

## Protecting the Place





# Miami Marine Stadium: Making the Case for Exceptional Significance

JORGE L. HERNANDEZ

**M**ore and more Mid-Century Modern masterworks face uncertain futures as they “show their age.” After decades of heavy use, they may now require extensive repairs, alterations, and upgrades. Often misunderstood, public opinion regards these structures as either no longer the prominent exuberant symbols they once were, or not “sufficiently historic.” The Miami Marine Stadium—once a vibrant cultural center for the young city of Miami, but now shuttered and abandoned—is one such example.

## A REMARKABLE DESIGN

In 1962 the Chicago planning firm of Ralph H. Burke, led by J. L. Donoghue, submitted a master plan to the City of Miami for a recreational landscape on Virginia Key—the Miami Marine Stadium. The firm’s proposal for the stadium, envisioned as the world’s finest speedboat

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racecourse, consisted of a shaped and dredged aquatic basin similar to one built in Long Beach, Calif., for the Olympics of 1932 and a waterside grandstand structure modeled after the one built at Jones Beach Theater in Wantagh, N.Y., in 1952.

The combination of grandstand and basin was unique and remains so to this day. An aerial rendering that accompanied

the Burke Master Plan depicts the basin—6,000 feet long and 1,400 feet wide—configured as an aquatic circus maximus, dredged from Biscayne Bay and surrounded by land on three sides yet open to the west framing views of Miami’s skyline. The rendering also shows how the planners had envisioned the architecture of the grandstand, resembling a straightened section of a ball field grandstand, with a vaulted metal roof—an expected formal response for the design of a grandstand structure.

Nothing about this early rendering suggests the masterwork that would be produced when the architectural commission was granted to the Miami firm of Pancoast, Ferendino, Skeels and Burnham in 1962. Upon receiving the commission, the partner in charge of the project, Andrew Ferendino, tapped a 26-year-old Cuban architect, Hilario Candela, as the lead designer. Hilario had joined the firm just a year earlier.

The grandstand structure that Candela designed is a masterpiece among Miami’s

Modern works of architecture. The structure, which is 326 feet long and 126 feet wide, consists of eight bays of “V” shaped columns supporting a thin-shell concrete roof with a 65-foot cantilever. The undulating planes of the roof structure are formed by hyperbolic paraboloids (a continuous flowing double-curved form) and appear to float over the 6,500 seats of the stands below. The view





A 1963 photo shows the architect Hilario Candela standing in front of the stadium while it was under construction. In 2011, at the awards ceremony for a competition that solicited design ideas for reviving the facility, Candela notes that he never anticipated being able to look back over 50 years and “hear one of my designs, my creations, so celebrated and heartily fought for.”

PHOTO COURTESY OF SPILLIS CANDELA DMJM ARCHIVES

from the nearby causeway presents a forceful pattern of “chiaroscuro” caused by the deep sculptural recesses of the structure awash in strong Florida sunlight. On the other side of the basin, the structure is open to the sky and sea as the lower rows of seats project over and hover above the waters of the basin.

In the words of Hilario Candela, “The stadium is an architecture for that place where the land and the sea kiss.” The form of this monumental yet graceful structure resembles a giant work of origami in concrete. It suggests waves, wings, sails, clouds, shells, kites—all evoked by the skillful use of geometric forms. The architecture of the grandstand lends a presence at once brutal and fragile in contrast to the natural serenity of the protected waters of the basin. Architecture and designed landscape (grandstand and basin) together give rise to a truly memorable place—the Marine Stadium.

#### ROLE IN MIAMI'S CULTURAL LIFE

Since its opening night, December 27, 1963, the stadium was a place of spectacle and

celebration, a social nexus for the community. Over the years, the mix of activities was astounding: high-speed boat races, rowing regattas, swimming competitions, beauty pageants, water skiing exhibitions, opera, movies, classical concerts, rock concerts, political rallies, Easter sunrise services, flotillas for the Patroness of Cuba, performances by Mitch Miller, Arthur Fiedler, Ray Charles, Aretha Franklin, Bonny Rait, El Puma, and many others. At the Marine Stadium, Elvis Presley shot his movie *Clambake* and Sammy Davis hugged Richard M. Nixon during a political rally.

No event has become so inextricably linked to the venue as the Jimmy Buffet concert in 1985. The youthful abandon of Buffet's lyrics and the spirit of this setting were a perfect complement. Where else but here, under a Miami sky, could the performer and one-third of the audience be afloat? That's because of a custom at the stadium that had evolved over time: Just before a concert, for a small fee, boats were allowed to coast into the basin and moor





This historic photo of the Miami Marine Stadium shows the “V” shaped columns supporting the concrete cantilevered roof.

PHOTO COURTESY OF SPILLIS CANDELA DMJM ARCHIVES

to one another around the floating stage to enjoy the show. Yet even as this most memorable of concerts took place, the stadium’s heyday was already nearing its end.

#### ABANDONMENT BY THE CITY

Mismanagement and the city’s unrealized hopes for private development of the public site, coupled with the assault of Hurricane Andrew in 1992, brought about the stadium’s current derelict state. The City of Miami, claiming that the hurricane had irreparably damaged the structure, closed the facility and sought funds from FEMA and the insurance carrier to demolish it. However, the structural engineering company hired by the insurance company to evaluate the City’s claims found evidence to the contrary. The plan to demolish the grandstand failed. Still, the grandstand was fenced in and abandoned for 19 years. It was left to rot—a clear case of demolition by neglect.

In 2008 the City was set to begin the approval process for a new master plan for all of Virginia Key, including the stadium and surrounding property. This plan, authored by the firm of Edward Durrell Stone and Associates, proposed demolishing the Marine Stadium grandstand, filling the basin with a marina

containing permanent dock slips and mooring points, and allowing commercial over-development of the site. If realized, the plan would have destroyed the cultural, social, natural, and aesthetic fabric of the site’s history and created a pallid replacement of the vibrant original.

#### FRIENDS OF MARINE STADIUM

In February 2008 a new group, Friends of Marine Stadium (founded by Hilario Candela, Becky Matkov, Donald Worth, and myself) was established under the auspices of the Dade Heritage Trust. In less than three years, the organization has rallied the community behind the cause to save the stadium and return it to vigorous public use. The organization sought and obtained local historic designation from the City’s Historic and Environmental Preservation Board. (Although the City withheld its consent for the designation, the local ordinance allows the Board the authority to grant designation anyway.) This was quickly followed by the inclusion of the Marine Stadium on the lists of endangered historic sites of the most prestigious preservation organizations at state, national, and international levels including the Florida Trust and the National Trust for Historic Preservation in 2009. This recognition led

The World Monuments Fund to include the stadium on its list of 100 worldwide sites under watch in 2010. The nation and the world joined the local community in recognizing the unique historic character of the Marine Stadium.

### THE CHALLENGE OF DESIGNATING RECENT-PAST PLACES

In securing the local designation, Friends of Marine Stadium had to confront a problem that is all too familiar to advocates for recent-past resources—overcoming the resistance in national, state, and local historic designation criteria to recognize places that are less than 50 years old. The Criteria Considerations for the National Register of Historic Places state that “properties that have achieved significance within the past 50 years shall not be considered eligible for the National Register” unless the property is of “exceptional importance.”<sup>1</sup> This restriction has been picked up by most state and local registers as well, and is often (arguably, too strictly) used to dismiss all “underage” resources.<sup>2</sup>

But the National Park Service publication *Guidelines for Evaluating and Nominating Properties that Have Achieved Significance Within the Past Fifty Years* adds that “An understanding of the context of the historic resource is based on the knowledge of the time, historic theme and geographic area with which the property is associated.”

Further: “The 50 year period is an arbitrary span of time, designed to ensure that enough time has passed to evaluate the property in a historic context...[It] was not designed to be mechanically applied on a year by year basis. Generally our understanding of his-

tory does not advance a year at a time, but rather in periods of time which can logically be examined together.”<sup>3</sup>

At the time the Friends group was seeking designation, the age of the stadium was five years short of the 50-year mark. The Friends group, however, successfully established that the Miami Marine Stadium had truly achieved “exceptional importance” within the past 50 years. Here’s why:

The concept of the significance of history being revealed in “periods of time...examined together” allowed for the interpretation of the architecture of the stadium in connection to a lineage of works in exposed structural concrete that begins at the dawn of the 20th century with the work of Auguste Perret, the French engineer. Later mid-century works by Luigi Nervi (Italy), Oscar Niemeyer (Brazil), and Eero Saarinen (USA) provided a context for comparing the stadium to contemporary works already recognized nationally and internationally as masterpieces of Modern architecture.

More important is the story of a trio of master architects sharing and elaborating ideas with regards to Pan-American Modernism of the mid-century. The Marine Stadium plays a major role in that story.

Before completing his education at the Georgia Institute of Technology in 1957, Hilario Candela, the designer for the Marine Stadium, had interned in the office

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of Max Borges Jr. in Havana. Both Max Borges Jr. and his brother Enrique Borges were heirs to their father’s legacy as an important Cuban architect. Max Borges Jr. began his career under the sober influences



of rationalist architecture but by 1951 had designed his masterpiece, the exuberant yet haunting Salon de los Arcos de Cristal (salon of the crystal arches) at the Tropicana nightclub in Havana.

The affinity between Borges' new direction and the work of Spanish-born Mexican architect Felix Candela (a distant cousin to Hilario) caused Borges to invite Felix Candela to collaborate with him in Havana. Felix Candela was the accomplished master of thin-shelled structural concrete forms. His sculpturally expressive structures seemed to defy gravity, or at least challenge it. Around the mid- to late 1950s the collaboration of these architects had produced important works in the history of Cuban Modernism—the Banco Nunez in 1957 and the Antilla Flower Shop in 1956.

In the mid 1950s, at Georgia Tech, the young Hilario Candela met the master, Felix Candela, who was a visiting lecturer. The creative aura of collaboration between the elder Pan-American masters filled the air during Hilario's internship in Max Borges Jr.'s studio. The aesthetics of this collaboration found fertile ground in the imagination of the younger Candela and its influence would bear fruit on the shore of Biscayne Bay where "the land and the sea kiss" in Hilario Candela's design of the Marine Stadium grandstand.

This story of the interconnections among masters of Pan-American Modernism provides "[a]n understanding of the context of the historic resource... based on the knowledge of the time, historic theme and geographic area with which the property is associated." Because the story demonstrates historic significance that is connected to "a period of time" and based on inter-related history and geography, it dismisses the strict

application of the 50-year threshold in evaluating the Marine Stadium.

#### FUTURE PROSPECTS

Friends of Marine Stadium, now an independent nonprofit organization, has staved off the bulldozer. After obtaining local designation for the stadium, the nomination to the National Register is now in process. On behalf of the Friends organization, Hilario Candela, Catherine Lynn from the University of Miami School of Architecture, and I conducted a public planning process with the University of Miami School of Architecture students and 30 community groups. The resulting plan was adopted in July 2010 as the official City of Miami Master Plan for Virginia Key and the Stadium. The organization also sponsored an international ideas competition for the Floating Stage and meets with future stadium promoters. It receives grants and broadens public support for the project by working in partnership with the National Trust and the World Monuments Fund. The Friends organization is now negotiating with the City of Miami to implement the renovations by 2013. The organization continues the advocacy, fundraising, and public relations campaign to return the stadium to vital public use. For more information go to [www.marinestadium.org](http://www.marinestadium.org). FJ

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- 1 *How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation* (National Register Publications, 1990; revised for internet 2002). [www.nps.gov/nr/publications/bulletins/nrb15/](http://www.nps.gov/nr/publications/bulletins/nrb15/)
- 2 For more on this, see Elaine Stiles, "50 Years Reconsidered" (*Forum Journal*, Vol. 24, No. 4 [Summer 2010]).
- 3 (1979, revised 1990), 3, 6. [www.nps.gov/history/nr/publications/bulletins/nrb22/](http://www.nps.gov/history/nr/publications/bulletins/nrb22/)