

HISTORIC RESOURCES REPORT

OCEAN BLUE HOTEL

334 OCEAN DRIVE
MIAMI BEACH, FLORIDA 33139



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OCEAN BLUE HOTEL
334 OCEAN DRIVE, MIAMI BEACH

This small hotel at the south end of Miami Beach occupies Lot 4 of Block 4 in the Ocean Beach Subdivision, platted by the Lummus brothers' Ocean Beach Realty Company in 1912. While this is the oldest part of the City, it was left out of the National Register Historic District and was only designated locally as the Ocean Beach Historic District in 1996. This building is a Contributing structure in this district.

Built in 1941, the hotel was originally named the Ocean Blue but is now known as Blue Ocean. The Sey Construction Company was the original owner and builder, and it was designed in classic Art Deco style by architect Joseph J. De Brita (see Biography following). This two-story, rectangular flat-roofed building originally had 28 hotel rooms and cost \$30,000 to build. A search of photo and postcard archives has not yielded any early images of the building, but four sheets of original plans (one voided) were found on Microfilm #15724 in the Miami Beach Building Department. The plans are somewhat illegible but show all four elevations, foundation plan, roof plan, and wall sections. While the building is still true to its original overall design, some elements of the front façade appear to have been changed or removed.

Following the Art Deco "rule of three," the front elevation consists of three sections, with the center one projecting forward by several inches. The second story has four windows – two in the center section and one on each side. The plans show each of these windows as a pair of casements flanked by sidelights, but they are now pairs of 4-over-4 sash type.

The plans show a band along the parapet, but it is now plain. The center section of the front parapet is stepped up, with a small, square pinnacle at the midline. The plans seem to show this pinnacle as the extension of four vertical

lines, perhaps incised, that rise up from the central entrance. Two pilasters that flank the entrance also appear to have been extended to the roofline, creating more of a vertical element to the design than exists now. Horizontal “racing stripes” incised in the stucco decorate the side sections of the second story and are probably original. The center section has an incised grid pattern that does not seem consistent with the plans, although the original builders may have deviated from the drawings. The plans also show four decorative scupper drains on the front parapet, only two of which survive, and more along both side parapets, but most of those on the north side are gone.

Returning to the front façade, the original full-length eyebrow tops the first story, but an aluminum extension has been added to it at an unknown date. Two large windows on either side of the entrance still remain as shown in the plans: nine panes of various sizes are set in a grid-like wooden frame. All the panes are fixed except for one at the top that can be opened. The front terrace has a terrazzo floor that matches that in the lobby: a field of white with flecks of green, yellow, red, and black, surrounded by a dark green border. Masonry elements of an enclosure around the front terrace still remain, but the metal railings that were attached to them are gone. The decorative pattern of the railings is seen on the plans.

The plans show the front door with a transom window, but no other details. The transom, as well as the curving walls flanking the door, are now of glass block, which may or may not be original. The panels flanking the door were probably lit from within with neon, accessed by small doors in the lobby wall.

While the lobby interior is not depicted in the plans, its terrazzo floor, recessed ceiling, contoured archway over the stairs, and the angled pink keystone reception desk with a light cove above, all appear to be original. Window and door configurations match the original plans, but the large window on the south wall of the lobby, now sash type, appears on the plans as

a large pane with four-pane sidelights. On the north side of the lobby, two doors lead into small rooms whose original use is unclear; the plans are illegible here. One of these rooms has a large front window.

The Building Card documents that the Ocean Blue had a neon sign installed in December 1941, but it saw little use before the wartime blackout was imposed. Almost as soon as it was completed, the Ocean Blue became one of approximately 300 Miami Beach buildings used by the U.S. Army Air Forces for military training for World War II. Tourists were turned away and hotels became barracks, restaurants served as mess halls, theaters became classrooms, and thousands of new recruits trained daily on the beaches, streets, and golf courses. Military records show the Ocean Blue as having 30 available rooms, so perhaps the two lobby rooms were occupied at that time. The hotel accommodated 62 soldiers and was rented by the government for \$5250 per year.¹ It returned to civilian use on June 12, 1944.

The Ocean Blue originally had 28 rooms: 12 were on the first floor, along a double-loaded corridor, and the second floor had the same arrangement, plus four more rooms at the east end, above the lobby. In 1960, the 24 rooms along the corridors were conjoined in pairs to create 12 apartments, with one of the two bathrooms converted to a kitchen. The four front rooms upstairs were found to be too small to be converted and were left alone. No plans for this project were found on microfilm, and no other major alterations are listed on the Building Card.

---Carolyn Klepser, researcher
June 19, 2013

¹ "Investigation of the National Defense Program," Senate Resolution 6; Jan. 4, 1944, online.

ARCHITECT BIOGRAPHY

Joseph J. De Brita (1901-1992) was born in Italy and came to the U.S. as a child. The 1930 U.S. Census shows him living in Queens, New York, and working as a draftsman. Within a few years, as an architect, he moved to Miami, and designed dozens of buildings in Miami Beach from 1934 through the 1950s, including:

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| Ocean Blue Hotel | 334 Ocean Dr. | |
| Villa Luisa | 125 Ocean Dr. | |
| Eastview Apts. | 1530 Washington Ave. | |
| Dorset Hotel | 1720 Collins Ave. | |
| Coral Reef Hotel | 3611 Collins Ave. | |
| Mt. Vernon Hotel | 6064 Collins Ave. | (with A. Kononoff) |
| Monticello/Harding Hotel | 6077 Indian Creek Dr. | “ “ |