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Sunshine State of Mind

Universal's Cabana Bay Beach Resort | Orlando, Florida
Shulman + Associates

A colossal destination hotel riffs on midcentury design to create a new family vacation experience.

By Beth Broome



SINCE THE WALT DISNEY Company imported its brand from Anaheim, California to Orlando, Florida, in 1971, its themed empire has become synonymous with the family vacation. A trip to Disney World is a childhood rite of passage, and, for some adults, akin to the fulfillment of a religious pilgrimage. But over the decades, other entertainment enterprises have edged in for a piece of the action, and now 62 million tourists flock to Orlando—the most-visited U.S. destination—every year. Comcast, which owns Universal Parks & Resorts, has played aggressively, winning significant market share. Contributing to Universal's expansion is the recent arrival of Diagon Alley, its second Harry Potter-themed attraction. Also making an impact is the nearby Cabana Bay Beach Resort, a sprawling, fanciful, midcentury-themed family hotel designed by Miami-based Shulman + Associates that, with 1,800 rooms, is Universal Orlando's fourth and largest such facility.

Universal recognized the need for a moderately priced amenity (the company's three other local properties—which, like Cabana Bay, are shared ventures with Loews—are classified as deluxe). "We kept coming back to the 'drive-to' vacation

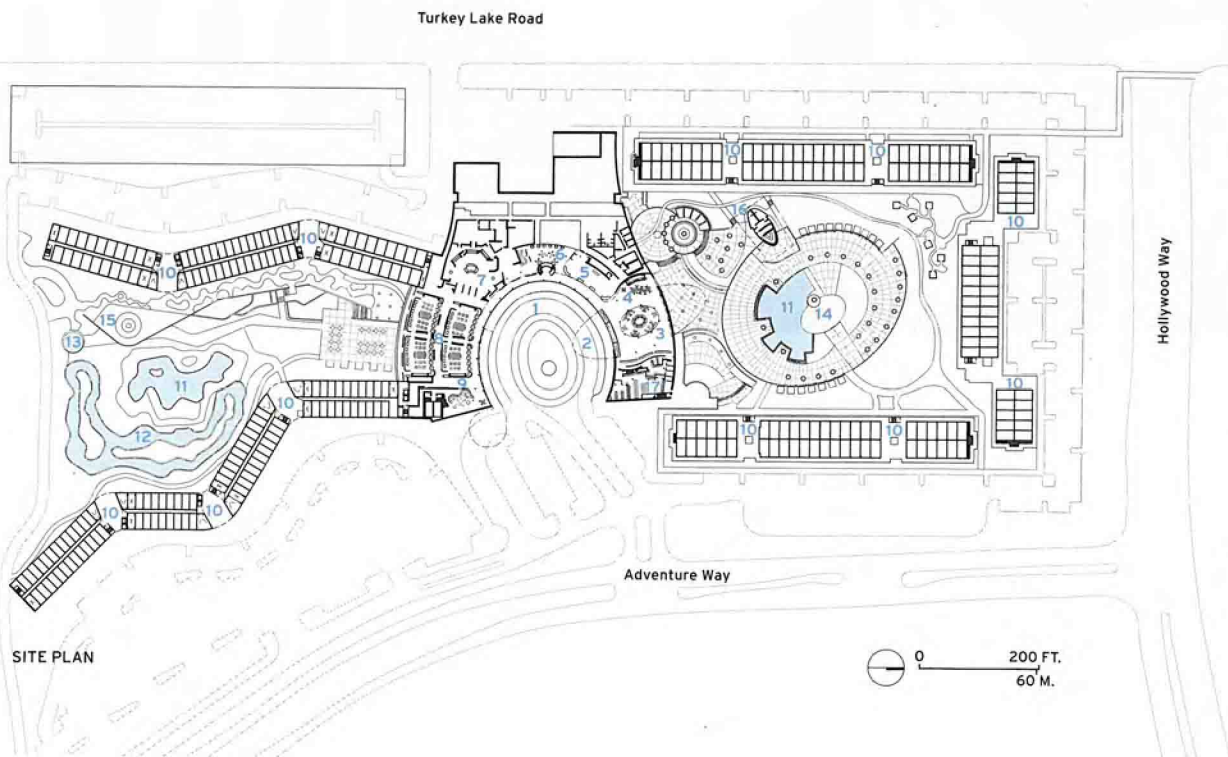
urban planner as well as an architect." And while Universal saw the theming as an extension of its mission to create immersive experiences, Shulman was intrigued by the possibility of honoring the languages of the Florida Modern period in a contemporary reinterpretation.

Approaching this massive project, Shulman riffed on his deep knowledge of midcentury hotel design. "The most important component, which we elevated to the major organizing feature, was the pool deck," he says, referring to the ubiquity of this element as lifestyle space in the postwar era at Florida institutions from Miami's luxurious Fontainebleau to the smallest motel on the strip in Sunny Isles Beach. Traditionally, follies were scattered around this sheltered area—shade structures, diving platforms, barbecue pits—features that animated the open space and became



of the '50s and '60s that represented a simpler time," says Russ Dagon, vice president and executive project director for Universal Parks & Resorts. "We fell in love with the idea of the motel building—one that would resonate with anyone who's been to a coastal hotel." The corporation's creative group found Allan Shulman, who has researched and written extensively on Miami Modernism and whose firm has considerable hospitality and midcentury restoration and adaptive-reuse projects in its portfolio. But its hotels have been in the urban boutique category. Surrounded by exurban bleakness on 40 acres, Cabana Bay, with its swimming pools, water follies, bowling alleys, and 650-seat dining hall, is another beast altogether (and there are already plans to expand). "This is a hotel of another order—it's more of a campus or a complex," says Shulman. "I had to think like an

CHECKOUT TIME
Seven-story guest room wings (opposite) face each across an open space animated with pools, sunning decks, and other amenities. The elliptical porte cochere (above) sweeps guests from the entry court into the lobby.



- 1 ENTRY COURT
- 2 PORTE COCHERE
- 3 LOBBY/TERRARIUM
- 4 SWIZZLE LOUNGE/BAR
- 5 GIFT SHOP
- 6 STARBUCKS
- 7 BAYLINER DINER FOOD COURT
- 8 DINING HALL
- 9 LOUNGE
- 10 GUEST ROOMS
- 11 POOL
- 12 LAZY RIVER
- 13 JACUZZI
- 14 "DIVING TOWER" STRUCTURE
- 15 HIDEAWAY BAR & GRILLE
- 16 ATOMIC TONIC BAR
- 17 STORAGE



POOL PARTY

Guest room bars with motel-style exterior corridors (opposite) form a room around a pool and the follies that surround it, such as concrete-shaded picnic benches. The curvilinear arrival building (top, right), screened with perforated metal panels, connects a double-height concourse inside with the entry court. A water slide (right) deposits riders beneath a sculptural precast concrete "diving tower."



distinguishing features of each hotel. True to this model, at Cabana Bay the architects created a kind of “great room,” with a large pool at the north end, by enclosing the space with four-story orthogonal bars of guest rooms that open to exterior walkways. To the south, the seven-story guest room wings (with interior corridors) extend out as long zigzagging arms embracing the breezy green space and pools in between. Projecting concrete floor plates and colorful grids of aluminum panels provide depth and character to the huge facades, stylistic moves that borrow from popular midcentury architecture, which often relied on simple means and legible functionality for expression. “In Florida,” notes Shulman, pointing to the shadows cast across the elevations, “architects who could not indulge in expensive materials understood that they had the sun to work with.”

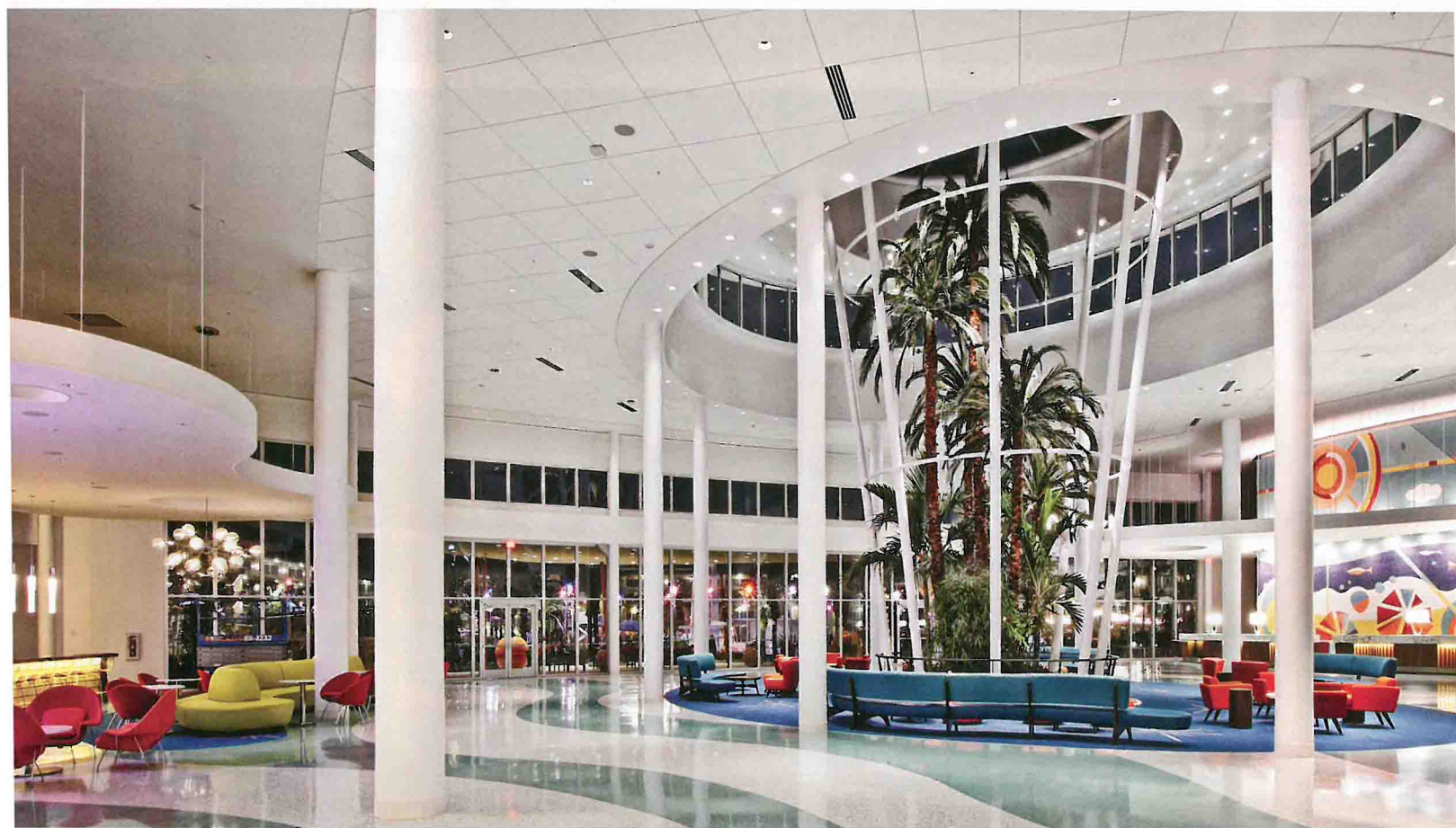
Linking the north and the south is a curvilinear arrival building that contains the lobby, restaurants, lounge, and recreation spaces. Recalling grand entry sequences of the past, a broad circular drive-up space with a swoopy porte cochere whisks guests into a soaring, white, terrazzo-floored lobby with a giant palm-tree “terrarium” as its focal point. This space hums throughout the day as guests come and go from the theme parks and spill out in bathing suits to the enormous pool area beyond. A mall-like “concourse” also leads from the lobby, linking a gift shop, Starbucks, food court, double-height 14,000-square-foot dining hall, and, on a mezzanine level, an arcade and bowling alley. (The program developed over the rapid, 26-month design and construction

period, notes Shulman.) Big, open public spaces are complemented with smaller environments: conversation areas, cabanas, fire pits, and other amenities that break down the scale and facilitate intimate gatherings.

In sync with Shulman’s approach, Philadelphia-based Daroff Design considered the interiors also as a modern interpretation of the time. “Every element of the lobby was imagined to be ‘bigger than life’ rather than a slavish recreation of the period,” says principal designer Karen Daroff. Sprightly finishes and motifs throughout the resort underscore the pursuit of leisure. The conceit is potent, but it doesn’t quite go over the top: a vibrant palette of aqua, orange, and lime green is tamed by terrazzo, teak, walnut, and bronze. And the smartly designed guest rooms, the suites in particular, evoke the traditional motel room while correcting its missteps, offering added daylight, privacy, and flexibility with logical floor plans and screening devices.

With Cabana Bay, the design team has taken an outside commercial venture and used it to elevate the experience of the middle-market family vacation. Despite the staff’s bowling shirts, the ‘50s pop soundtrack, and vintage cars out front, the hotel does not lapse into nostalgia. “For me, the midcentury era represented a time of optimism, the feeling of endless possibilities,” says Shulman. The complex, with its logical spatial organization, clean lines, and jaunty vibe saluting simple pleasures, communicates this idealism while bringing dignity to a building type that typically lacks this quality. ■

DREAM VACATION
Morris Lapidus’s terrarium for Bal Harbour’s Americana Hotel inspired the one in Cabana Bay’s lobby (below), set against terrazzo floors and a whimsical tile mural behind check-in. For the interiors, Daroff Design researched midcentury pop culture, furniture, and craft. The color palette carries into guest rooms, including family suites (opposite, top), which include kitchenettes and sitting areas. Rows and rows of cabanas and deck chairs (opposite, bottom) accommodate the thousands of guests.





credits

ARCHITECT: Shulman + Associates – Allan Shulman, design principal; Derek Sommers, Juan Alvarenga, Brand Gonzalez, Luis Sanchez, Herman Courrau, Michelle Bilbao, Wesley Kean, project managers/designers; Jason Walker, Claudia Aguado, Andres Camacho, Mike Galea, Smitha Vasan, Monica Socorro, graphics

ARCHITECT OF RECORD: Lindsay Pope
Brayfield Clifford & Associates

INTERIOR DESIGN & ARCHITECTURE: Daroff Design – Karen Daroff, principal designer; Katie Pass, associate designer; Richard Lanning, senior architect

LANDSCAPE: ESciences

CLIENT: Universal Parks & Resorts/Universal Creative/Loews Hotels

SIZE: 1,250,000 square feet

COMPLETION DATE: March 2014

SOURCES

GLASS: Oldcastle BuildingEnvelope

METAL PANELS: McNichols

ELEVATORS: Otis

SPECIAL SURFACING: Formica

