

On The Key

Renaissance of Miami Marine Stadium, reawakening of Key's soul

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Faced with the specter of losing a priceless piece of its history, each city strives to reclaim its moments of glory.

Such is the case with the unprecedented restoration of the historical landmark that is Miami Marine Stadium and its revitalization as a community gathering place in the works.

"This is a chance to do something truly glorious and transformative by recreating a magical place," affirms Friends of Miami Marine Stadium (FMMS) co-founder Donald Worth.

Dubbing it "the people's amphitheater," he says the renaissance of the Miami Marine Stadium will offer the best of both worlds — breathtaking scenery amidst the backdrop of a glittering Biscayne Bay with world-class entertainment in an intimate setting. Describing it as a hybrid of Sydney Opera House and Central Park, Worth stresses the new project is a win-win situation for South Florida's best-kept tropical jewel.

Created in 2008, the not-for-profit FMMS advocated the restoration and return to operation of the Miami Marine Stadium under the administrative umbrella of Dade Heritage Trust (DHT), Miami's foremost organization devoted to historic preservation. Formed by DHT board member Worth, the stadium's original architect Hilario Candela, University of Miami professor of architecture Jorge Hernandez and DHT executive director Becky Roper Matkov, the all-volunteer organization has since endeavored to rescue the stadium from its state of limbo. "Since the outset, it has been our goal to work with the City of Miami and the community at large to accomplish this purpose and to have the stadium operated in the public interest," explains Worth.



Photo courtesy Michael Stephen McFarland

Volunteers from Friends of Miami Marine Stadium continue their effort to renovate and reopen the historic venue.

In March of this year, the Miami City Commission granted FMMS the green light to furnish the proposal with a business plan within six months and develop full funding for the stadium within two years.

"These are formidable tasks with equally challenging time-frames," observes Worth, who along with FMMS is busy at work on both the site plan and the development of an operating plan for the stadium.

"We're going to need the business, civic and philanthropic leaders of our community to step up and join us, to help raise the funds, and see what an inspirational project this is," emphasizes Worth.

For the past four and a half years, FMMS

has been working on feasibility issues by conducting market tests and meeting with 35 promoters and event organizers.

Built on Virginia Key as a premier venue for powerboat racing, throughout the years Miami Marine Stadium hosted a wide variety

of events ranging from classical, rock and pop music concerts such as Queen, the Boston Pops and Ray Charles to boxing matches and Easter Sunday services.

Measuring longer than a football field, the building was the longest span of cantilevered concrete in the world when it was built. In addition to being classified as an architectural masterpiece by the National Trust for Historic Preservation, it was included alongside Machu Picchu and Old Jerusalem in the 2010 Watch List (naming important endangered sites) of the World Monuments Fund, the leading international entity dedicated to the preservation of cultural and architectural sites.

"The Miami Marine Stadium has earned substantial national and international recognition, and the FMMS has received letters of support from all over, such as rotary clubs, Jimmy Buffet and the World Monuments Fund," says Worth, a transplanted Floridian who was born and raised in Massachusetts.

The Miami resident and his wife, Nina, are currently putting together a compilation of testimonials submitted by residents and visitors who are sharing their past experiences at the stadium.

"Titled *If Seats Could Talk*, the book will feature entries detailing their memories of Miami Marine Stadium or offering suggestions for its future use," notes Worth.

Collaborating with a number of groups headed by the Urban Environment League, FMMS's founders first implemented the Virginia Key Master Plan, which was approved in July 2010. A new master plan, which was co-authored by UM architecture students and with the help of many local organizations, ultimately convinced the Miami City Commission to approve the project and enter into a partnership with FMMS to restore the stadium.

"There is no funding behind the plan; it is simply a blueprint of the area's development and gives us the marching orders to proceed," explains Worth.

Construction cost estimates for the Miami Marine Stadium are around \$30 million; FMMS currently has \$10 million in committed or identified funds.

"We're beginning the quiet campaign by talking to potential major donors," indicates Worth. "This is a wonderful naming rights opportunity."

So far, the group has received \$3 million in funding from Miami-Dade County and, with the assistance of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, has also identified a major corporate sponsor for \$2 million. The sale of historic tax credits will provide another \$4-5 million.

The National Trust and the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation have also provided a \$50,000 grant for additional planning and feasibility studies. Previously, there was an engineering study done of the Marine Stadium which demonstrated that the building is structurally sound. Contrary to popular opinion, it was never damaged by Hurricane Andrew, points out Worth.

"We have a significant amount of support from Key Biscayne and a very good working relationship with Village Manager John Gilbert and Mayor [Frank] Caplan," states Worth, who has appeared before the Village Council, the Key Biscayne Chamber of Com-

merce and the Rotary Club of RKey Biscayne. He has delivered 59 presentations throughout Miami, including 10 Rotary clubs, 5 yacht clubs, historic preservation groups and women's clubs.

"Recognizing that the Marine Stadium is a front yard for the Key, we intend to do something of quality and work very closely with the Village to ensure that the facility is beneficial to residents and businesses," underlines Worth. "The stadium won't have its own self-contained infrastructure; rather, the Village will have the opportunity to capitalize on the project by requiring promoters and organizations to get in touch with its Chamber of Commerce and other local groups and by creating marketing strategies for promotions.

"Our goal is to maximize the profits and minimize the problems for the stakeholders – the Key Biscayne residential and business community."

FMMS plans to take all issues under consideration to ensure that the development is an asset, rather than a liability. "We've met with the director of traffic on the Rickenbacker Causeway, and we will also be hiring a traffic engineer to make sure the interchanges are done in the most effective manner," points out Worth.

In view of the fact that the stadium's maximum capacity is 6,000 and that alternative forms of transport to the venue, such as water taxis, will be recommended, traffic concerns should be alleviated, he explains.

Five types of events are being contemplated for the stadium: athletic events such as triathlons, rowing regattas and dragon boat races; concerts ranging from Latin and jazz to classical and the Florida Grand Opera; boat racing; special events such as graduations, Easter Sunrise Services, corporate events, movie shoots, film shoots and fashion shows; and spectacle events such as Cirque du Soleil's aquatic masterpiece "O".

"The Save Our Sisters (women's breast

cancer survivors) dragon boat team races are the kind of event we would like to bring to the stadium and by the same token support this group of gutsy women who have been through hell and come out on the other side," states Worth.

"Kim Bomono has played a big role in ushering in the women's Dragon Boat Festival in Sarasota, and she as well as Team SOS are interested in bringing this event to the Key," he notes. "Having the up-and-coming Miami Symphony Orchestra, led by the charismatic Eduardo Marturet, be the resident classical orchestra at the stadium and combining events with synchronized live fireworks are among the endless possibilities.

"Candela, the architect, designed the stadium so that pretty much all of the seats are in the shade, and that makes a huge difference. On average, the temperature in the stadium is 10 degrees cooler than the air around it," explains Worth.

Furthermore, he notes, the seats are reasonably steeped, so that every attendee feels like a VIP and has a seat with an unobstructed water view.

"The word that people have used time and time again to describe the stadium is 'magical'," remarks Worth.

With one-third of the stadium built over the water, it is an engineering marvel like a piece of Japanese origami, he says.

"It reminds you of the Emerald City in *The Wizard of Oz* in the sense that the city is a couple of miles away and at the same time, it is so close that you can touch it," remarks Worth. "The lands east of the stadium will be turned into a great lawn to accommodate family festivals with an entertainment activities."

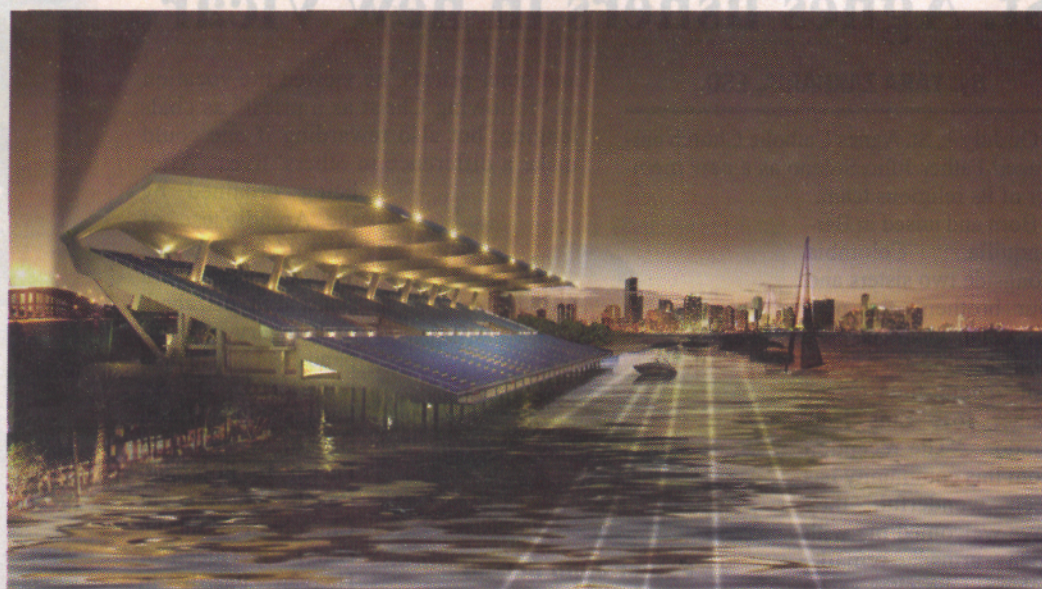


Photo courtesy Steven Brooke Studios

Miami Marine Stadium by night boasts the shimmering Miami skyline as a background.

In February, the FMMS and the University of Florida School of Engineering honored Jack Meyer, the stadium's original engineer, at the Biscayne Bay Yacht Club.

"He said that he had over-engineered the stadium by designing it to last 100 years: 'Hilario made it beautiful, and I made it strong'," he says, echoing the engineer's remarks.

FMMS is committed to making this project an asset to Key Biscayne and to continuing to engage the Village.

"We welcome and encourage Key residents to submit thoughts or ideas, support our efforts by signing up for our newsletter and contribute online to the fundraising campaign," he said. "As a philanthropic organization, we work very hard, and every dollar goes to this good cause whose impact will be broad-based and enormous. At heart, this is a community project."

In a city such as Miami, where cynicism is rampant, he observes, such a project will serve as a "wonderful source of pride."

"For the community to come together and save a marvelous building that was on the brink of demolition and turn it into something spectacular is a historical moment for generations to cherish," affirms Worth.

For more information about FMMS, visit www.marinestadium.org or contact Worth at dontonton@gmail.com.