

The Bacardí Building in Miami: Crafting an Identity

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The Bacardí Imports Headquarters in Miami, built in 1964, is a curtain-wall slab clad with building-sized Brazilian murals visible for blocks. The clean, corporate lines point to Mies van der Rowe, the murals to a traditional Latin American craft. This uneasy marriage of Mies and samba raises eyebrows and raises questions. But contradictions in the images projected by Bacardí, the exiled Cuban rum distiller, were a pointed statement of identity that projected corporate strength and political will in the tumultuous early years of Fidel Castro's rule.

The Bacardí building's mixed messages arise from the political history of the Bacardí corporation, its leader, José "Pepin" Bosch, and the architects that he engaged to design a succession of buildings for the company in the 1950s and 1960s. The Bacardí building in Miami is particularly articulate, and can be read as a commentary on the company's recent past and an assertion of identity for the future. The building was designed by Enrique Gutierrez, a Cuban modernist and protégé of Mies van der Rowe.¹ Four years earlier, Gutierrez had served as Mies' local associate on a Bacardí office building planned for Santiago de Cuba. That design was published and became part of Mies' oeuvre but construction was delayed indefinitely when Bacardí's operations in Cuba were nationalized and its owners left the country. So in 1964, Gutierrez was lately of Puerto Rico, having fled Cuba along with his clients.

Gutierrez's building is a glass and steel slab on a plaza but strays from Miesian purity both in its structural sleight of hand and its bright, Latin murals. The building's seven floors are suspended from an open truss at the top that cantilevers off of four columns. The floors hang on cables so they can move slightly in the event of an earthquake.² The ground floor is recessed and transparent to reveal this structural feat. The surface of the plaza is raised to a pedestrian's eye level so receding parallel lines of the paving are not visible and the slab appears to float at an indeterminate distance. This evanescence is reinforced by a plane of reflective glass that faces east onto Biscayne Boulevard and Biscayne Bay, shining copper in

morning light. In contrast, monumental tile murals by Francisco Brennand in a traditional Brazilian technique, "azulejos," cover the entire north and south walls to greet traffic in both directions as billboards.³ Sublime Miesian serenity is overwhelmed both by overt structural expression and by figurative art. Rather than standing refined, abstract and self-contained as a Mies building might, the Bacardí headquarters looks outward to the city, addressing Miami explicitly.

The head of Bacardí, Pepin Bosch, recognized the rhetorical power of architecture. The Miami Headquarters was only the latest in a series of architectural projects that Bosch had undertaken to redefine Bacardí's public identity. When Bosch took charge of the company in 1944, Bacardí rum was identified completely with Cuba.⁴ In one of their advertising posters Bacardí was called "el mejor de Cuba." The company's original Spanish colonial building in Santiago de Cuba had a bar known to tourists and soldiers for its free-wheeling atmosphere. During prohibition in the United States, Cuba had been a favorite spot for US tourists seeking a variety of pleasures illegal at home, and was known as a haven for smugglers (runrunners). Bacardí sold liquor and the Cosa Nostra bought.⁵ In the US, even after prohibition was repealed, Cuban rum was synonymous with libertine licence. (Fig. 1 Bacardi Ad)

Bosch was also active in Cuban politics, working with the underground resistance to reestablish democracy in Cuba.⁶ When Carlos Prío Socarras was elected president in 1949 Bosch was brought into the government as Secretary of the Treasury. He served in that post, an arrangement profitable for both the company and the country, until Batista overthrew Socarras in a coup d'état in 1952. Bosch, still head of Bacardí, was forced to leave Cuba.⁷

In the next years, an exiled Bosch changed the company's identity on several fronts. He established distilleries in Puerto Rico and Recife, Brazil (a sugar-growing region), then moved



Fig. 1. Bacardi Ad, 1940s.

the legal home of the Bacardí brand name to the Bahamas, thus detaching the company from both Cuban sugar and Cuban law. In these new venues, he built modern architecture that projected an international corporate image independent of the product he sold. None of the new buildings included a bar and none had Cuban or specific Latin associations. Abstract and cartesian, modern architecture helped to dissociate the company from its past and construct a new identity that spoke only of a clean, bright future. Bosch changed both the image and the geography of the company so thoroughly that by 1960, Bacardí was known as Puerto Rican rum.

In Cuba, behind the scenes, Bosch worked to overthrow the dictator Batista as he had previously worked to overthrow Machado and establish a democratic system.⁸ When Castro took power in 1959, Bosch was at his side. Bosch mounted an immense placard across the façade of Bacardí's building in Havana, "Gracias, Fidel." He accompanied Castro on a visit to the US, as a delegate for Cuba representing business' confidence in the government.⁹ Bosch was so committed to Cuba's future that he hired Mies van der Rowe to plan new offices in Santiago de Cuba to bring his company home. An Architectural

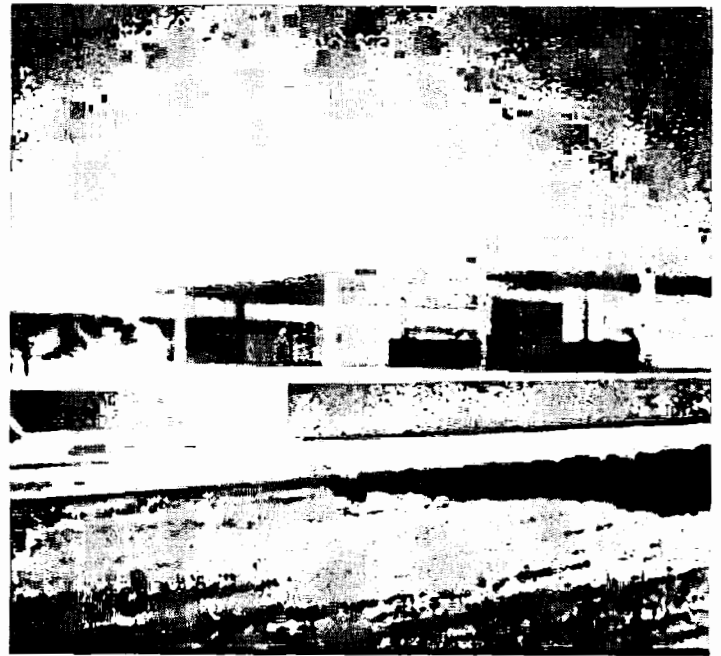


Fig. 2. Mies van der Rowe model for Bacardí Headquarters in Santiago de Cuba, 1959.

Forum article in 1959 quotes Bosch, "Now that we have democracy and justice in Cuba, we can have this building built."¹⁰ (Fig. 2 Mies building in Santiago de Cuba, 1959)

His choice of architect for a new company headquarters was telling. A few years before, the Seagram whiskey company had asserted their corporate dignity in a Mies building in Manhattan.¹¹ Mies' signature work, beyond all others, projected an impeccable refinement that seemed able to erase all associations: geographic or historic. If Mies van der Rowe's architecture could help Seagram to shed all reference to the evils of whiskey and to rise as a corporation, then perhaps it could also help Bacardí, Castro, and Cuba to enter the international marketplace.

Eighteen months later, Castro nationalized Bacardí's property and operations in Cuba, reportedly valued at \$77 million.¹² Bosch and Bacardí left the country taking with them their recipe for their rum, and never returned. Bacardí became a company without a country.

Bosch retreated to the Bahamas, asked Mies to design a new administrative building in Mexico City, and bought property in Miami. Even before he moved to Miami, Bosch became a leader in the exile community doing what he had done so effectively before: organizing and politicking to overthrow a dictator in Cuba. He financed the RECE, Representación Cubana en el Exilio and worked to strengthen the exile community.¹³

When Bacardí left Cuba this second time in October, 1960, the company had several audiences to address. In the international



Fig. 3. Bacardi, Mexico City, 1960.

corporate world. Bacardi had to exude enough confidence to outweigh recent losses. In Cuba, Bosch had to show Castro personally that neither he nor the company were weakened. And in Miami, Bosch needed to reassure the exile community that he was on their side. The Mies building in Mexico City, opened in 1962, served the first two purposes.¹⁴ (Fig. 3 Mies building in Mexico City, 1960) Its dark steel structure, white

curtains and travertine slab turn away from the local setting to address an audience of international architecture connoisseurs and corporate patrons.¹⁵ In Miami however passions were heated and the cool hauteur of the international style may have seemed too abstract. Gutierrez interpreted Miesian surfaces in a hovering form supported by an expressive structure, and to further strengthen the building's impression, Bosch commissioned art for the end walls of the building. Like the placard congratulating Castro in 1959, Brennan's tile murals address the city. The art work however, was not Cuban but Brazilian, specifically from Recife. Big and bright, the murals identified Bacardi with a larger Latin America at the moment that the company let go of Cuba. The murals monumentalize a traditional craft thus lifting it into a modern idiom as "authentic." Thus modernized and displaced to Miami, Francisco Brennan's art spoke not of a nostalgic past but an international future. In its architecture, Bosch seems to present Bacardi as a pan-Latin and global corporation that could rise above Cuba's dictators, sending a message that the exile community should do the same.

The Bacardi building in Miami glosses Mies. Gutierrez transformed the calm Miesian surfaces into a futuristic fortress to support Brennan's modern-authentic Latin American art. In the transformation, the clarity of Mies van der Rohe is lost, replaced by the voice of Pepin Bosch.

NOTES

- ¹ Gutierrez worked for Sagmac International Architects of Puerto Rico
- ² A company statement describing the building notes that the cables are anchored in the foundation, run up through the columns and over pulleys in the truss then down to carry the floor slabs. Hurricanes are a greater threat in Miami than earthquakes.
- ³ A company statement notes that Brennan, a modern painter, believed in an integration of art and architecture toward a total environment. He saw the Bacardi building as an example of this integration at its best.
- ⁴ Bosch married into the Bacardi family, proved his worth in a regional post then quickly rose to leadership.
- ⁵ Hernando Calvo Ospina, *Ron Bacardi: La Guerra Oculta* (Madrid: Red de Consumo Solidario, 2000), p.23
- ⁶ Cuban rum manufacture deals in sugar, alcohol and Caribbean trade, all highly charged political arenas with troubling histories. See Sydney Mintz, *Sweetness and Power* Penguin, NY, 1985
- ⁷ Don Bohning, "Bacardi Boss Leads Three Lives: Rum, Refugees and Rebellion." *Miami News*, August 13, 1964-1964.
- ⁸ Ezra Stoller, *The Seagram Building* (NY: Princeton Architectural Press, 1999), p.1
- ⁹ In October, 1960 Castro nationalized the company's assets in Cuba. Bohning, *The Miami News*
- ¹⁰ Ospina, *Ron Bacardi: La Guerra Oculta*, p.38. Ospina details Bosch's association with the CIA, his influence on US policy toward Cuba as well as his role in US clandestine operations in Nicaragua under Reagan.
- ¹¹ "Four Great Pours: Candela," *Architectural forum* 115 (1961). At the same time adjacent to the Mies project Bacardi built a vaulted structure designed by Felix Candela "Mies Builds in Mexico," *Architectural forum* 116 (1962).
- ¹² "Administration Building," *Arts and architecture* 79 (1962). "An Administrative Building in Mexico," *Zodiac* 10 (1962). "Bacardi Building, Mexico City," *Architectural design* 32 (1962). "Mies Builds in Mexico," *Architectural forum* 116 (1962).