

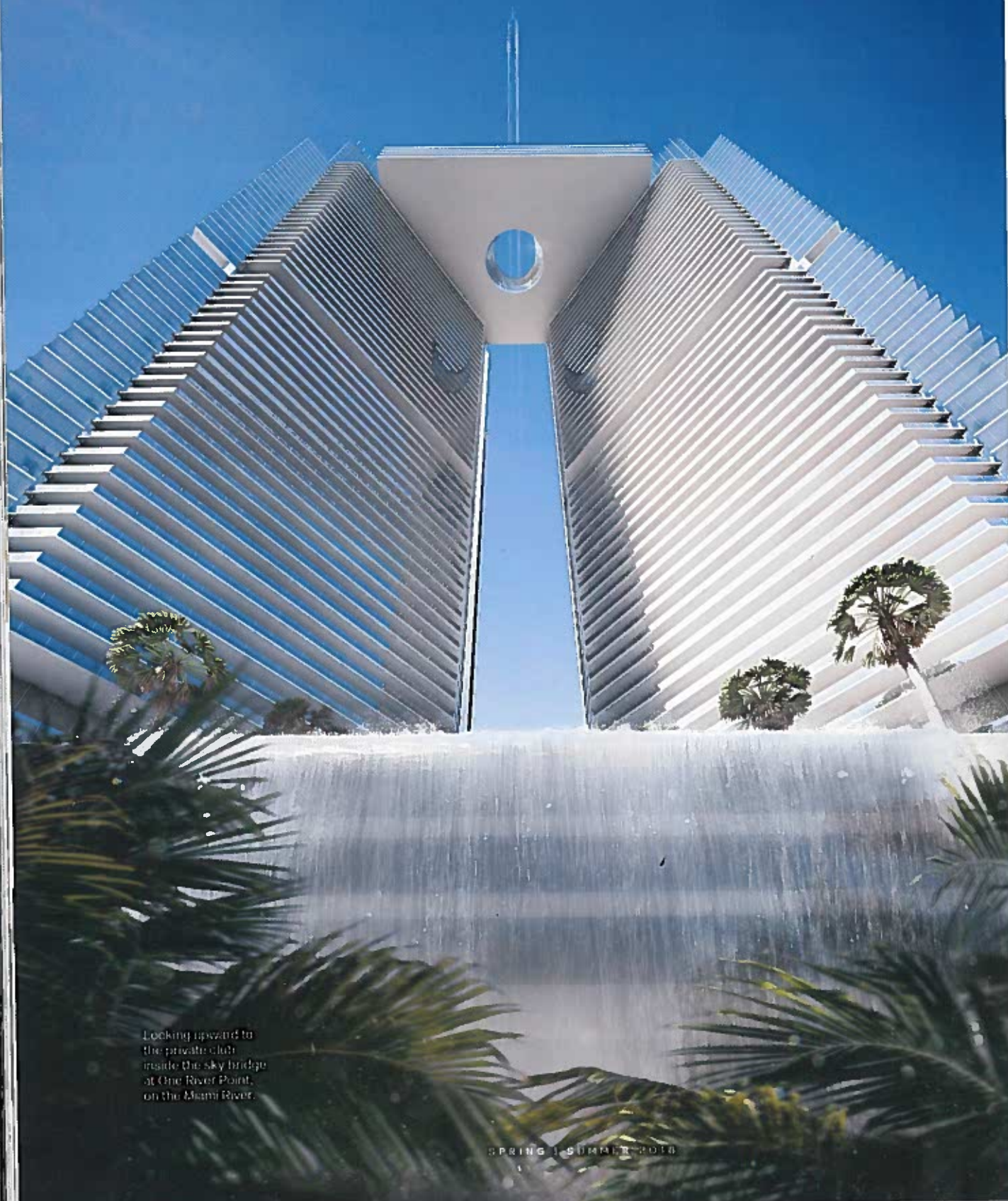
# CENTURION

M A G A Z I N E

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# LET THE RIVER RUN

CAN MIAMI'S MOST AMBITIOUS REAL ESTATE PROJECT TRANSFORM  
ONE OF THE CITY'S MOST UNLOVED AREAS? *by Chris Pomorski*



Looking upward to the private club inside the sky bridge at One River Point, on the Miami River.



According to its developer, One River Point will boast the highest glass-to-square-foot ratio in Miami.

**“I SHOULD HAVE WORN PANTS,”** Sabine Otamendi said. Otamendi, one of Miami’s premier real estate brokers, was standing on the bank of the Miami River wearing, instead, a leather skirt in fire-engine red. Having removed a pair of Louboutin heels, she was considering how best to board *La Vie Est Belle*, a smartly appointed yacht bobbing just barely within reach, without risking immodesty—or an early afternoon swim.

Otamendi has dark hair, angular features, and a soft French accent. In recent years, she’s helped sell contemporary luxury icons in sought-after Miami neighborhoods, like Zaha Hadid’s One Thousand Museum, downtown, and the

St. Regis Bal Harbour, in Miami Beach. But in 2016, she was hired for a somewhat more adventurous project, by a New York developer named Shahab Karmely. In a rumored partnership with the hedge fund titan Dan Loeb, Karmely had just spent \$70 million on roughly five acres fronting the Miami River. The area had long been considered a blighted backwater, and Karmely had in mind a play decidedly unusual for the locale: three adjacent luxury condominiums. One River Point—the trio’s 60-story, twin-towered flagship—would go up first. Karmely wanted Otamendi to sell it.

Karmely’s development plan for One River Point, which included a pair of crowning, 14,000-square-foot “sky villas”—\$30 million apiece—was arguably the most ambitious going in the city. Until recently, though, it would have been entirely unthinkable. Sullied by oil and heavy metals, the Miami River, which flows for six miles from the airport to Biscayne Bay, had long

functioned as an artery of unsightly industry. Drug runners and magpie freighters carrying everything from machine parts to poultry plied its course. During the 1980s, voodoo priests were known to behead sacrificial goats at water’s edge.

But in 1998, the Florida legislature mandated a comprehensive revitalization. Dredging has since deepened the Miami by three feet. Boat wrecks have been hauled from the riverbed. Several new parks have materialized on the waterfront, and here and there, high-end restaurants are replacing the bait shacks and fuel docks that once bumpered the river.

Safely on board, Otamendi ascended to the upper deck of the boat, taking a seat on a leather banquette with Daniela Carvalho, a member of her sales team, and Mariela Dobрева, One River Point’s “lifestyle curator.” The day was sunny and mild. A crew member poured flutes of champagne. The women had invited me to join them

COURTESY ONE RIVER POINT

## HOT PROPERTIES

on a tour usually reserved for especially promising prospective buyers. Returns-to-date had been auspicious. Though One River Point won’t open until 2022, Carvalho said nearly a quarter of the condo’s 418 units had already sold.

Since 2008, Miami’s real estate climate has grown feverish, heated by foreign wealth, population growth, and opportunistic developers. But the term *luxury* gets tossed around with abandon. It can be tough to tell tinsel from titanium. To distinguish himself, Karmely assembled an extraordinary team: Rafael Viñoly, the architect behind Manhattan’s tallest residential building, 432 Park Avenue; Rémi Tessier, a French interior designer known for yachts and private planes; and Adrian Zecha, the Indonesian founder of Aman.

Across the street from the One River Point construction site is a sleek sales gallery: displays detailing facial-recognition technology, keyless entry, and concierge services; lovingly compiled lists of pools, spas, and in-house restaurants; catalogs of travertine, bronze, granite. A bottle of Dom Perignon, primed for post-contract popping, rests atop a carrera marble island. But most striking, perhaps, are the renderings, shown on a flat-screen display. Unusually, the development’s structural core will be located on its west side, rather than at its center, affording water views from each and every unit. Karmely says One River Point will boast the highest glass-to-square-foot ratio in Miami. Eight hundred feet up, a sky bridge containing a 50,000-square-foot private club will connect Viñoly’s towers, a futuristic flourish that also aims to rival Beijing’s Hong Kong Jockey Club.

As a pod of dolphins trailed our



Shahab Karmely, the New York-based developer of One River Point.

**“A few years ago, Miami realized that we had a huge problem. We had no place to park the mega-yachts!”**

boat through the bay, Carvalho named upscale chain restaurants that have opened on the river: Cipriani, the Capital Grille, Zuma. As in London, Hong Kong, and Abu Dhabi, their presence here announces the ascendant demand of the semi-stateless rich. “A few years ago, Miami realized that we had a huge problem,” Otamendi recalled. “We had no place to park the mega-yachts!” This was rectified in 2016 with the opening of a marina that can host boats 550 feet long on nearby Watson Island. One River Point will offer a Watson Island water taxi. But meeting the needs of some rarefied Miami visitors remains elusive. “A few weeks ago, the Emir of Qatar was here,” Otamendi said. “His yacht did not even fit in the mega-yacht marina.”

Karmely first contemplated investing in Miami in late 2012,

after reading about Brickell City Centre, a planned billion-dollar project spanning five blocks in an unglamorous neighborhood adjacent to downtown. When complete, it will include a hotel, shopping, restaurants, and condos. Karmely was sure the value of nearby land would leap—and that he could make a killing flipping it. Initially, though, he had difficulty finding partners. “I was told, ‘It’s too early, Miami is not coming back,’” he recalled one morning at his Madison Avenue office. Undeterred, Karmely began pouring in his own cash, and as he spent time in town, his vision became less mercenary. He grew enamored with the idea that he could help the city mature, from a conduit to Miami Beach to a glamorous, diversified urban center.

Karmely immigrated to the United States in 1978, after fleeing the Iranian Revolution. His father had been a wealthy

rug dealer in Iran. But after losing almost everything during the unrest he struggled to re-create his success. “With the collapse of Iran, there was a flood of a new type of product,” Karmely said. “New exporters—China, India, Pakistan—stepped in. My father had difficulty adjusting.”

A keen awareness of instability’s inevitable winners and losers informs Karmely’s work. “What happens to us in Miami is driven by currency exchange rates, geopolitical turmoil, the health of Latin American democracies, opening of flights from China,” he said. “It is completely disassociated from the so-called economic cycles in the United States. What happens in Venezuela, Brazil, and Argentina affects us more than the Dow.”

If Karmely’s candor is unusual for a developer, his analysis is not. Like other top-tier Miami condos,



The Miami River has gone from an outlet for drug runners to the anchor of a downtown revitalization.

One River Point draws heavily on Latin American clients, and Karmely makes a winning ambassador. Athletically built at 56, he wears a Monopoly Man mustache and longish gray-blond hair casually slicked back. When we met, he wore jeans and a gray cashmere V-neck, and spoke accented English with discursive flair, tacking from Montauk surf spots to the Southeast Asian gem trade.

Since the fall of 2013, when Karmely paid \$27.8 million for the 1.8-acre One River Point parcel, other developers have snapped up nearby land with urgency. Most notably, in 2014, an Argentine supermarket scion paid \$125 million—a South Florida record—for a 1.25-acre site blocks away. It will be home to the Aston Martin Residences, a glass, sail-shaped luxury condo building with a 19,000-square-foot penthouse priced at \$50 million. In terms of marketing and design, Karmely has certain differences of opinion with

the developers of the Aston Martin Residences, and for now, they're his only riverside competition. But they've also confirmed his intuition. "Can I tell you why I love them?" he said, a little mischievously. "These guys went and paid the most amount of money in the history of South Florida for an acre. And they are three blocks away from us! It further supports what we're bringing to the river."

Back on *La Vie Est Belle*, lunchtime was approaching. We returned to the river and motored upstream, passing Brickell City Centre, the first portion of which was completed in 2016. Saks Fifth Avenue anchors the development; a second phase, including an 80-story tower, is planned. A mile upriver, past a scattering of remaining fishermen's shacks, the boat paused, idling while two manatees finished a wharfside meal, before tying up outside Kiki on the River, a Greek restaurant with a clubby, South Beach-reminiscent vibe.

Since opening in April 2017, it has developed a reputation for fizzy alfresco festivities and visits from LeBron James and the occasional Real Housewife.

Over a long lunch of grilled fish and scallops, octopus, *melitzanosalata*, and cold rosé, real estate, restaurants, and Paris were discussed. On the water, pleasure boats passed. Late-afternoon diners took dockside tables: lean women with long hair, flawless skin, and abbreviated skirts; men on the whole older and shorter, wearing big watches. Afterward, as we walked outside, where a driver waited behind the wheel of a late-model BMW 7 Series, Otamendi reflected that she had begun to see on the river a crowd of beautiful people, "the same you see at Carpaccio's and Makoto"—two well-known hot spots in Bal Harbour. Did the beautiful people ever get bored? "They don't seem to," Otamendi said. "Some parts of Miami are on a kind of Island Time."