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Living in a White Cube

A Florida home features cutting-edge art—and very little furniture

By NANCY KEATES

Michael Stein likes empty buildings. His collection of photography and multimedia works by artists like Eve Sussman and Candida Hofer revolves in large part around furniture-free structures. To showcase his pieces, Mr. Stein keeps his Coconut Grove home, a stark, white cube, almost furniture-free as well.



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Jason Henry for The Wall Street Journal

Its main living space, a square atrium the size of an art gallery with a 40-foot-ceiling, contains one sofa and a coffee table unaccompanied by bookshelves, side tables or a single lamp. The bedroom, housing a bed and a white comforter, is immaculate—a good thing, since it's open to the living area downstairs. A room off the kitchen that would usually hold a breakfast table is empty; Mr. Stein watches the flat-screen television installed there while perched on a stool in the kitchen about 30 feet away at a side angle.

Almost everything is white and gray. "I've never liked color. It has something to do with my personality. I'm methodical,

meticulous and organized. When things are neat and under control I am able to be more productive and concentrated," said the 42-year-old real-estate financier, neatly put together in a tailored, gray suit. "It feels more peaceful."

Although Mr. Stein didn't start collecting art until 2004, everything in his home is designed around his collection. Christoph Morlinghaus's well-known photo of the empty TWA terminal at JFK Airport now hangs on the mezzanine. Ms. Hofer's empty interior of the Biennial Pavilion in São Paulo is around the corner, and a video still of a performance-art show by Inigo Manglano-Ovalle called "Climate: White Noise," which shows the interior of a Mies van der Rohe-designed building in Chicago, is in the living room. Mr. Stein hung the yellow headphones worn by the window-washer in the performance piece on the wall below.

Kimberly Marrero, a New York curator and Guggenheim educator who advises Mr. Stein, calls his collection "cerebral," adding that his fascination with empty spaces reflects his understanding that architecture can exude the same inspiration as the human form. Mr. Stein says his interest in architecture came from his career in real estate. The other theme of his art is women. "I don't golf. I don't fly planes or own a boat. So women is how I filled my space," he says.

Home Front

▪ **Private Properties:** Christian Lacroix Sells

Art Basel Miami Beach, the show that put the city's art scene on the international map, began earlier this week. Mr. Stein, who

- Apartment
- **Relative Values:** Luxe Homes with Indoor Pools

serves on the collector's council of the Miami Museum of Art, threw a cocktail party at his home the night before the opening for 15 other collectors and friends and plans to spend much of the weekend socializing with other collectors and shopping at

the show.

Mr. Stein grew up in a series of Florida apartments that were modern and uncluttered —the aesthetic of his mother, Bonnie Guren. She says her son was always exacting: He'd rush home after getting the results of a test to add them into a chart he kept for calculating his averages. It was his mother, also a collector, who introduced Mr. Stein to the art world at the Armory Show in New York in 2004.

Two years after he began collecting, Mr. Stein bought the 4,200-square-foot house for \$2 million in 2006 when it was a three-story box outfitted with glass block partitions, curving green marble and beige popcorn stucco on almost every surface. "It was hideous. It was awful. But I could see it had good bones," says architect Max Strang, who directed the nine-month, \$400,000 remodeling, finished in September 2007.

A few blocks away, Mr. Strang's own house, which was featured in "Miami Vice," is for sale for \$5.9 million. A five-bedroom beige Mediterranean a few blocks away is currently for sale at \$1.8 million.

Mr. Stein said he didn't initially ask for a white box: He just wanted enough space, light and unobtrusiveness to highlight his art. But as the design process evolved, it turned out that what he wanted was a house designed in the fashion of Brazilian architect Oscar Niemeyer. Mr. Stein loved how Mr. Niemeyer's stark white stucco buildings contrasted with the local vegetation, and made him think a similar look would go well in the untamed, tropical green vegetation that surrounds his house in Coconut Grove.

Mr. Stein's uncompromising devotion to minimalism is now being tested by his recent engagement to Brazilian lawyer Adriana Pinheiro. Colorful and outgoing, Ms. Pinheiro is already complaining the only cozy space in the house is a brown B&B Max Alto sofa downstairs, where three bedrooms house Mr. Stein's teenage kids from a prior marriage every other weekend. She's got ideas for the empty breakfast room. "I feel like we need something. Even just an Eames chair," she said.

"That's great, honey," Mr. Stein replied, before turning away to some other guests. "You learn to say that," he then joked.

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