

Life and work of
barbara baer
capitman history
essay



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Barbara Baer Capitman, whose vision and persistence helped to turn a rundown area of Miami Beach into a vibrant Art Deco historic district, died of congestive heart failure on Thursday at Mount Sinai Medical Center in Miami Beach. She was 69 years old and suffered from diabetes and heart tremors.

Ms. Capitman, who had lived in Miami since 1973, applied her talents to arouse renewed interest in 1920's and 1930's buildings throughout the country. Radio City Music Hall and the Chrysler Building are among the best examples of Art Deco.

" My whole life had been Art Deco," she once said. " I was born at the beginning of the period and grew up during the height of it. It's a thing of fate."

Headed a Preservation League

In 1976 she helped to found the Miami Design Preservation League, which in 1979 won Federal historic designation for the South Beach district of Miami Beach. Her outspoken, unorthodox manner later led to her ouster from the group.

" She would push and agitate and cause trouble until people wouldn't speak to her," said Michael Kinerk, chairman of the Art Deco Weekend festival. " She was interested in results, not social sensitivities."

The South Beach district is now on the National Register of Historic Places, the only 20th-century district on the register. That status brought Federal tax relief to what had been a depressed area. It is now enjoying an economic and cultural rebirth.

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Chapters in Other Towns

Mrs. Capitman, president of the Art Deco Society of America, helped found chapters of the society in several cities, including New York, Washington, Chicago, San Francisco and Los Angeles. She was the author of "Deco Delights" (1989; E. P. Dutton).

She was born in Chicago and attended New York University. She later wrote advertising copy and was a reporter for The Atlantic City Daily World, which has ceased publication.

Her husband, William Capitman, died in 1975. He was a market researcher and economist and in later years a teacher at Florida International University.

Mrs. Capitman leaves two sons, Andrew W., who lives in London, and John A., who lives in Cambridge, Mass., and four grandchildren.

Barbara Baer Capitman, the intrepid little old lady credited with saving Miami Beach's colorful Art Deco district made famous on the hit television series "Miami Vice," has died in the city she sought to preserve. She was 69.

Mrs. Capitman, who suffered from diabetes and heart problems, died Thursday at Mt. Sinai Medical Center in Miami Beach, according to hospital spokesman Arthur Ehrlich.

She was president of the Art Deco Society of America and had organized chapters in cities around the country, including Los Angeles, to preserve the "decorative arts" style of architecture popular between the two world wars.

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Although somewhat more whimsical in Miami, the style is exemplified by the Chrysler Building and Radio City Music Hall in New York City and the old Pan Pacific Auditorium and the Times building in Los Angeles.

At the time of her death, Mrs. Capitman was putting together the first World Congress on Art Deco and working on a book, " Art Deco U. S. A." Last year she published a book about Miami Beach's 1930s hotels and other Art Deco buildings called " Deco Delights."

Mrs. Capitman became a preservationist in 1975 as a means of making new friends after the death of her husband, William, at 53. She attributed her quavery voice, which her detractors frequently mimicked, to the shock of his death.

Within four years, despite opposition by the Miami Beach city manager and Chamber of Commerce, Mrs. Capitman and her Design Preservation League won listing of the mile-square district on the National Register of Historic Places, providing federal tax incentives for restoration. The area is the only district with 20th-Century architecture in the register.

" It was a tremendous achievement by one person-one little old lady," said her son Andrew.

" Barbara Capitman deserves her reputation as the indomitable champion of the Art Deco treasures of Miami Beach," said billionaire investor Robert Bass, chairman of the National Trust for Historic Preservation."

The district's 800 or so buildings, designed in the '30s to look like ocean liners or rocket ships or even bonbons to take vacationing Americans' minds
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off the Depression, are the focus of Miami Beach's annual Art Deco Weekend festival, which draws about 400, 000 people.

In *Saving South Beach*, historic preservation clashes with development as each side vies for control of South Beach. A spectrum of characters are present, from Barbara Baer Capitman, the ailing middle-aged widow who became an evangelist for the Miami Beach Art Deco district, to Abe Resnick, the millionaire Holocaust survivor determined to stop her. From pioneers to volunteers, from Jewish retirees to Cuban exiles, from residents and business owners to developers and city leaders, each adds another piece to the puzzle, another view of the intense conflict that ensued.

Although a number of the area's iconic buildings were demolished, the Miami Design Preservation League succeeded in entering almost half of the neighborhood into the National Register of Historic Places, kicking off a revitalization effort that spread throughout South Beach.

Preservationist M. Barron Stofik lived in Miami during this turmoil-ridden period and, through hundreds of interviews and extensive investigation, weaves together dramatic themes of civic heroism, preservation, and cultural change in the passionate human story behind the pastelfacades and neon lights.

Barbara Capitman is our 2010 Woman In History Honoree

She was born in Chicago and attended New York University. In her early years she was a reporter for *The Atlantic City Daily World* and was an advertising copywriter. When she moved to Miami in 1973, she used her

literary skills to help stimulate interest in 1920s and 1930s Art Deco buildings throughout the country.

Much of South Beach's buildings were neglected and abandoned at the time, but Barbara Capitman was a visionary thinker and was greatly inspired by finding the world's largest concentration of Art Deco architecture.

In 1976 she helped found Miami Design Preservation League (MDPL) and led a highly criticized fight to save Miami Beach's Art Deco architectural buildings. Miami Design Preservation League finally won its landmark battle on May 14, 1979, and the Art Deco District was added to the National Register of Historic Places. It was the first time a 20th century district was recognized as Historic by the U. S. government.

This act brought federal tax relief to the depressed area, and South Beach began to show signs of economic and cultural growth. One by one, the abandoned buildings were restored into vibrantly colored Art Deco works of art which almost immediately became backdrops for International fashion catalogues, films and television shows; and suddenly models, celebrities, and photographers began to flock to the new pastel playground.

" Art Deco is the heart and soul of South Beach, and Miami Design Preservation League carries forth its spirit," says Miami Beach Mayor Matti Herrera Bower. Our community's success story is a tribute to MDPL's championing our historic district. Preserving the community's architecture, character and integrity led the way to the economic and cultural revival we all benefit from today."

The League was the world's first Art Deco Society and Capitman's efforts led to the formation of Art Deco preservation groups throughout the United States, Europe, Latin America, Australia and New Zealand.

Barbara also hosted a radio show and authored the books " Art Deco Trademarks", " Rediscovering Art Deco U. S. A." and " Deco Delights - Preserving Miami Beach Architecture".

Barabara Capitman died twenty years ago in March 1990 but her indelible mark on South Beach history will never be forgotten. WE are proud to name Barbara Baer Capitman our 2010 Women's History Honoree and have asked early preservationist to come and share a few memories about her and the preservation of the Art Deco District.

Perhaps the next time you walk down Ocean Drive you will think of Barbara. WE invite you to visit the new Miami Design Preservation League's ART DECO WELCOME CENTER located on Ocean Drive at the corner of Barbara Capitman Way (10th St) and we hope it inspires you to join in the Preservation Movement that continues in South Beach and surrounding communities. Click the link below if you would like to make a \$50 Donation to MDPL help preserve the memory of the woman who led the fight to preserve our community. Your donation will include a 1 Year Membership to MDPL and a contribution to The Barbara Capitman archives.

August 1976

The Miami Design Preservation League (MDPL) was formed through the efforts of Barbara Baer Capitman and her son John Capitman. The initial

impetus was to find a project to honor the United States' bicentennial; the <https://assignbuster.com/life-and-work-of-barbara-baer-capitman-history-essay/>

Capitmans worked with designers Leonard Horowitz and Lillian Barber to identify a concentration of 1930s buildings in South Miami Beach that the group felt could be a historic district of 20th century architecture.

December 1976

MDPL held its first large-scale public meeting, dubbed the “ Design Forum.”

May 6, 1977

MDPL was incorporated by the State of Florida. Officers were: Barbara Baer Captiman, President; David Gell, Secretary; Jerry Peters, Treasurer; and Howard M. Neu, Vice President.

September 1977

Art Deco Number of Night and Day magazine highlights the goals and accomplishments of MDPL.

October 13-19, 1978

Art Deco Week organized by MDPL. The festival was held at and around the Cardozo Hotel on Ocean Drive. Barbara Capitman created the event as a showcase for the Art Deco section of Miami Beach hoping to attract both locals and tourists to the area which was comprised of an elderly population living on fixed income, many living at the poverty level.

December 12, 1978

By-laws of MDPL were amended and submitted to State of Florida. Barbara Baer Capitman, David J. Gell and Carl Weinhardt, Jr. were authorized to execute the Articles as subscribers and Andres Fabergas and Michael Kinerk, president and secretary, respectively, were authorized to execute the

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declaration. Chairperson, Barbara Baer Capitman; President, Andres Fabregas; Vice President, Leonard Horowitz; Secretary, Michael D. Kinerk; Treasurer, Jose Madrazo; Board members besides officers: Jerald Goodman, Claire Major, Joy Moos, Karolyn Robinson, Sol Schreiber, Landon Thorne III, Carl J Weinhardt, Jr., Mitchell Wolfson, Jr.

May 14, 1979

The Miami Beach Architectural Historic District (popularly known as the “ Art Deco District” and “ Old Miami Beach”) was listed on the National Register of Historic Places. It was the nation’s first 20th century Historic District.

July 1979

Portfolio of the Art Deco Historic District was published by MDPL with funding from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA.) Barbara Capitman, editor; Diane Camber, Assistant Editor; Bill Bucolo, Managing Editor; photographic essay by David Kaminsky; articles by Carl J. Weinhardt, Jr., Karalyn Robinson, Barbara Capitman and Andrew Capitman.

September 1979

The Art Deco District: Time Present Time Past, a magazine with articles on various aspects of Art Deco, was published by MDPL.

March, 1980

Andy Warhol, world-famous artist and one of the pioneering Art Deco collectors, called the MDPL office in March 1980 and asked if someone would show him the Art Deco buildings in Miami Beach. An appointment was made, Warhol arrived from New York and he was given a top to bottom tour led by

MDPL founder, Barbara Baer Capitman and Diana Camber the Executive Director of MDPL, now Director of the Bass Museum of Art. This event was widely covered by the news media and gave our new historic district a stamp of approval from an art-world celebrity.

April 1980

The Boulevard Hotel, at 775 Dade Boulevard, was demolished.

January 1981

The Anderson-Notter-Finegold plan for the Miami Beach Architectural Historic District was completed (the plan was never adopted).

January 7, 1981

The New Yorker Hotel (Henry Hohauser, 1939), at 1611 Collins Avenue, was demolished. Despite sustained protests from preservationists, the hotel was destroyed by owners Abe Resnik, Dov Dunaesvsky, and Isaac Fryd. The hotel, which many consider to be Hohauser's most successful design, awakened the community to the need to enact local legislation to protect properties listed on the National Register. The hotel's façade was later used in the new logo of the Miami Design Preservation League; the New Yorker's lot stood vacant for many years and is now occupied by the northern-most portion of the Loew's convention center hotel.

February 1981

Adoption of the first Dade County Historic Preservation Ordinance, which required municipalities to adopt Historic Preservation Ordinances by July 1982.

February 4, 1981

City Commission adopted Resolution No. 81-16551 requesting exemption from County Historic Preservation ordinances.

1981

MDPL founders Barbara Baer Capitman and Leonard Horowitz took a cross-country trip to “discover” Art Deco architecture in major U. S. cities. The trip spurred the development of Art Deco societies in many of the cities, and Capitman began to be referred to as the “Johnny Appleseed of Art Deco.”

1981-1982

MDPL worked to protect historic buildings by encouraging local historic designation on the National Register District.

April 2, 1982

First meeting of Mayor’s Ad Hoc Committee to draft and review a Historic Preservation Ordinance for Miami Beach.

June, 1982

Miami Beach Art Deco District: Time Future was published by Community Action and Research under the auspices of MDPL. The booklet, edited by Paul A. Rothman and Barbara Capitman with graphic design by Woody Vondracek, summarized the Anderson Notter Finegold plan for the Art Deco Historic District and lobbied for its adoption by the City of Miami Beach.

June 16, 1982

The first Miami Beach Historic Preservation Ordinance, No. 82-2318, was adopted; it contained 100 percent owner consent provision.

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September 23, 1982

The Dade County Historic Preservation Board found the Miami Beach Ordinance not in compliance with county requirements.

October 20, 1982

The City Commission appointed the first Historic Preservation Board.

January 31, 1983

The U. S. Department of the Interior found the Miami Beach Ordinance to be in compliance with National Register standards for local governments.

April 20, 1983

Ordinance No. 83-2367 amended Historic Preservation Ordinance No. 82-2318, changing owner consent from 100 percent to 51 percent required for designation.

May 4-7, 1983

The Art Deco District came to the attention of the art world as a result of “Surrounded Islands,” an installation by artists Christo and Jeanne-Claude in which a series of 11 islands in Biscayne Bay were wrapped in pink fabric. During the installation, the artists established their “headquarters” in the Art Deco District.

August 15, 1983

Dade County and others filed a lawsuit to invalidate the Miami Beach Historic Preservation Ordinance.

October 5, 1983

The City Commission adopted Ordinance No. 83-2388 designating the Old City Hall building as the city's first Historic Preservation Site.

February 1, 1984

The City Commission adopted Ordinance No. 84-2402 designating the 21st Street Community Center a Historic Preservation Site.

April 4, 1984

The City Commission adopted Ordinance No. 84-2405 creating a Design Review Board.

1984-1989

The Art Deco District achieved worldwide recognition as a result of the hit television show Miami Vice, starring Don Johnson and Philip Michael Thomas. The show used the Art Deco District as a backdrop in many of the episodes.

February 6, 1985

The City Commission adopted the Ocean Drive plan containing recommendations for local Historic District designation.

March 20, 1985

The City Commission adopted Ordinance No. 85-2470 eliminating the owner consent provision from Historic Preservation ordinances.

October 16, 1985

The City Commission adopted the Espanola Way plan containing a recommendation for local Historic District designation.

1985

Renowned fashion photographer Bruce Weber chose Miami Beach's Breakwater Hotel for a photo shoot for an ad for Calvin Klein's " Obsession," spurring an onslaught of fashion photography shoots in the Art Deco District.

July 23, 1986

The City Commission adopted Ordinance No. 86-2511 designating the Espanola Way District and the Ocean Drive/Collins Avenue District as Miami Beach's first Historic Preservation districts. These ordinances were adopted after significant grassroots efforts by MDPL.

1986

" Our Drive...Ocean Drive" was a joint campaign by MDPL and its sister organization, the Miami Beach Development Corporation (MBDC), now renamed the Miami Beach Community Development Corporation (MBCDC). As a result, a \$3 million bond package was approved to fund the widening of the sidewalk on the west side of Ocean Drive, allowing hotels to establish sidewalk cafes. On the east side of the street, a wide promenade was created along the wall separating Lummus Park from the beach.

1986-1988

MDPL campaigned for local designation of the entire National Register District and revisions to the zoning codes to make them more compatible with historic preservation.

MDPL started the SOS (Save Our Senator) campaign to prevent demolition of the Senator Hotel. Although the hotel was demolished (see May 3, 1988),

MDPL's efforts delayed demolition for more than a year. The public outcry that MDPL created resulted in the City Commission passing a strengthened local preservation ordinance that could prevent demolition.

1987

The Biscaya Hotel (1925), at 650 West Avenue, was demolished. MDPL mounted an unsuccessful campaign to save the hotel, originally the Floridian Hotel and the last remaining example of the grand bayside hotels.

May 6, 1987

The City Commission adopted Ordinance No. 87-2665 designating Altos del Mar a Historic Preservation District.

January 1988

The Poinciana Hotel (Albert Anis, 1939), at 1555 Collins Avenue, was demolished.

February 3, 1988

The City Commission adopted Ordinance No. 88-2598, strengthening the demolition section of the Historic Preservation Ordinance.

May 1988

Miami Beach Art Deco Guide was published by MDPL. The guidebook, written by Keith Root with editorial assistance by Dr. Ernest Martin and Michael Kinerk, contained six self-guided walking tours of the Art Deco District.

May 3, 1988

The Senator Hotel (L. Murray Dixon, 1939), at 1201 Collins Avenue, was demolished.

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June 1988

Deco Delights: Preserving the Beauty and Joy of Miami Beach Architecture, written by MDPL founder Barbara Baer Capitman, was published by E. P. Dutton.

June 1, 1988

The City Commission adopted Ordinance No. 88-2616 placing the Architectural District under Design Review jurisdiction.

April 5, 1989

The City Commission adopted Ordinance No. 89-2637 designating the Venetian Causeway (1926) a Historic Preservation Site.

September 7 & 21, 1989

The City Commission nominated the Flamingo and Museum neighborhoods for Historic Preservation Districts designation. The Museum area was nominated as a local historic district or collection of historic sites depending on the findings of the Historic Preservation Board.

March 30, 1990

Barbara Baer Captiman dies of congestive heart failure.

An advocacy program attempts to influence public policy and public actions in a direction consistent with a group's mission. MDPL's advocacy program is guided by its advocates' aim to act consistently with MDPL's mission statement:

Miami Design Preservation League (MDPL) is a non-profit organization devoted to preserving, protecting, and promoting the cultural, social, economic, environmental and architectural integrity of the Miami Beach Architectural Historic District and all other areas of the City of Miami Beach where historic preservation is a concern.

The MDPL Advocacy Committee suggests these priorities for MDPL advocacy activities:

Preserve and protect the historical and architectural integrity of the Miami Beach Architectural District, both of its individual buildings and of the district as a whole;

Support the historic preservation process put in place by the City of Miami Beach and the City's enforcement of the outcomes of that process in any area " where historic preservation is a concern."

Propose and support changes in the City's historic preservation process and land use policies when necessary to carry out and fulfill the mission statement;

Propose and support changes in Florida and national policy when necessary to carry out and fulfill the mission statement;

Preserve and protect historical, architectural, and environmental resources in other areas of Miami Beach, especially when designated as local historic districts by the City of Miami Beach, but including any area " where historic preservation is a concern."

Act to support residents and property owners, in current and potential historic districts, when citizens act to preserve, protect and promote the historic, architectural, cultural, social, economic, and environmental integrity of any area “ where historic preservation is a concern.”

Miami Beach’s building boom came during the second phase of Art Deco known as Streamline Moderne, which began with the stock market crash and ended in most cases with the outbreak of World War II. It was less decorative-a more sober reflection of the Great Depression. It relied more on machine-inspired forms, and American ideas in industrial design. It was buttressed by the belief that times would get better and was infused with the optimistic futurism extolled at America’s Worlds Fairs of the 1930s. Stripped Classic or Depression Moderne was a sub-style often used for governmental buildings, the U. S. Post Office being the best example in Miami Beach. Miami Beach architects used local imagery to create what we now call Tropical Deco. These buildings feature relief ornamentation featuring whimsical flora, fauna and ocean-liner motifs to reinforce the image of Miami Beach as a seaside resort.

Art Deco – What to look for

Over-all symmetry, ziggurat (stepped) rooflines, glass block, decorative sculptural panels, eyebrows, round porthole windows, terrazzo floors, curved edges and corners, elements in groups of three, neon lighting (used in both exteriors as well as interior spaces).

However, there really are three predominate architectural styles found in the Art Deco District:

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When our tour guide revealed yesterday that the person most responsible for saving Miami Beach Art Deco buildings from the wrecking ball of capitalist progress was a Communist Jew from New York, my first reaction was surprise and delight. But after a moment it sunk in that this was just what I might have suspected. When it comes to looking after the long-term interests of society, whether it is cultural heritage or climate change, you have to rise above the profit motive and who better to assume this role than the Red.

In 1948 the 28 year old Barbara Capitman met her future husband Will at a May Day party sponsored by the Young Communist League in N. Y. She was the only child of a sweater-importing father and a mother who was a sculptor and painter. When Will graduated from NYU law school in 1951, he was blocked from passing the bar because of his YCL past. So instead he made a living teaching business and marketing at Harvard and Yale.

In 1973 he got a tenure track position at the Florida International University business school and the two moved to Coconut Grove, Miami's version of Greenwich Village. Two years later he died from pancreatic cancer and Barbara was on her own.

After moving to Miami Beach, Barbara ran into Leonard Horowitz, a doorman at a luxury condo who was gay and an aspiring artist/designer. They became close friends after meeting and soon discovered a shared commitment to the preservation of Art Deco buildings. The two formed a committee to save the old buildings now falling into disrepair that relied heavily on donations from gay people and senior citizens. Within 3 years, they managed to have over half of South Beach's Art Deco hotels covered by landmark preservation

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laws. Leonard Horowitz died of AIDS in 1988. The hotel we are staying at is between 10th and 11th streets on Ocean Drive and 11th street has been renamed Leonard Horowitz Drive.

Barbara Capitman died two years later. The NY Times obit noted:

In 1976 she helped to found the Miami Design Preservation League, which in 1979 won Federal historic designation for the South Beach district of Miami Beach. Her outspoken, unorthodox manner later led to her ouster from the group.

“ She would push and agitate and cause trouble until people wouldn’t speak to her,” said Michael Kinerk, chairman of the Art Deco Weekend festival. “ She was interested in results, not social sensitivities.’

I would say that no social change takes place without people who are “ outspoken” and “ unorthodox”. The fact that she was interested in results rather than “ social sensitivities” should not be lost on those leftists who are reluctant to take on the status quo.

In the April 27 1982 Village Voice, Alexander Cockburn hailed Capitman as a true heroine. He quoted her on the Art Deco district:

At night when the full moon is overhead, the residential streets of the Art Deco district take on that stagey, solemn simplicity of another era. Moonlight and neon articulate the stripes and circles of the small apartments on Euclid or Jefferson and the swaying palms cast shadows on the curving walls. This is the night world that Thomas Wolfe wrote of in the 1930s-the decade of our

district's revival-nights filled with the far-hooting of trains, the nearer sounding of great vessels moving into port, the mysterious rustling of trees...

Cockburn noted that Capitman was not able to defend all of Miami Beach from the assault of real estate developers. The South Beach area remains unsullied but the middle and northern parts of the island have succumbed to the forces Cockburn describes as follows:

The forces of darkness gathered their nerve, and finally, in 1981 tore off their whiskers and pounced. Anyone who wants to see what might happen to the Deco Square Mile need only glance north of 23rd Street, where architectural barbarism is on the rampage and the condomaniac, behemoth tide marches down via the Fountainbleau and other signposts of Babylon.

Cockburn concludes his article by saying that if the real estate developers had their way, the northern sector of South Beach would succumb and the result would be equivalent to " the permanent submersion of substantial portions of Venice."

Ironically, Art Deco was an attempt to apply the aesthetic of Russian Constructivism and Italian Futurism to architecture. These art movements were in themselves attempts to approximate the forms of machinery to fine art in the spirit of a modernization stripped of nostalgia for the past. The products of that age now are threatened by the relentless march of capitalist modernization which will result in the leveling of all that is beautiful and its replacement by shopping malls and Walmarts. It is to the credit of people like Barbara Capitman, someone who presumably would have read the

Communist Manifesto at some point in her life and who would have absorbed <https://assignbuster.com/life-and-work-of-barbara-baer-capitman-history-essay/>

Marx's breathless evocation of the bourgeoisie's "most revolutionary role", to draw a line in the sand and tell this bourgeoisie to get fucked.

Anyone who knew the late Barbara Capitman was bowled over by her undying devotion to Art Deco Miami Beach. A founder of the Miami Design Preservation League, Capitman led the battle to have a large swatch of the Beach listed as an historic district in the National Register of Historic Places — the first such district made up of 20th-century buildings. This book is her memorial.

Tropical Deco: the Architecture and Design of Old Miami Beach, by Laura Cerwinske, David Kaminsky (Photographer). (Rizzoli, 1982.)

Barbara Baer Capitman, born in 1920, founded the Miami Design Preservation League (MDPL) which started the Miami Beach Art Deco preservation movement. She led in the formation of the Miami Beach Architectural Historic District, the nation's only Art Deco district to be listed in the National Register of Historic Places. Her efforts to protect Art Deco architecture led to the founding of Art Deco societies in San Francisco, Chicago, Washington, D. C., Boston and New York. Capitman was also the founder of the World Congress on Art Deco. She was the author of three books: *American Trademarks*, *Deco Delights* and *Rediscovering Art Deco U. S. A.* In 1993 The Miami Herald named her one of the 100 most important people in the history of South Florida. Barbara Baer Capitman died in 1990. Her Great Floridian plaque is located at the Cardozo Hotel, 1300 Ocean Drive, Miami Beach. [http://www. flheritage. com/services/sites/floridians/?section= m](http://www.flheritage.com/services/sites/floridians/?section=m)

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