate of Appropriateness is not necessary. She asked that the citation be canceled.

Silverman applied for the certificate anyway, and was approved the same day. "Believe me," he says, "if I could get the [motel] sign fixed quickly, it would be the first thing I do. It's completely rotted on the inside and most of the electrical is faulty." He's having a new sign fabricated, at a cost of \$14,000, which will be a replica of the original. "As soon as the Historic Preservation Board approves it," he says, "the new sign will go up."

D'Amico argues that Silverman violated other preservation rules as well. One example: recently installed silver air-conditioning ducts that jut out of a window along the side of the motel. In addition, she points to the words "Farmers Market" and "Transit Boutique" (a clothing store operated by Silverman's wife) painted onto the façade of the building. "Painting a sign directly onto a historic building is improper," she contends. "He would never have been approved by the Historic Preservation Board to do that."

Silverman counters that the board *did* approve the signage as a temporary measure: "They approved the color, size, font, everything. It's a mock-up of the real sign I'm planning to install. The letters are going to be metal and lit in the back."

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D'Amico doesn't buy it: "As I said before, he's already clearly demonstrated his lack of respect for the preservation process."

This past September, the city's Planning Advisory Board approved the creation of a special "Market District" along Biscayne Boulevard, from 51st Street to 77th Street, which, if passed by the city commission on December 11, will allow Silverman and a few other qualifying property owners, to permanently operate outdoor markets on Saturdays and Sundays from 8:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. Silverman runs his current market under a temporary special-events permit.

From the outset, D'Amico, who shares credit for coining the term "MiMo," was less than enthusiastic about the idea of an outdoor market at the Vagabond. She felt it would provide Silverman with a convenient way to generate income from his property without actually restoring it, and she feared that an outdoor market would morph into a kind of low-rent bazaar. In her view, the market has already morphed. "It's a flea market," she says derisively. "It's a hodgepodge of things they're selling."

The proposed Market District ordinance specifically defines what can be sold, not all early vendors were aware of the restrictions. Ellen Wedner, who recently stepped down as Silverman's special-events manager to concentrate on her vintage store at the motel (Vagabond Vintage), says only one vendor violated those restrictions on opening day. "I was the first one to tell vendors who brought [prohibited] things that they had to leave," she says. "I'm trying to very careful. But I think Teri has a lot of nerve walking around taking pictures. People told me she was standing on the corner, screaming at people: 'You're parking illegally!'"

D'Amico denies saying anything to anyone about parking, and insists she doesn't have anything against Silverman or his market concept. "A marketplace is a phenomenal use for that building," she says, "but the [new ordinance] is going to allow him to set up tents around the perimeter of the building, which will obscure it. So when someone drives down from the Smithsonian in D.C. to see this incredible building that is on the National Register of Historic Places, they'll say, 'Where's the historic building? All I see are tents selling junk.'"

"It's so frustrating," Silverman says with exasperation. "Teri thinks I'm trashing the neighborhood. It's such negative energy. I'm working 16-hour days, seven days a week, to

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make this place vibrant, and these people bust my chops for nothing.”

D'Amico, who is both applauded for her preservation work and unpopular for her assertive tactics, wants preservation standards strictly upheld so the Vagabond can remain a viable symbol of the MiMo District she worked so hard to create. At the same time, Silverman, who is alternately referred to as a clever visionary and an impetuous bulldozer (depending on who is talking), hopes one day to see a return on his multimillion-dollar investment. Both sides are clearly wary of each other.

“If Teri succeeds in putting Eric out of business,” says Wedner, “what will be left but a shell? I'm not sure what would be achieved. It's bad for all of us if the Vagabond goes dark.”

But MiMo architecture is D'Amico's passion. She played a key role in identifying, promoting, and preserving MiMo structures along the Boulevard. It is, in a sense, her legacy. “I will always, until the day I die, be promoting this neighborhood,” she says. “I'm just asking Eric to follow the rules. That's it.”

“I *am* trying to follow the rules,” counters Silverman. “I always go to the preservation board first. And the amount of positive feedback we've gotten from locals has been heart-warming. People thank us. So do I listen to the 300 people who are positive or to the handful who are not? And who's done more than I've done? Show me one person on the Boulevard.”

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