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Construction begins on Miami's first supertall tower. Who won the race to the sky?

BY ANDRES VIGLUCCI

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Kevin Maloney, founder and CEO of Property Markets Group, talks about the construction of the first supertall building in downtown Miami. BY [JOSÉ A. IGLESIAS](#) ✉

For years, many a developer has vowed to give Miami its first supertall tower — a class of cloud-piercing skyscraper that rises to a dizzying pinnacle of 1,000 feet or more. But no one has managed to deliver it.

Until now.

Miami's [race to the sky](#) at long last appears to have a winner: It's the [Waldorf Astoria Hotel & Residences](#), which has broken ground. For real.

With foundation preparation permit in hand, the tower's developers have begun drilling and pouring a special concrete for support pilings into the ground on Biscayne Boulevard in downtown Miami across from Bayside Marketplace. They say the 1,000-plus-foot, 100-story tower, a slender, Jenga-like stack of glass cubes, will be the first supertall in Florida and the tallest residential building south of New York City, once it's completed in about four and a half years.

“I think it’s a big deal, not just for us, but for the community,” said Ryan Shear, managing partner at Miami’s PMG, which is developing the Waldorf tower with Canada-based Greybrook Realty and other partners. “It’s not every day a supertall starts construction. As a Miamian, I take a lot of pride in it. It’s not just another groundbreaking. This one is a bit special.”

In another first, the arrival of the Waldorf Astoria tower — to be marked with a formal groundbreaking Oct. 27 — signals the Miami debut of the storied New York City hotel brand owned by Hilton. The luxury-loving Miami area has its share of Ritz-Carlton, Four Seasons and St. Regis hotels, condos and resorts, with a couple more St. Regis towers on the way. But the nearest Waldorf is in Orlando.



PMG managing partners Dan Kaplan and Ryan Shear, left and center, stand with company founder and CEO Kevin Maloney at the construction site for their Waldorf Astoria Hotel & Residences on Biscayne Boulevard in downtown Miami. The Waldorf is the first supertall tower to break ground in Miami. Jose A. Iglesias jglesias@elnuevoherald.com

The \$426 million, “beyond luxury” Miami Waldorf, as Shear put it, will include 360 condos and 205 hotel rooms and suites. PMG said more than 85% of condos have been sold.

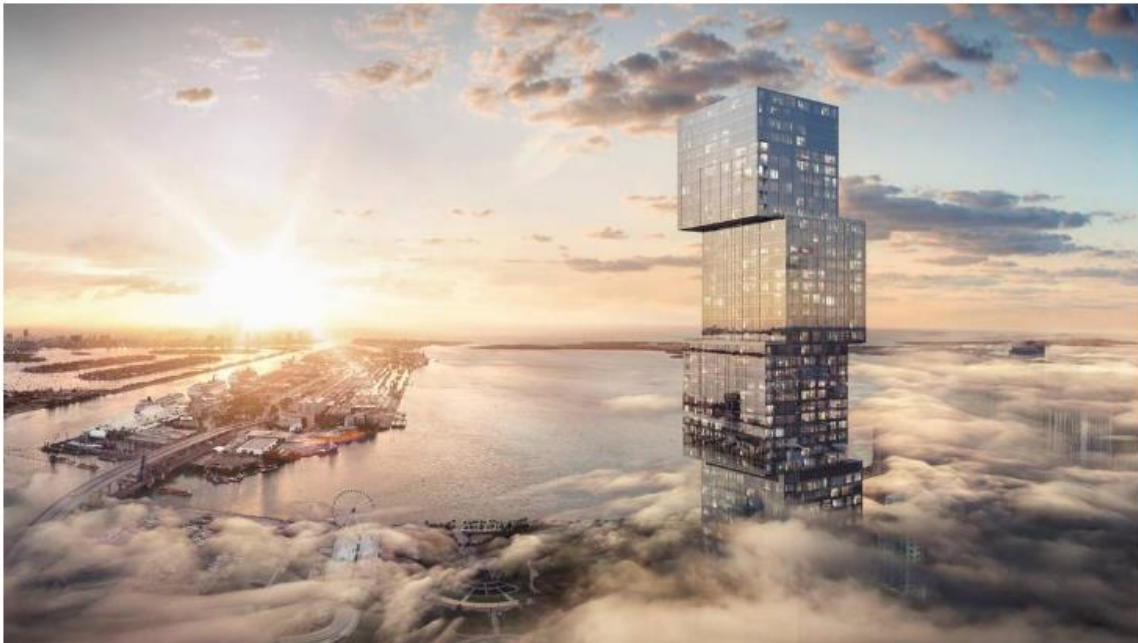
The colossus will top off at 1,049 feet above ground level, the maximum allowed by the Federal Aviation Administration in downtown, which sits directly below flight paths to and from Miami International Airport. To be considered a supertall, a tower technically must exceed 300 meters in height, or around 984 feet.

The Waldorf won’t come anywhere near the nosebleed heights of the world’s tallest buildings, which exceed 2,000 feet. The global titleholder is, at least for now, the [Burj Khalifa](#) in Dubai, which reaches a head-spinning 2,717 feet. The Jeddah Tower in Saudi Arabia was designed to bust the record by reaching an unfathomable 1 kilometer, or 3,281 feet in height, but construction has stopped and remains on hold for mysterious reasons.

But the Waldorf will handily best the current holder of the record as Miami's tallest building, the Panorama Tower, a residential high-rise in Brickell that's 85 stories and 868 feet high.

In the planning for some five years, the Waldorf's Miami tower was designed by Uruguayan-born [Carlos Ott](#) and Miami's [Sieger Suarez Architects](#). The project's principal engineers are MG Engineering and the general contractor is John Moriarty Associates Florida. Renderings of the 2017 design depict a slender column of unevenly stacked boxes rising from a compact one-acre lot to make its downtown neighbors seem Lilliputian by comparison.

"It's going to stick out, so it has to be beautiful," PMG founder and CEO Kevin Maloney said.



An architectural rendering of the planned supertall Waldorf Astoria Hotel & Residences tower, which will pierce the clouds at 1,049 feet above ground over downtown Miami. *ArX Solutions*

This is not PMG's first dance with a supertall. It was co-developer of Manhattan's 1,428-foot-tall [111 West 57th Street](#), which opened this year. Also known as the Steinway Tower, it's one of a run of controversial supertall, superskinny billionaires' condo towers that jut up like matchsticks from the Midtown Manhattan skyline.

Planning, designing and engineering the Miami supertall was “a Herculean effort,” said Dan Kaplan, also a PMG managing principal. He joked the partners learned “what not to do” on a supertall from the Steinway tower, which some leading architecture critics have nonetheless called [the best designed](#) of the New York superskinnies.

“In a nutshell, it’s complicated,” Shear said of developing a supertall. “It’s a science. You’re dealing not just with structure. You’re also dealing with wind, settlement, constructibility. The taller the tower, the more complicated it is.”

For one thing, the tendency of a slim tower to sway must be restrained. The Waldorf is the first skyscraper in Miami to use what’s called a [tuned mass damper](#), a sphere or another heavy object — sometimes a pendulum — that is mounted on springs near the tower’s top to slow and counteract that sway and ensure building motion remains imperceptible. The Waldorf’s will weigh 600 tons, Maloney said.

Some details that wouldn’t be so important in a conventional tower become critical, Shear and Kaplan said. For instance, normal drywall would crack because of the building’s slight movement and settling. Drywall at the Waldorf tower will have slip joints, like expansion joints in bridges, to absorb movement without producing cracks.

The elevators have to be rocket-fast. They move at 1,800 feet per minute, or about six times the speed of normal high-rise elevators. That’s fast enough to make your ears pop, Maloney said.

Add to that the challenge of ensuring that the complex design and engineering also produce a Waldorf Astoria worthy of the name. The developers said they were glad to have the more than five years it took from project announcement to start of construction to tweak and refine.

“You’re looking at it through a different lens,” Shear said. “If you want to do it right and deliver a five-star experience in a supertall, every detail is critical. We were able to analyze and refine every square inch of the building. It was not all rushed, and it’s nothing short of spectacular.”

The reception has been unusually enthusiastic, the developers said.

“The height alone is one of the reasons. So is the design, with the nine offset cubes. A lot of people gravitate to that,” Shear said. “People say, ‘Wow, this is new, this is different.’ “



The planned supertall Waldorf Astoria Hotel & Residences tower reaches 1,049 feet toward the sky over downtown Miami in this architectural rendering. *ArX Solutions*