

UPON REFLECTION

For a home in South Beach's prestigious Portofino Tower, Britto Charette keeps things light with oak, marble—and lots of mirrored walls.

Story by Drew Limsky | Photography by Kris Tamburello





In an industry where word of mouth is everything, some well-heeled, globe-trotting homeowners discovered Miami firm Britto Charette while researching interior designers online. The firm's work spoke for itself. "The clients interviewed us and two other firms, and they chose us because of our work in the 'Miami' style," recalls principal Jay Britto. "They liked our aesthetic. When they reviewed our portfolio, they liked our approach to several other projects. They wanted a clean design with light woods and light materials—a neutral palette with accent colors."

The clients live full-time in Rome near the Colosseum, with multiple homes in other resort destinations. No strangers to South Beach, FL, they had been renting an apartment seasonally at the Flamingo, deciding whether or not they liked the area enough to buy. South Beach is hard to resist, and eventually it became time to purchase.

It's a big investment to buy at the Portofino (the property cost close to \$3 million). Unveiled in 1997 by the Portofino Group and the Related Group, the peach-colored building, at 44 floors, is the fourth tallest tower in Miami Beach, and surpassingly prestigious. Residents have included acclaimed actor Donald Sutherland and former tennis star Anna Kournikova. But Britto Charette's soon-to-be clients took the plunge on the three-bedroom, 2.5-bath residence, and soon they and their two children would have a base in one of South of Fifth's most coveted towers. The apartment was not exactly move-in ready, however. "The condo was in need of a makeover," says Jay. "Who-



ever owned it before must have had work done in the '90s when the building first went up. It had coral stone applications, typically small marble tiles on the floor, and inadequate lighting.”

Portofino Tower carries an irregular footprint, with eight different angular floor plans, so Britto Charette set to establish a more serene flow. “Because the floor plan is not your typical rectangular box, we wanted to create symmetry as you walk in,” Jay explains. “Since the original vestibule was round, we removed some walls to create a stronger sense of entry.” His team clad the foyer walls in mirrors, so when you enter, you see the city on one side and the ocean on

the other. The skyscraper lords over the tip of the barrier island that contains South Beach, and the new configuration immediately showed off the assets of the location to all who enter. At 3,000 square feet, the condo is far from small, but the mirrors confer a feeling of endlessness. “We used mirrors throughout to give the home the illusion of a larger space,” says Jay. “In the dining room and foyer, there was a great deal of wall space, so we also added mirrors because we didn’t want the eye to fixate on the walls.”

“The client was initially concerned about the mirrors, thinking it might look like the '80s,” Jay remembers, “but we said, ‘Listen, the interpretation that



you're envisioning—with mirrors and chrome, like a gym—is not what we're thinking.” The owners decided to trust the designers. “Once everything was installed, they said, ‘Wow, it really opens up the room,’” Jay recalls. The wood gives the mirrors a look that is at once earthy and sophisticated. To avoid a corporate feel, the two mirrored walls are not identical: one has a wooden niche; both feature oak display shelves.

Several of Britto Charette’s signature accessories appear on one of the shelves: two ceramic horns, one completely dipped in gilt, the other half-dipped. Such pieces serve as the design firm’s calling cards. “We develop products that are

unique to us, and when someone walks into one of our homes, they see the piece and know we designed the space,” notes Jay. The firm debuted the white, gold and platinum accessories line around seven years ago; it was inspired by a gold-themed exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, as well as by handcrafted Peruvian objects. Jay lived in Peru until he was 16, and the aesthetic had a huge impact on him. “Even my tattoos were inspired by the culture,” he says.

Within a few years after their introduction, the objects were scooping up awards—even beating established brands like B&B Italia—and garnering ma-



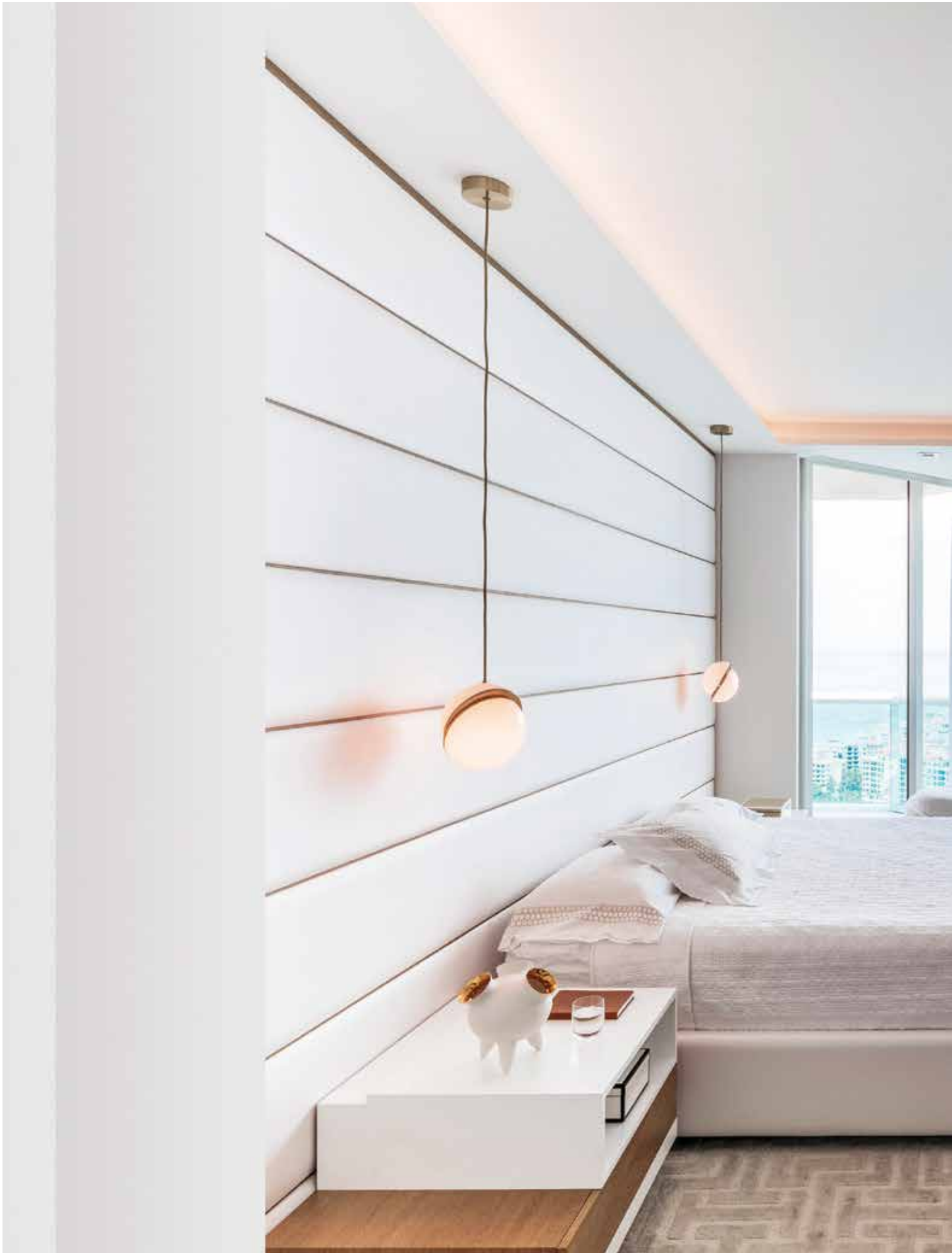


for coverage in newspapers and design magazines. The combination of the objects' white matte finish and the suggestion of precious metals balances the rustic and traditional with the rarefied and exclusive. Once people see them, they tend not to forget them. The early success propelled the duo to create even more shapes and silhouettes. The firm always gives clients a piece as a gift; clearly, these Roman clients were moved to purchase several more.

The home's sense of reflection is reinforced by the glossy marble flooring in the foyer, leading to the living room, and in the bathrooms. Britto Charette used statuary white marble in a 24- by 48-inch rectangular format in the living space, and a 12- by 24-inch format in the bathrooms. The bedroom, on the other hand, is warmed up with eight-inch oak panels on the floor.

But the design duo did far more than reinvent surfaces. The project involved a substantial redo of the interior architecture—including raising the ceilings, in part because the clients are tall. "Our team loves a challenge, and we found a fun one here," says Jay. "With the help of our fantastic construction specialists, we were able to raise the ceilings 20 inches by moving air-conditioning ductwork and mechanicals, thus providing the perfect solution for our clients."

"To achieve the sleek design, we had to clean up several architectural aspects of the condo," he continues. "In addition to opening the entrance, we removed the ceiling curve and cleaned up the ceiling architecture. We created a soffit ceiling design, so we were able to add downlights and integrated lighting, and then we had to tear down all the bathrooms. We also opened the entrance from the master bedroom to the bathroom by removing several nonessential doors and adding a barn door, creating a high-end boutique effect." Britto Charette eliminated one of two closets in the guest bedroom to make room for a larger, eat-in kitchen, and created a more formal dining









room with a custom-made banquette set against a structural wall.

The firm designed beautiful furniture to complement the interior architecture, enlisting Soto's in Deerfield Beach for the upholstery. "Nearly every piece was customized for this project, including beds, headboards, nightstands, TV wall units, area rugs, chaise and vanities," says Jay. Some designers are given to customizing a certain piece for virtually all their clients. For Jay, those favored pieces occur in the bedrooms. "I design the beds and nightstands for almost every single project," he says. "Some companies don't do specific sizes of furniture, so it's easier to create pieces geared to the client. Some clients want a nightstand for books, a pull-out tray or a surface to display art."

In this case, the clients had mid-century tastes that played out in the master bedroom specifically. To reflect a sleek 1960s Italian aesthetic, the firm custom-designed the bed and the wood-and-white-lacquer nightstands. Once again, Jay got resourceful given the original floor plan: he had an idea for an elliptical oak desk to fit inside a niche that he'd transformed from an angular space to a softer, round one.

The living room is rather minimalist, boasting statement pieces and standout brands. The open-weave chenille sofa is from CasaDesús by Arravanti, with chenille and velvet pillows. An ottoman tucks neatly under the coffee table—these pieces are also from CasaDesús. Ripple-fold sheers hang over the windows. "Many designers use pinched-pleated, which we don't think is modern enough," says Jay. A second seating area, separated from the main seating area by a custom-made oak bookcase, is anchored by a totally different type of sofa—the iconic two-seater from Ligne Roset. "It's low and doesn't compete with the CasaDesús sofa," says Jay. The settee finds company with a Dedon coffee table and a Poliform armchair.

The geometric wool and silk rug was custom-made to fit under all the seating, and has an almost magic carpet feel—but that's to be expected when reflective surfaces like marble and mirrors merge with a vast view over the sea. You're in the clouds.

Resources:

Interior Designers
 Britto Charette
 310 NW 26th Street
 Miami, FL 33127
 305.640.5005
 brittocharette.com

General Contractor
 CH Construction
 444 Brickell Avenue, Suite 403
 Miami, FL 33131
 786.762.2641
 chconstruct.com

Millwork
 EVM Woodworks
 7542 West McNab Road
 North Lauderdale, FL 33068
 954.655.6414

