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Downtown has come a long way since he moved back to Miami in 2009, says Robert Hill. From his office overlooking PortMiami, the general manager of the InterContinental Miami reflects on the challenges facing the hotel industry and staying competitive in a busier downtown, **8**

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InterContinental GM on Miami's progress

■ Robert Hill, the general manager of the InterContinental Miami, reflects on the growth of downtown Miami, the challenges facing the hotel industry and staying competitive in a busier downtown.

BY CHABELI HERRERA
cherrera@miamiherald.com

Robert Hill was about 13 when he started designing hotels at his family home just outside Limerick, Ireland. It wasn't his first choice for a future profession — Formula 1 race car driver or race car designer would have been cooler — but it satisfied an appetite for the hospitality industry that he had started to develop.

It also helped that at the time, Hill was watching a mid-1980s TV show called "Hotel" about the

fictitious St. Gregory Hotel in San Francisco. The St. Gregory was more traditional, but Hill liked mod-

ern. "The one that I recall most was designing this kind of four-tower hotel building and having the central complex for the elevators," Hill recalled. "Each of the towers standing out from that central bank, I was able to maximize the views."

He didn't quite make it as a hotel designer, but he did pursue managerial positions in the hospitality industry, which led him to become the general manager at the InterContinental Miami in downtown in 2009. Last week, he spoke to the Miami Herald from his office at the

InterContinental. Outside, PortMiami and a Disney Cruise Line ship. Consider the views maximized. When

Hill took over at the InterContinental, it was in the midst of the economic downturn of 2009. Now the hotel is navigating another bleak period for the local hotel industry. For the past six months, local hotel taxes have been on the longest downward streak since the Great Recession. Zika took a bite from hotel performance last year and the short-term rental industry has grown exponentially, threatening the hotel industry.

But it has turned around before, Hill said, and it likely will again.

Back around the recession, it was the 2010 Super Bowl between the New Orleans Saints and the Indianapolis Colts at what is now Hard Rock Stadium (then Joe Robbie Stadium), that turned it around.

The InterContinental hosted the Saints, who came from behind to win 31-17.

"The hotel was pretty much bought out for the team," Hill said. "We had an after-party from midnight until about 5 a.m. for 2,000 New Orleans Saints fans, the players, their friends and families. That's the largest party that we've hosted at the hotel."

Things started looking up after that and the grim projections for Miami's hotel industry turnaround brightened. In 2012, the hotel, built in the 1980s, completed a \$30 million renovation that gave Miami the "skyline dancers," silhouettes of dancers displayed on a large digital canvas covering the side of the hotel.

Hill sat down with

Robert Hill

Job title: General Manager, InterContinental Miami and Chair of the Greater Miami and the Beaches Hotel Association Downtown/Brickell Committee

Experience: Twenty-five years of service with InterContinental Hotels. Hill joined at the Churchill London in 1992, held subsequent roles at InterContinental properties in Maui, Atlanta, Washington, D.C., Chicago and Miami, where he was an assistant director of food and beverage in the mid-1990s. Hill took on his first general manager role in Austin before returning to Miami in 2009.

Personal: Resides in Miami Beach with his wife Breda and two children, ages 9 and 5.

Best advice you ever got on hotel management: "Ask yourself every morning, 'How am I going to improve our hotel today?' Each day brings something different — new guests, new groups and meetings in house, new team members — so I've always got to be focused on the big picture. I try to raise our game in every facet of the business, from employee relations and guest services, to operations, sales and community outreach. There is nothing more rewarding than a 'thank you' from a guest or colleague when they see me engaged."

About InterContinental Miami: Built in 1982, the InterContinental Miami caters to business and leisure travelers and has hosted heads-of-state, royalty, rock-stars and celebrities. The 34-story hotel features views Atlantic Ocean, Biscayne Bay and PortMiami. It has 641 guest rooms, including 34 suites and 33 meeting rooms with more than 100,000 square feet of meeting and exhibition space.

Website: icmiamihotel.com

the Herald to discuss the current state of the industry, how it has navigated tough times and staying competitive in a busier downtown.

Q: You took a chance with the major renovation the hotel completed in 2012 that gave Miami the "skyline dancers." Looking back on that now, how do you think that helped catapult the hotel to where it is now and to downtown as a whole?

A: Our business at the

InterContinental Miami was stable leading up to our \$30 million renovation, but we understood the importance of staying fresh and aligning our property with the "New Miami" and our changing downtown, which was fast becoming a lifestyle destination. That meant investing in new technology, incorporating visual arts into our common areas and our exterior façade, and adding a signature restaurant, Toro Toro, led by celebrity chef Richard Sandoval.



CARL JUSTE cjuste@miamiherald.com