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AS SEEN IN  
**HOME**  
MIAMI

*How David Wolkowsky  
Helped Shape Modern Florida*

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DEEP SHADES OF LAPIS LAZULI AND ELECTRIC TURQUOISE undulate to the horizon in every direction. Little mangrove islands vibrate in the steady trade winds. Pelicans dive, tucking back their wings an instant before pounding the water. In the distance, specks of white — herons — creep across the seascape. Here, on the southernmost inhabited island in the United States, in the middle of a national wildlife refuge, David Wolkowsky is having lunch.

Sitting on a deck at his under-renovation house nine miles off Key West, the octogenarian architect and designer dines on grilled snapper, turkey hot dogs, broccoli and iced tea. Inspired by an old gulf lighthouse, the three-story house with its sloping metal roof, glass front and rooftop deck is expansive yet restrained. It seems an almost organic part of the 25-acre island's grassy palm and sea grape-dotted landscape. The eye rolls over it gently.

Wolkowsky has made a career of finding understated modernist beauty where others never thought to look. Even now, at 88 years old, the man who transformed Philadelphia's Rittenhouse Square area from slum to desirable neighborhood — and later put Key West on the international tourism map — can't resist a good renovation project.

But at this moment he is still. He gazes out to sea, then turns to a guest. "Isn't this beautiful?"

Wolkowsky's private island, Ballast Key, is named for the nautical litter left by a Spanish galleon that foundered there in 1630. After years of taking friends to the spot for picnics, Wolkowsky

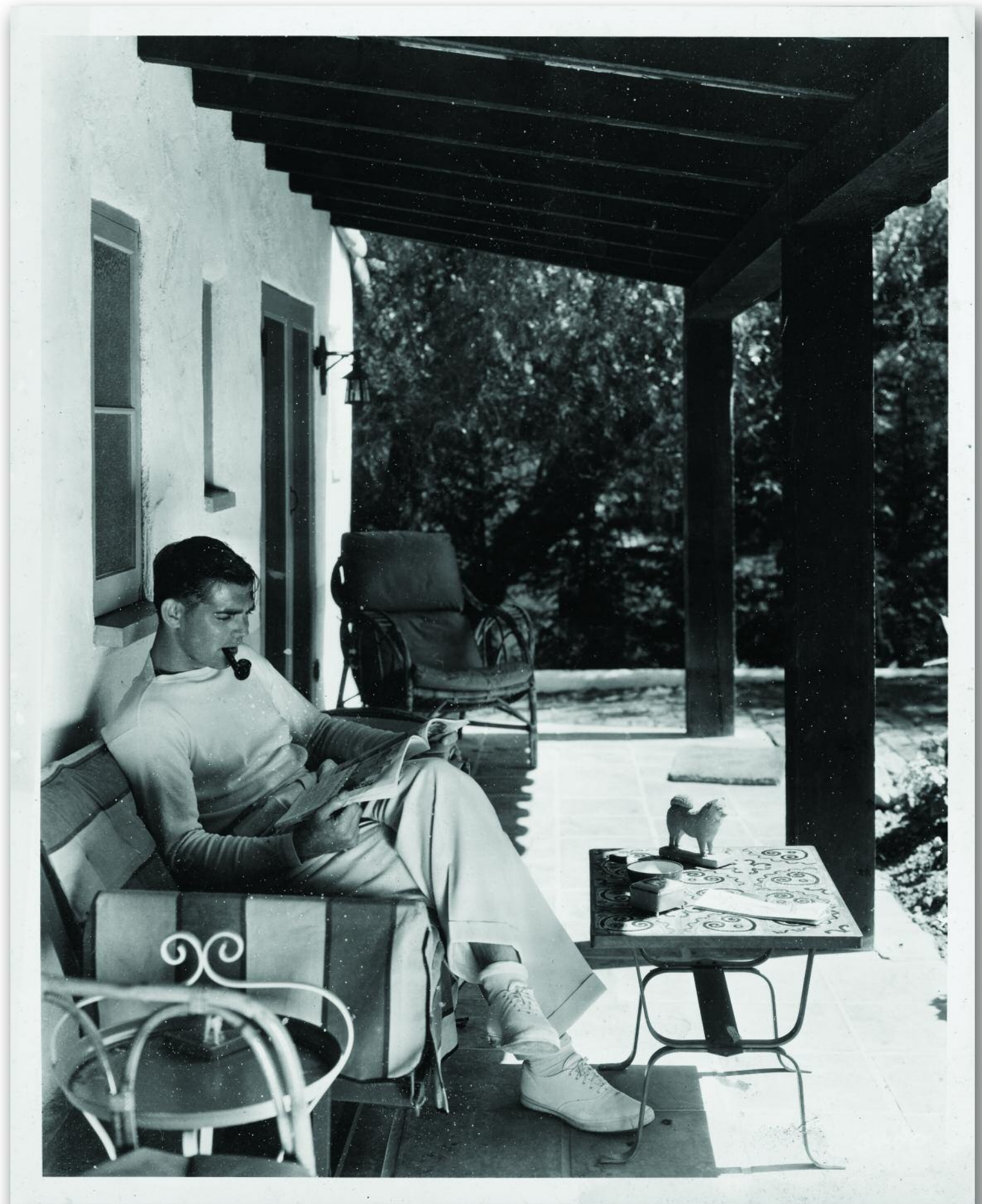
jumped at the chance to buy it for \$160,000 in 1974. The Navy had no use for the World War II-era bombing target, now a part of the 300-square-mile Great White Heron National Wildlife Refuge.

For years, there was no pier and no running water. Still, Wolkowsky's hideaway played host to the likes of Tennessee Williams, Lillian Hellman, Rudolf Nureyev, Leonard Bernstein, Jimmy Buffett and the Bee Gees or the "Bee Jays," as Wolkowsky pronounces it. Williams, a close friend, spent many hours on the island painting watercolors and sipping red wine.

It's not hard to imagine Wolkowsky, dressed in a white linen shirt, loose slacks and a wide straw hat, entertaining Williams and others. Showing guests around his island or his beloved Key West, he seems indefatigable. His frequent high-pitched laughs come in quick exhalations. Despite breaking his hip in a recent fall, the lifelong bachelor still drives himself occasionally and often waves off help navigating stairs.

First stop on a recent Wolkowsky tour: the Pier House. A jewel in the crown of Wolkowsky's career, Key West's first real resort is approaching its 40th anniversary, going strong at an age when

**PREVIOUS PAGES:** David Wolkowsky's house on Ballast Key. Wolkowsky, photographed at his Miami Beach house. **ABOVE:** Wolkowsky in front of the tiny preserved "doll house" (named for his sister) that he donated to the Key West Art and Historical Society. **OPPOSITE:** An early portrait of Wolkowsky shows him relaxing in the loggia of his home.



many American hotels are scheduled for the wrecking ball. On the water just off Mallory Square, the concrete struck-block buildings and slanted roofs remain strikingly modern in appearance despite numerous renovations and the passing of time.

Wolkowsky started work on the resort around the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis. Key West's beaches were known more for concertina wire and missile launchers than sunbathers. In a town Wolkowsky likes to call a "wooden museum," the Pier House was daring both architecturally and financially.

"I wasn't that confident. I just gambled," Wolkowsky recalls. "I wanted something that wasn't competitive with the Bahamian and New England architecture."

He had bought the two-acre lot, home to aged shrimp houses and transients, for less than \$100,000. He hired Greek architect Yiannis Antoniadis, whose Coconut Grove houses Wolkowsky admired, and got to work. The block design was a "combination of design and economy," Wolkowsky says, an elegant way to

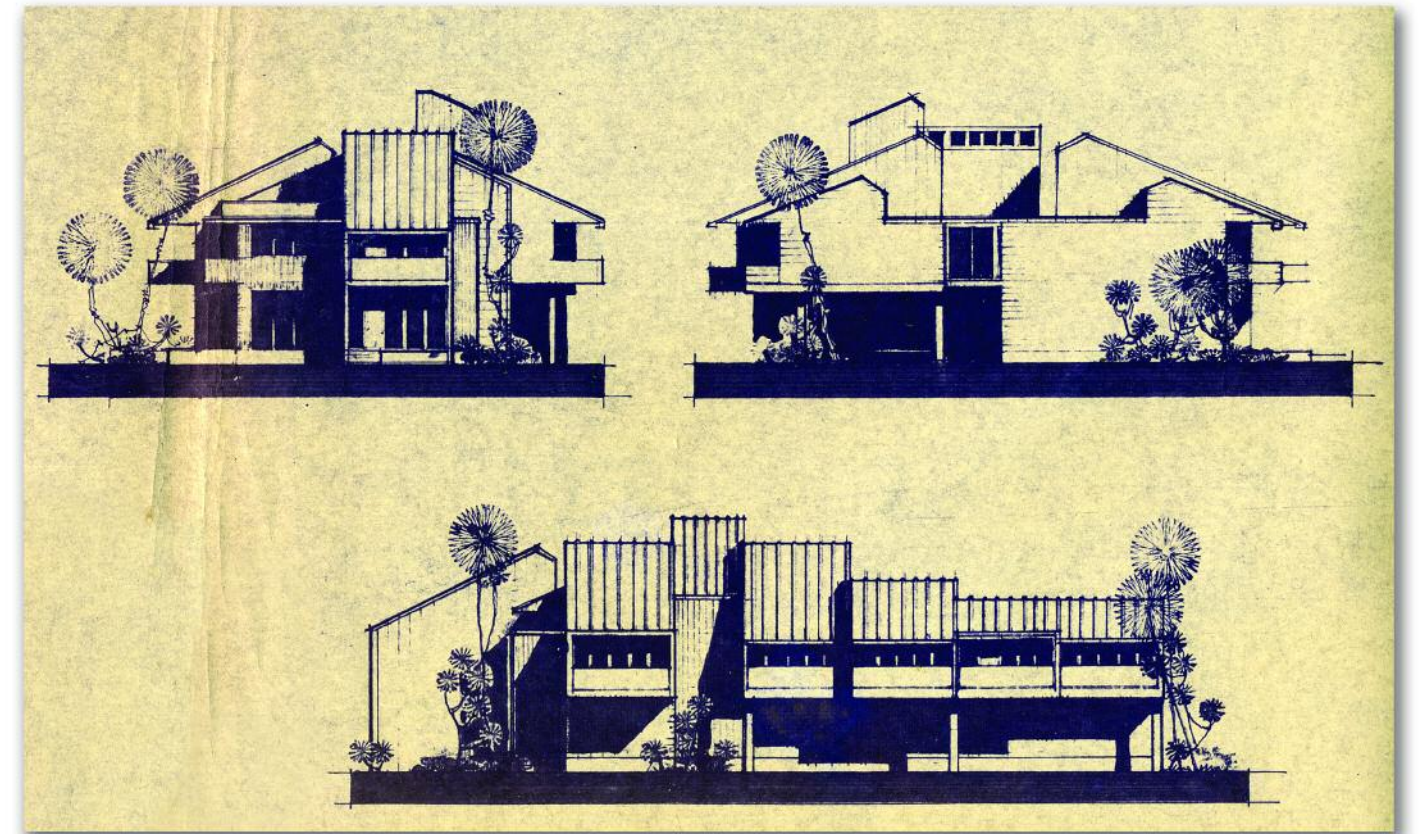
build 50 rooms for less than \$300,000.

The Pier House opened in 1968, almost immediately garnering attention from architecture critics and travel writers. Rene D'Hamoncourt of MoMA called it "the most unusual motel design in America." Locals were less excited. Some decried the modernist structure as tacky, ugly and out of place. Those who ventured on the grounds, however, found a surprisingly rustic setting sympathetic to its island surroundings.

The lobby was accented with driftwood and Key West scenes painted by local artist Mario Sanchez. Rooms, painted in soft blue and green hues, were set around a central atrium with lush plantings and a sunken floor with redwood benches. Balconies had peaceful little patios with ocean and gulf views. The outdoor bar was made of wood from an old wharf in Marathon.

The first few years were slow. Wolkowsky sometimes worked behind the desk, checking in overflow guests from the Howard Johnson's further inland. "Then, people started to realize they'd

**BELOW:** This 1960s photo of Key West shows two historic buildings, a house and former U.S. Navy barracks Wolkowsky purchased and moved to the future site of Pier House. **OPPOSITE:** Elevations from the original Yiannis Antoniadis plans for Pier House and a photo of Pier House in its prime.





**ABOVE:** Wolkowsky's apartment on Duval Street, which is above Fast Buck Freddie's department store. **OPPOSITE:** (clockwise from left): Wolkowsky during one of his projects; the Key West street named for him. The Kress building, which he adapted into Fast Buck Freddie's, Jimmy Buffett's Margaritaville and his own apartment. Captain Tony's Saloon. A waterfront view of Pier House.



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rather be downtown," Wolkowsky says. Of course, it didn't hurt that the resort was beginning to attract celebrities such as Truman Capote, Carson McCullers, James Merrill, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Robert Motherwell and Isamu Noguchi. "Pier House was kind of the axis of Key West" (in the Sixties and Seventies).

Wolkowsky, a former resident of New York and Philadelphia, worked his considerable charm to bring his literary and artistic friends to Key West. He was and is a character – both literally and figuratively. In fact, Wolkowsky makes an appearance in *License to Kill*, the James Bond novel based on the screenplay for the 1989 film. In the book, Bond ditches a seaplane in the Keys and swims through shark-infested waters. Finding his old friend's island house empty, Bond sneaks in and calls Wolkowsky in Key West. "David, it's James. James Bond." Wolkowsky, modest and low-key even as a fictional character, is nonplussed by news of the break-in. "My," he says. "How ingenious of you."

The real-life Wolkowsky is not so icy, but is similarly enigmatic, prone to paradoxes. "I'm so bored of anything about me," he says shortly after pointing out numerous pictures of himself hobnobbing with celebrities. He is soft-spoken but has proven a master of publicity over the years (he released photographs of the Pier House's famous guests only to newspapers that agreed to run them on the front page). He remains a disciplined business man, frequently making deals by phone, but he also maintains a

childish sense of awe and wonder.

Wolkowsky's grandfather immigrated to Key West in 1879 to escape Jewish persecution in Russia and quickly became an influential force. He opened a general store on Duval Street and owned the original Sloppy Joe's on Greene Street. Wolkowsky grew up not only in the shadow of his grandfather's success but under the pressure of his father's expectations. "My father wanted me to be a football player and a boxer. I wanted to be anonymous."

During World War II, Wolkowsky escaped with the Merchant Marine, sailing to Calcutta, Alexandria and other great cities he had dreamed of. "It was the happiest time in my life." Back stateside, he attended Pennsylvania University initially as a pre-med student and then as an architecture major. In the '50s, Wolkowsky took the first of a long line of architectural gambles.

Working on his own, he designed renovations for a slum area populated with a type of three-story tenement building known as a "father, son and the holy ghost." He challenged orthodox thinking by putting kitchens in the front of the building and living areas in the back overlooking small lots formerly occupied by outhouses. The work won national acclaim and made Wolkowsky a small fortune.

In his forties, he retired from his Philadelphia practice and moved back to Key West. His hometown was a ghostly place. Wolkowsky went to work restoring his grandfather's old bar, now

called Captain Tony's Saloon. Upon hearing the Navy was looking to unload surplus wooden houses, he bought 24 of the small structures at \$1,600 each. After trucking them to Front Street at the Navy's expense, Wolkowsky had the houses lifted on top of existing structures, creating a complex of shops and apartments that now rent for almost as much per month as they cost Wolkowsky to buy.

He has renovated more than a hundred Conch houses in Key West and is credited with restoring the charm of the island's historic downtown. A street in the heart of old town bears his name and a portrait of him hangs along with paintings of Ernest Hemingway and Henry Flagler in the Key West Museum of Art and History, as part of an exhibition entitled "Who is Key West?"

Over the years, Wolkowsky has made a habit of collecting renovation projects and – in the process – homes for himself. He owns three homes and several buildings in Key West, Ballast Key, a house in Miami and an apartment in New York City.

All his homes are cluttered with books, antiques, uniquely designed lamps and desks, sculptures and flowers. Open windows and fans are preferred to air conditioning, nature presses in around the foundation and whimsy abounds.

There's the main house on Flagler Street, a boxy concrete structure with a sprawling high-ceilinged living room supported by columns from an ancient Indonesian mosque. The room's massive window panes look out on plants, patio and pool. Asked

why he had installed near his pool antique doors that lead nowhere, Wolkowsky laughed. "That's part of the charm."

There's the apartment on top of the Kress Building on Duval Street. A rooftop garret-cum-cabin, the apartment serves as an atmospheric downtown pad with its massive wood beams, antique brass telescope and other curios, including a larger-than-life-size photograph of a young Liz Taylor, a painting of Napoleon and an ancient-looking camera. Wolkowsky hosts the opening party for the annual Key West Literary Seminar here each year.

There is the house in Miami's Venetian Islands, a simple box lined with coral rock and tile, with massive sliding doors that open unto a view of the bay. Wolkowsky bought the house in 2003 after his family's home in the Edgewater neighborhood became crowded by highrises. His disappointment borders on bitterness when he describes development in South Florida. "They have invaded nature's privacy. They've trampled on so much. It's almost as though they've taken the core out of the apple and still expect it to live."

Architecture, Wolkowsky says, "can be a courtship with nature. It can be a seduction."

Is that what led him to take on his most recent project, a conch house renovation on leafy Von Phister Street in Key West? Wolkowsky pauses to reflect, then smiles. "I just thought it would be fun." ■