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Move to save Miami Marine Stadium gets historic boost

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A scrappy campaign to save the long-shuttered Miami Marine Stadium, increasingly admired as a masterpiece of modern architecture, will get a major boost Tuesday when the country's principal preservation group names the city-owned site as one of the most endangered historic places in the United States.

Inclusion on the National Trust for Historic Preservation's list of 11 most-endangered historic sites puts the marine stadium, largely forgotten until a group of architects and preservationists launched a save-the-stadium effort, in the company of Frank Lloyd Wright's Unity Temple outside Chicago, the Manhattan Project's Enola Gay hangar in Utah and Los Angeles' Century Plaza Hotel -- designed by the architect of the World Trade Center.

The annual list -- which last year included Miami's Vizcaya and Fort Lauderdale's Bonnet House, both threatened at the time by adjacent high-rise development -- is meant to shine a national spotlight on structures and landscapes that preservationists think merit urgent action.

"This recognizes the stadium is important nationally," said Jorge Hernandez, a Coral Gables architect, professor and trustee of the national group that pushed for the stadium's inclusion on the list. "This will reach an even broader audience, and we hope it will help our politicians recognize what a unique resource it is."

National Trust president Richard Moe said the marine stadium was included on the list after researchers concluded there is nothing else like it in the country.

"It's an iconic building," Moe said. "I've never seen anything like that design. Everything argues for the city putting muscle and mind behind a plan to bring it back to life."

Although Miami's historic preservation board named the stadium grandstand and its companion U-shaped water basin a historic site last year, preventing demolition or significant alteration, its future remains in doubt.

The threat, as fans of the stadium see it: potential city plans that could strip the stadium of its significance.

The deteriorated grandstand, designed by Cuban American architect Hilario Candela, needs millions of dollars in renovation work to reopen. Meanwhile, the city -- which once planned to do away with it -- has yet to identify potential new uses for the building.

And the city administration, in an unusual move, has appealed historic designation of the basin portion to the city commission, raising worries among boaters, rowers and preservationists over the

valuable site's future. The city had long eyed the site for commercial development.

Early city plans showed a marina that would constrain use of the popular basin. Without open water, preservationists argue, the grandstand would be little more than a relic. City planners have been revising the concept for more than a year, but nothing has been issued publicly.

"If you remove the basin, it's like a baseball stadium without the diamond," Hernandez said.

The stadium was nominated for the National Trust list by Friends of Miami Marine Stadium, www.marinestadium.org, which plans a demonstration outside the site's gate on the Rickenbacker Causeway at 10 a.m. Tuesday. The group also is planning a series of events to raise funds and awareness of the stadium.

Release of the National Trust list -- and the marine stadium's inclusion -- coincides with the group's launch of an initiative to highlight the need to save Modernist buildings, many of which are under threat of demolition or falling into deterioration. The often-austere style, which fell into disfavor as the century wore on, has found new adherents among young architects, preservationists and design fans.

Miami and Miami Beach have in recent years moved aggressively to create historic districts to protect structures built in the 1940s and 1950s, many in the tropics-meets-Bauhaus style dubbed Miami Modern, or MiMo. Aside from designating the marine stadium, Miami's preservation office is also considering protecting the iconic Bacardi buildings on Biscayne Boulevard, with a preliminary vote scheduled for May 5.

"Every architectural style that has passed the test of time had a period of being very controversial," Moe said. "Victorian was very controversial in its time. People forget that. Art Deco was very controversial.

"Now Modernism is coming into its own as historic. But so much of the good stuff is being lost before it's 50 years old. So we're not going to wait."

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