

HISTORICAL RESOURCES
REPORT

THE
NATIONAL
HOTEL

138-4984

prepared by:

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— 2383 Flungo Dr #7
138-4984

NATIONAL HOTEL
1677 COLLINS AVENUE, MIAMI BEACH

On the ocean just north of fashionable Lincoln Road, the National Hotel was built in 1940 as the first hotel on this block. It occupies Lots 7, 8, 13 and 14 of Block 29 in Carl Fisher's First Subdivision of Alton Beach. Across 17th Street, L. Murray Dixon's Grossinger (Ritz Plaza) Hotel was constructed the same year. Next door to the south, the Sagamore would be constructed in 1948.

The National is designated a Contributing building in both the National Register and locally-designated historic districts of Miami Beach, and is one of the finest examples of the Art Deco style, designed by one of the city's most prominent architects, Roy F. France (see biography following). Its distinctive rooftop cupola is a local landmark.

The Building Permit Card (#5053) indicates that the National, at 11 stories, was built with 106 hotel rooms, one apartment, a dining room and swimming pool with cabanas – quite elegant for the Depression era. France's original plans were found on microfilm #14298 in the Miami Beach Building Department. They include all exterior elevations, floor plans, many details, and interior lobby elevations. In the lobby, the original reception desk (now used as a concierge desk) served to separate the front entrance area from the rear lounge (now a bar, with stairway to basement added). The mezzanine balustrade that has been meticulously restored in recent years is shown in detail. A plan of the original east terrace, obliterated by later additions, shows the statue of a female dancing figure that appears in several archival photographs.

The swimming pool and a one-story structure with 21 cabanas were constructed in November 1940 under separate permits. Roy France himself designed the cabana building, and plans were found on microfilm #15052. It was replaced, as we shall see, by another structure in later years.

Several pre-war photographs document the National in its original state. In the early 1940s Roy France published a monograph of his work that includes views of the National: the

front façade; the rear façade, showing the pool, cabanas, and the statue on the terrace; and an interior view of the lounge area when it still opened directly to the outdoors. In these monograph photos, the rooftop cupola is open, but in a similar postcard view from the 1940s it has been closed in, with sash-type windows. An undated brochure from about the same time (when a one-week stay cost \$35 per person!) includes the same photographs. Most of the building's windows were awning-type in these early photos. (The Building Card documents that 169 windows were replaced in 1964, and 50 more in 1978.) Original signage on the building consisted of a neon channel-letter sign on the eyebrow over the entrance, and the name "National" painted on the north and south parapet walls just below the cupola.

Shortly after its completion, the National became one of over 300 Miami Beach buildings that were leased by the US Army-Air Forces for military use during World War II. The city became the training ground for over 500,000 troops from 1942-1945. Hotels such as these served as barracks; restaurants became mess halls; the nearby golf courses and beaches were drill fields. Miami Beach's availability as a training center at that time is credited with shortening the war effort by six to eight months and saving the government \$6 million in building costs.¹ The National returned to civilian use on November 17, 1945.

The building underwent several changes in the post-war years as the economy boomed again. Roy France designed a \$25,000 remodeling in November 1955, found on microfilm #49183. It included the addition of two apartments and an extra stairway in the mezzanine, a "front extension for (a retail) concession," and a porte-cochere or "canopy" over the driveway that was "to not exceed the height and yard limits of the adjoining canopy at the Sagamore Hotel." Air-conditioning was added in 1956 at a cost of \$42,000.

In 1961 the rear cabana building was demolished and replaced with a two-story structure containing ten efficiency apartments. At the same time, the dining room was expanded into what had been the rear patio. Two years later, another two-story, ten-unit apartment addition was built adjoining the earlier one. In 1966, two more stories, with ten more units, were added to the easternmost structure, bringing it to four stories. The architect for this addition was W. M.

¹ "Army Life on Beach in Second Year," Miami Herald, Feb. 19, 1943.

Friedman, and the plans were found on microfilm #76863. By 1972, the National had a total of 138 units, which was 22 more than was allowed, but the addition of 21 more units was approved in another two-story addition, and an 11th floor addition, in 1975.

Two more postcard images remain. One is of unknown date, but probably from the early 1950s; the Sagamore Hotel, built next door in 1948, has been "erased," but the 1955 porte-cochere is not yet present. This view of the front façade has signage on the west parapet, but this might also be a case of "doctoring." The cupola in this view is open.

Another postcard dates from the late 1960s, and shows the front façade graced with vertical stripes of green tile and the porte-cochere with its pole columns and a row of vertical slats in place of the original portico. Neon channel-letter signs, with an enlarged and cursive capital N, are seen on the porte-cochere and on the west parapet. The cupola is now open, and the awning windows have been replaced. An accompanying photo of the rear pool deck – bare cement, devoid of landscaping or statues – shows the four-story addition fronting the ocean.

Fortunately, an award-winning restoration project in the early 1990s brought the National back to its pre-war splendor. The green tile and porte-cochere were removed and the front portico was restored, with the addition of a water feature in the driveway. A new reception desk was built unobtrusively into the lobby, and the swimming pool was replaced by a beautifully landscaped 205-foot lap pool, the longest in the city.

--- Carolyn Klepser, researcher

Dec. 24, 2008

NATIONAL HOTEL
COLLINS AVE. MIAMI BEACH,
FLORIDA.

2289

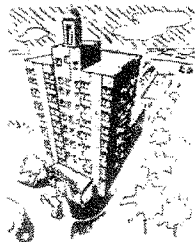


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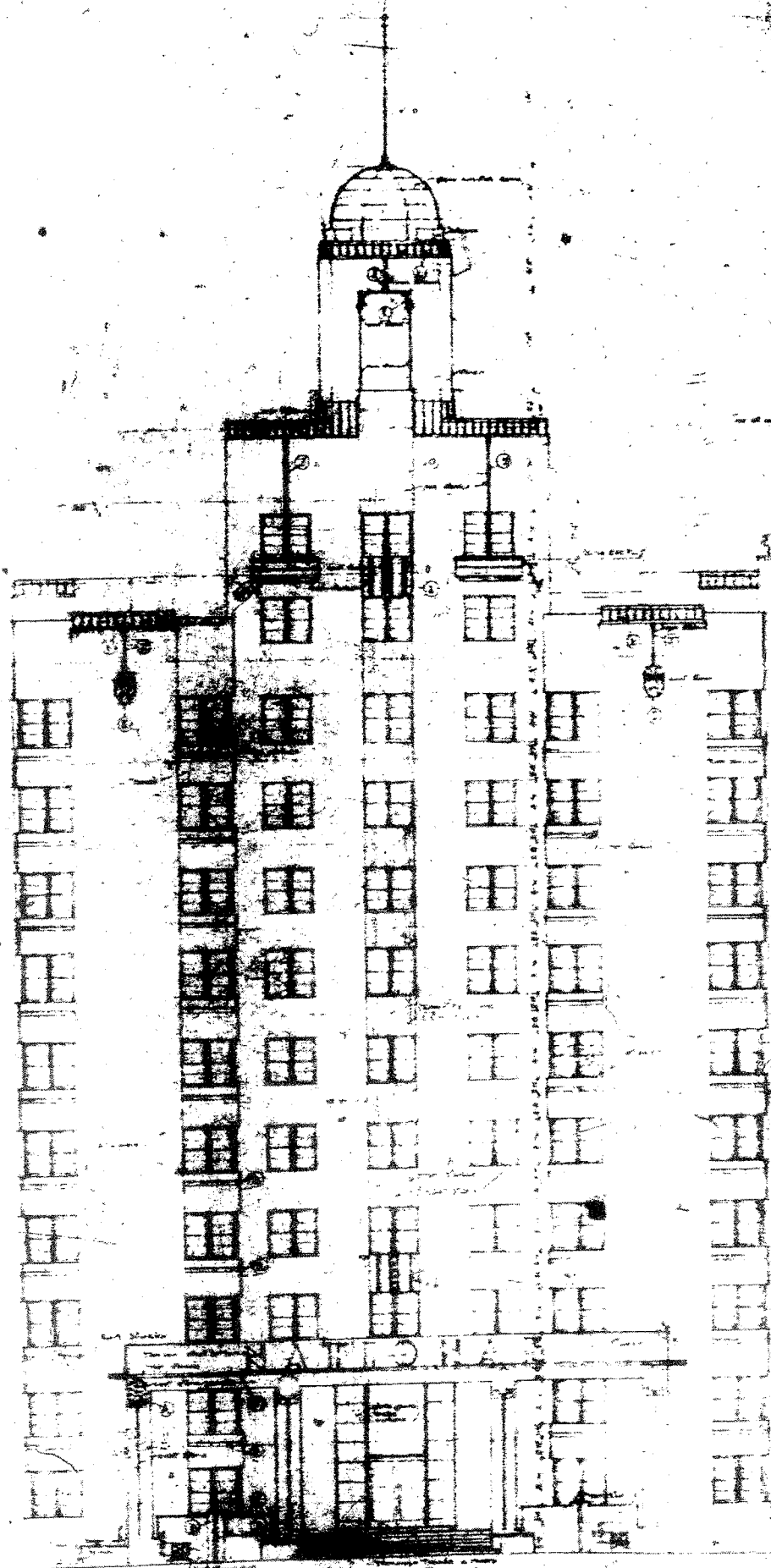


ALL YEAR 'ROUND

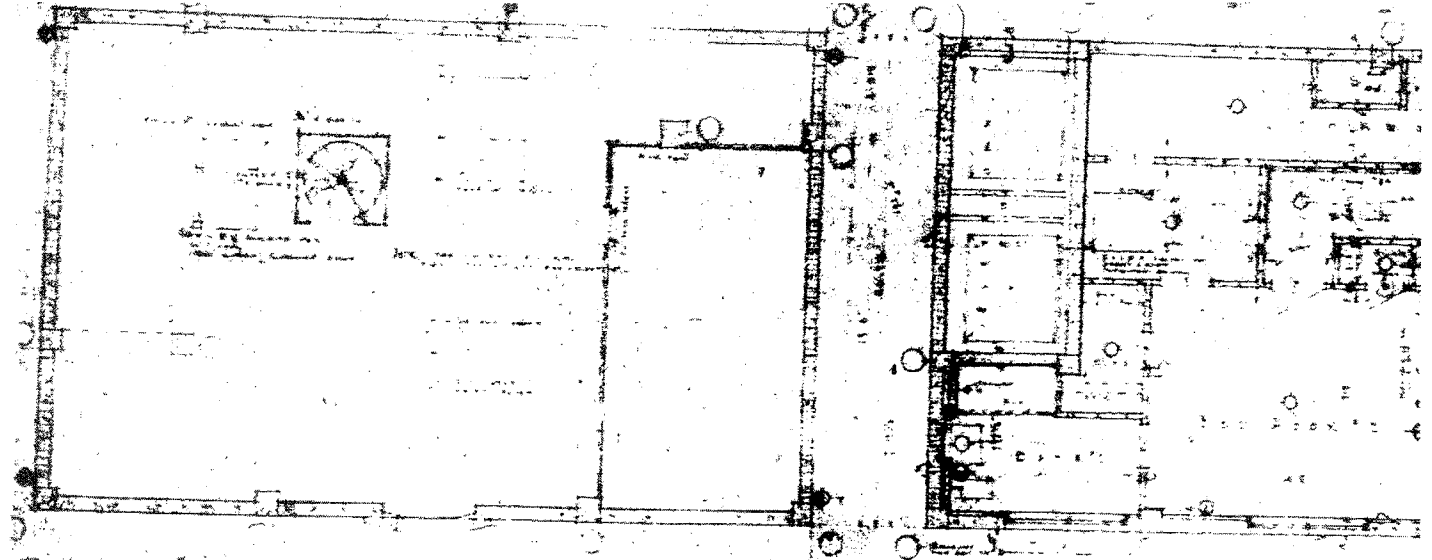
"The Trend is National"



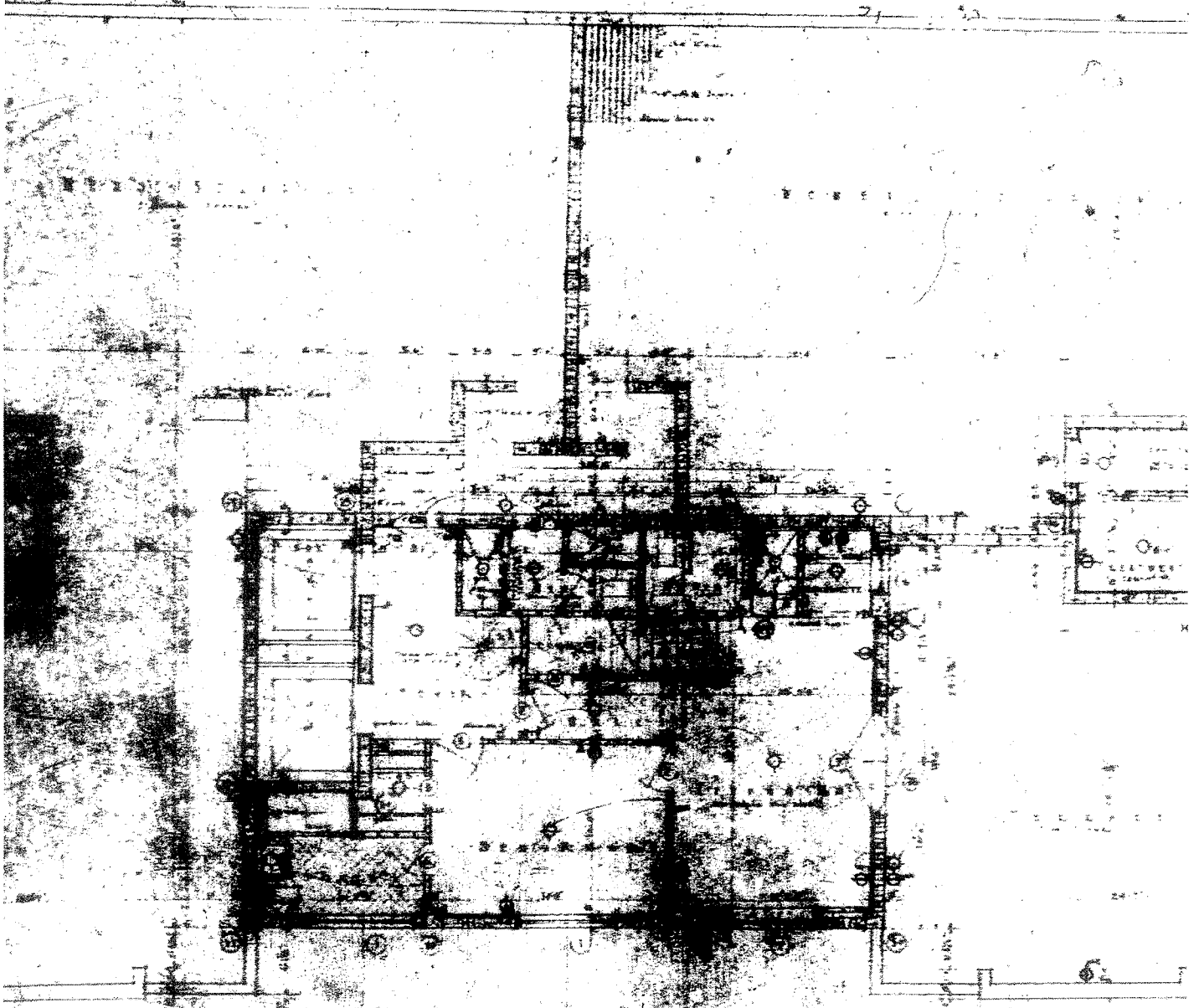
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