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# VAGABOND MOTEL

7301 BISCAYNE BOULEVARD

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## Designation Report



City of Miami

REPORT OF THE CITY OF MIAMI  
PRESERVATION OFFICER  
TO THE HISTORIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL PRESERVATION BOARD  
ON THE POTENTIAL DESIGNATION OF THE  
VAGABOND MOTEL  
AS A HISTORIC SITE

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for Janus Research, Consultants

Prepared by Sarah E. Eaton, Preservation Officer

Passed and  
Adopted on \_\_\_\_\_

Resolution No. \_\_\_\_\_

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I. GENERAL INFORMATION

Historic Name:

Vagabond Motel

Current Name:

Vagabond Sunshine Motel

Location:

7301 Biscayne Boulevard  
Miami, Florida

Present Owner:

Vagabond Motel Inc.  
7301 Biscayne Boulevard  
Miami, FL 33138

Present Use:

Commercial

Zoning District:

C-1, R-3, with an SD-9 Overlay

Tax Folio Number:

01-3207-034-0010

Boundary Description:

All of Block 6 of the plat of RE-PLAT OF BLOCK 6 OF BELLE MEADE OF MIAMI SECTION 1, as recorded in Plat Book 56 at Page 27, of the Public Records of Miami-Dade County, Florida.

Classification:

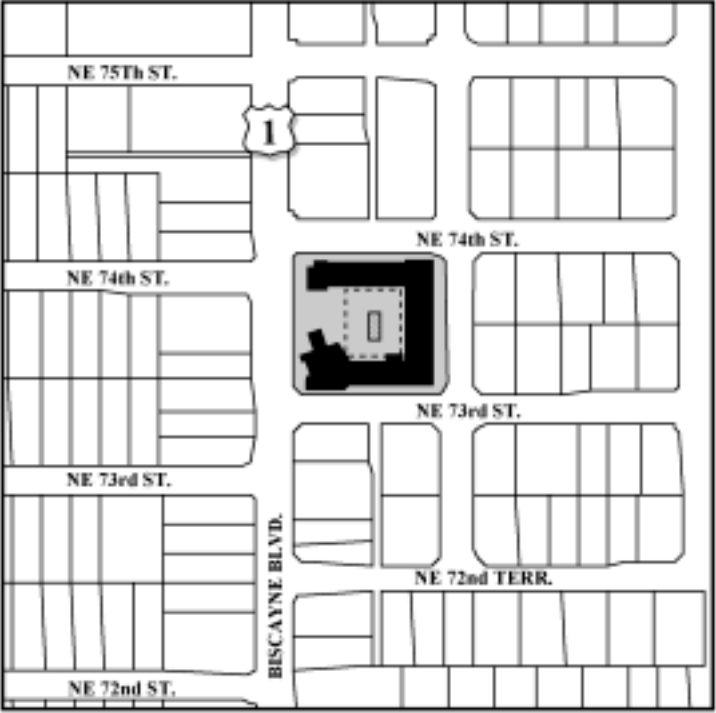
Historic Site

# VAGABOND MOTEL

7301 BISCAYNE BOULEVARD



location



site plan

## II. SIGNIFICANCE

### Specific Dates:

1953

### Architect:

B. Robert Swartburg

### Builder/Contractor:

Unknown

### Statement of Significance:

The Vagabond Motel is architecturally significant not only as an exemplary example of the mid-1950s Miami Modern style, but also as a work by prominent architect B. Robert Swartburg. It is particularly noteworthy for a design that incorporates elements of post-war automobile culture. It is also important for its details, materials and craftsmanship, as reflected in its open-air verandah with catwalk, rock face feature area and nautical theme. The motel is historically significant as a reflection of the development trends in Greater Miami during the mid-twentieth century.

The Vagabond Motel embodies the characteristics of the Miami Modern style, including an open-air plan, jalousie windows, geometric designs, overhanging roof lines, stone facing and masonry sculptural elements that denote marine life and other nautical themes. The porte-cochère, located at the southwest corner, curves wave-like at the end and is supported by V-shaped pipe columns. The motel also embodies a "classic with simple modern," B. Robert Swartburg design.

Swartburg, a leading modernist architect in Miami, was born in Bucharest, Romania in 1895 and immigrated to the United States with his parents when he was a child. He began his architectural ascent at an early age. In his father's workshop he drilled wormholes in furniture. By age 11 he was working in an architect's office for \$3 a week. He studied architecture at Columbia University and received additional architectural training at the American Academy in Rome and the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris. Although Swartburg designed structures in Miami in the mid 1920s, his most prominent work dates from 1944, when he made the City his permanent home, to his retirement in 1972. During that time he not only designed many of "South Florida's new landmarks" such as the Metro Justice Building and the Delano Hotel, but also created the murals and sculptures found within them. Many of Swartburg's early Miami buildings bridged the gap from Streamline Moderne to Modern. Later designs exemplified simple modernist ideas

of functionality. Examples of other Swartburg designed buildings in Sunny Isles, Miami and Miami Beach include Atlantique Motel, Shalemar Motel, Sorrento Hotel, Marseilles Hotel, Miami Beach Athletic Club (demolished) and Bay View Court.

The Vagabond Motel also reflects the development trends of Greater Miami during the mid-twentieth century. As the City progressed from a resort area to a more diversified economy, extensive new suburban areas were built up and the automobile became a dominant force in architecture. A large number of motels appeared along Biscayne Boulevard during this time. Additionally, this era marked a new fashion in building design that incorporated “jet-age styling” and modern materials. Among the motels located along Biscayne Boulevard, the Vagabond Motel is one of the more unique and significant in the City’s history. It was completed in 1953 and was initially a motel and nightclub that served travelers visiting Miami.

Relationship to Criteria for Designation:

As stated above, the Vagabond Motel has significance in the historical and architectural heritage of the City of Miami; possesses integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling and association; and is eligible for designation under the following criteria:

3. Exemplifies the historical, cultural, political, economic, or social trends of the community.

Following the outbreak of World War II, Greater Miami became a war camp and major training center for the Armed Forces. The end of the war brought an influx of people, as former soldiers who had trained in Miami decided to settle in the City. Consequently, Greater Miami experienced a post-war boom with new subdivisions dotting what had once been the outskirts of Miami. For the first time, automobiles were a dominant force in city planning and architectural design. Businesses, resorts and motels along major thoroughfares catered to automobile drivers. It was in this climate that B. Robert Swartburg designed the Vagabond Motel, which is one of the most noteworthy of the large number of motels located along Biscayne Boulevard.

5. Embodies those distinguishing characteristics of an architectural style, or period or method of construction.

The Vagabond Motel typifies the Post-Modern style, also known as Miami Modern, that was common in South Florida motel architecture from 1945 to the late 1960s. Its setback, driveway and porte-cochère reflect motor-age sensibilities. The Vagabond Motel has a floor plan organized around an open-air verandah with a catwalk on one side. It has overhanging roof plates, projecting floor slabs and open staircases. Additional design elements of the Vagabond Motel that exemplify the Miami Modern architectural vocabulary include a rock face feature area, a steel and neon sign, jalousie windows, a

flat roof and masonry sculptural elements that denote marine life and other nautical themes.

6. Is the outstanding work of a prominent designer or builder.

Miami architect B. Robert Swartburg designed the Vagabond Motel in 1953. Swartburg was one of the most prominent architects in the City, creating such notable structures as the Miami Civic Center Complex, the Bass Museum and the Delano Hotel in Miami Beach. His designs embodied the functional simplicity of the post-war styles that dominated Greater Miami in the 1950s and 1960s. After Swartburg's death in 1975, his library of architectural books, plans and drawings was donated to the University of Miami. His life's work can be seen in hotels, schools and civic buildings located throughout Greater Miami.

7. Contains elements of design, detail, materials or craftsmanship of outstanding quality or which represent a significant innovation or adaptation to the South Florida environment.

Miami embraced Post-Modernism long before it became fashionable. Beginning with the huge resort hotels of Miami Beach, Post-Modern sensibility progressed to cover everything from temples to office buildings. Recently, "Miami Modern" has been accepted into the architectural lexicon as a definitive regional term. The Vagabond Motel is an outstanding example of the eclectic, often outlandish, Miami Modern architectural style. As with many modernist structures throughout the United States, the design for the building relies heavily on post-war automobile culture and jet-age styling. However, the swimming pool and open-air verandah represent an adaptation to the Miami climate, and the "pastiche exoticism" of its signage and nautical theme ornamentation is purely South Florida.



### III. DESCRIPTION

#### Present and Original Appearance:

#### Setting:

The Vagabond Motel is located on the block bound by NE 74<sup>th</sup> Street to the north, NE 73<sup>rd</sup> Street to the south, NE 6<sup>th</sup> Court to the east and Biscayne Boulevard to the west. It occupies the entire block. The main entrance is on the south side at NE 73<sup>rd</sup> Street. The courtyard and parking lot face Biscayne Boulevard. The block is surrounded by commercial structures to the north, south and west and a residential neighborhood to the east.

#### Description:

The Vagabond Motel is a U-shaped structure surrounding a courtyard with a parking lot and empty swimming pool. The central block is two stories flanked by one-story wings on either side. The front office is located in the southwest corner of the building. The walls on the front façade of the building are covered with a stone veneer and ceramic tiles. A shed roof covered with red tiles has been attached to the original flat roof. The windows are original metal sliding or jalousie types. The updated doors of the motel rooms are flush to the wall and painted orange.

The west elevation of the motel's two-story section, which faces the courtyard, has three bays. The original smooth stucco of the central bay has been covered with a stone facing; its opening has been covered with a large, square concrete screen. The original sign on the central bay has been updated. There is a rectangular geometric balustrade on the north and south bays of the second floor. The geometric design continues on the handrails of the symmetrical staircases that flank the central bay. The handrails and balustrade are updated replacements of the original simple iron ones. The first floor supports are V-shaped pipe columns. The west elevations of the motel's one-story wings have open-air verandahs with square brick columns supporting shed roofs.

The exterior of the front office is covered in stucco and stone veneer with metal fixed-pane windows. It has a stucco-covered parapet with an eyebrow ledge, brick planters and a large, V-shaped brick column attached to its west elevation. The column supports the brown and yellow neon motel sign, which has scalloped edges and stars "falling" down along a V-shaped pipe column on the west side. In the sign, the word "Vagabond" is written in a Post-Modern style font. A second, modern, inverted-cross shaped sign is located west of the original. The porte-cochere is attached to the north side. It curves up at the end and is supported by V-shaped pipe columns with saucers at the top.

At the northwest corner of the motel is a small section that extends slightly from the main block. It has round decorative elements and a stone fountain with a masonry statue depicting three women in a shell flanked by dolphins on the northwest corner.

The exteriors of the motel's north and south elevations are covered with a smooth stucco finish. There are air conditioning units built into the walls. The windows are multi-light jalousies and there are overhanging eaves.

The east elevation is the rear façade of the central block. It is two stories in height with three bays. The center bay extends outward. There is a rear entrance on this elevation that is flanked by bricks. The windows are multi-light jalousies and there are air-conditioning units built into the wall. The second floor has an eyebrow ledge. There are vents at the foundation level. The southeast section of this elevation shows evidence of a fire.

The courtyard is surfaced with green painted cement. The pool is sited in the center with a small, rectangular covered area to its west. The pool is rectangular with the long edge running north/south. Surrounding the pool area to the north, south and east is a green iron fence. To the west is a brick wall with landscaped vegetation covering much of it. Placed at intervals along the fence are metal lampposts that once held paired brise-soleil light fixtures. The fixtures have been replaced with large, round bulbs. Within the fenced area of the courtyard are masonry statues of dolphins, masonry benches, round tables with umbrellas, beach chairs and masonry flowerpots. In the general courtyard area are islands of palm trees, masonry flowerpots and round tables with umbrellas. An iron fence surrounds the entire property.

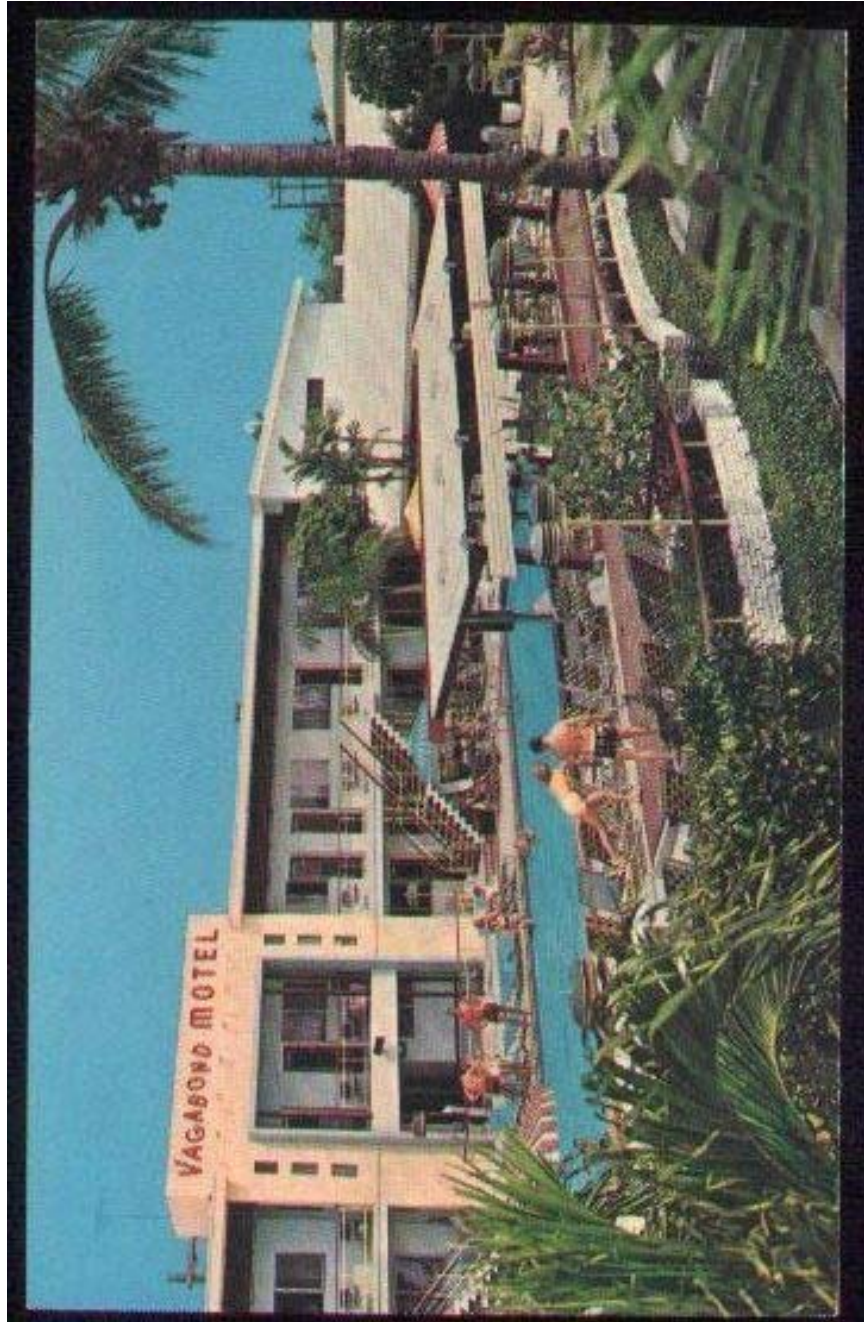
There are several elements on the Vagabond Motel that have been altered or updated since it was built. Many areas, such as the courtyard, show evidence of deterioration and neglect. However, the resource still retains integrity and exhibits its major character-defining elements.

#### Contributing Structures and/or Landscape Features:

The Vagabond Motel is the only contributing structure on the site. The courtyard area is a contributing landscape feature.



Vagabond Motel  
7301 Biscayne Boulevard  
East façade  
2002



Vagabond Motel  
7301 Biscayne Boulevard  
East façade  
Circa 1955

#### IV. PLANNING CONTEXT

##### Present Trends and Conditions:

The Vagabond Motel is an excellent example of the Miami Modern style in the City of Miami. It still serves its original purpose as a motel and most of the design elements that make it unique remain intact. Furthermore, there is a growing awareness and appreciation of Miami Modern and its role in the architectural evolution of the City of Miami.

##### Preservation Incentives:

Over the years, the Vagabond Motel has deteriorated, and appears to be in need of substantial rehabilitation. It is among the most distinctive of buildings from the Miami Modern era along Biscayne Boulevard, and any future alterations or additions should respect its historic character.

Should the owners wish to invest in its upgrade, the increased property tax resulting from a higher assessed value could be deferred for a period of 10 years under the Miami-Dade County ad valorem tax incentive ordinance. Additionally, if the Vagabond Motel were substantially rehabilitated and listed in the National Register of Historic Places, either individually or as part of a historic district, the owners would be eligible for a 20% Investment Tax Credit.

V. Bibliography

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