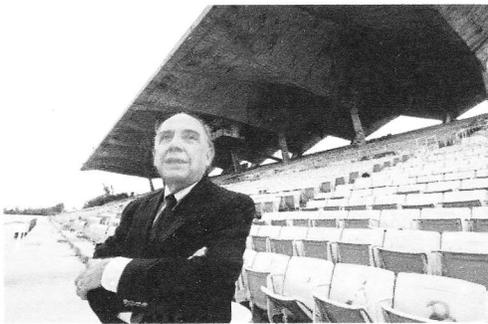


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Miami Marine Stadium: Eyesore or worth saving?

Power boats, Nixon and Jimmy Buffett: Miami Marine Stadium an unlikely cultural touchstone



(AP)

(AP) MIAMI (AP) - What does the Miami Marine Stadium have in common with such famous landmarks as Machu Picchu and the Old City of Jerusalem?

All three have made it on the World Monuments Fund's watch list for 2010 of monuments threatened by neglect or overdevelopment for 2010. But while the latter two - and dozens of others on the

95-monument list - are thousands of years old and have deep cultural significance for mankind, the quirky Miami Marine Stadium was built in 1964 and once hosted the soft rock group Air Supply.

The stadium has been a focal point for some iconic cultural and political events: scores of powerboat races, the spot where Sammy Davis Jr. and President Richard Nixon hugged in 1972, the site of a legendary and raucous 1985 Jimmy Buffett concert. The 1967 Elvis Presley movie "Clambake" - about an oil tycoon's heir swapping places with a poor water-skier - was filmed there.

The stadium was shut down in 1992, after Hurricane Andrew's winds damaged its cantilevered and origami-swanlike roof. Today, it sits empty on Key Biscayne, an island east of downtown Miami and all of its glittering new high-rises. The forlorn structure, once a hub of entertainment in Miami, is awash in graffiti.

"I have had feelings of anger both as a designer and as a Miamian," said Hilario Candela, who designed the stadium when he was 28. He is now 75 and is "saddened" to see how his creation has deteriorated.

Architectural experts both in Miami and around the world say the 6,566-seat Miami Marine

Stadium is a significant modernist structure - and the move to preserve it is not a joke.

"Yeah, we are serious," said Amy Freitag, the director for U.S. programs at the World Monument Fund in New York, a non-profit group that works to save places with historic or architectural significance. "This is a special and important and iconic place that is at risk. We can't let this fall down. And it's rare that you can mention the World Monuments Fund and Jimmy Buffett in same sentence."

There are eight other sites in the U.S. that landed on the list, some of them just as puzzling: Atlanta-Fulton Central Public Library, the bridges on the tree-lined and 1940s-era Merritt Parkway in Connecticut, the Phillis Wheatley Elementary School in New Orleans, and even the broadly defined "cultural landscape" of Hadley, Mass., a town along the Connecticut River in the western part of the state.

The marine stadium is unique because of its cantilevered, fold-plate roof and its construction of lightweight, poured-in-place concrete, which was popular in mid-century European and Latin American sports stadiums. The modernist design appears to float over the glimmering water of Biscayne Bay; when bands used to perform there, they would play atop a floating stage. Boats clustered in the water and fans packed the stands.

It's also the first structure in Miami built by a Cuban exile architect.

"It's quintessentially Miami," said Becky Roper Matkov, the CEO of Dade Heritage Trust, a local historic preservation group. "With the water and the sky and how it's open to the air."

Jorge Hernandez is a Miami architect and, along with Candela, is the co-founder of Friends of Marine Stadium, a group dedicated to bringing the venue back to its rockin' heyday.

Hernandez, who saw a Boston Pops concert, a Fourth of July celebration and attended an Easter sunrise celebration at the stadium as a child, said that even though the structure is relatively new, it needs to be saved because of its importance in the modern architecture milieu.

"We're just starting to understand the importance of preserving our recent modern past," he said.

It has also been the site of history: in 1972, Sammy Davis Jr. hugged president Richard Nixon, during a youth rally held at the stadium during the Republican National Convention - surprising folks who didn't know the actor was a Republican and Nixon supporter.

But restoring the building isn't easy. Engineering reports after Hurricane Andrew said the structure was sound. But it will take millions to restore the structure - because no engineering studies have been undertaken recently, it's unclear exactly how much restoration will cost - and the city of Miami is especially cash strapped during the recession.

In 2002, Mayor Manny Diaz expressed interest in restoring the stadium; his term ends this November without any significant progress for the stadium.

"Anything can be preserved, with enough money and inspiration," said Ellen Uguccioni, the city of Miami's Historic Preservation officer. She added that no one in city government wants the stadium to be torn down - but coming up with the money needed to restore it will be difficult. It has been included in a master plan for the area, which is actually an island just east of Miami's downtown; Uguccioni says the city would like to see it eventually return as a venue for concerts and events.

The city has awarded a historic designation for the stadium, and earlier this year, the National Trust for Historic Preservation also put it on "most endangered" list. On Oct. 1, it received its biggest endorsement yet: singer Jimmy Buffett cut a public service announcement on behalf of the stadium, urging his multitude of fans to support the restoration effort.

"It's a symbol of everything that's great about Florida - boats, music, water and great Florida fun," Buffett says in the video, against a backdrop of images of him singing "Margaritaville" at the stadium, during the 1985 concert. Tens of thousands of people packed the stadium and the water, and it was also the first concert video the singer ever released.

Says Candela, the architect: "My dream is to get the stadium back to the role it had in the community, to be a real part of the community again. That's how you create great cities, they have things you can't find anywhere else."

On the Web:

Friends of Marine Stadium: www.marinestadium.org

World Monument Fund: <http://www.wmf.org/>