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Marine Stadium saved – for now

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The demolition of Miami Marine Stadium on Virginia Key is on hold for now thanks to a strong grassroots effort by Friends of Miami Marine Stadium.

The Friends have been pushing for historic designation for the structure and recently received word from Miami's Historic and Environmental Preservation Board that preliminary designation had been granted. Still, there is a lot of work to do. The Friends will need to submit a full report to the board in September for an October hearing.

The preliminary designation means there is a 120-day period of non-activity.

"No permits for demolition and 120 days to build our case that Miami Marine Stadium should receive full historic designation," said Jorge L.

Hernandez, co-founder of Friends of Miami Marine Stadium.

The structure's fate has been subject to rumors as of late. The security guard patrolling the stadium grounds was surprised to see a news reporter pull up to the structure. He is convinced, he said, the structure is destined for the wrecking ball to make way for more bayside condominiums. Another person told *The Islander News* "a big developer" is prepared to dredge the bay as he eyes the property for a deep water marina.

"Neither one of those ideas is a great use of the property," said Hernandez. "But more importantly, to lose this as a public resource would be a crime."

Hernandez, a renowned local architect and University of Miami professor, has been involved in the stadium preservation effort since its inception a few short months ago. He, along with co-founder Don

Worth, started Friends of Miami Marine Stadium after a series of serendipitous encounters.

"There isn't anyone we've talked to who hasn't had an incredibly positive reaction," said Hernandez. "Their faces light up, and they immediately start recounting a memory. [The stadium] has that effect on people. It is a memory chamber."

Friends of Miami Marine Stadium

"This is one of those Miami stories," said Hernandez about how a group of loosely knit crusaders got together to form a determined alliance called Friends of Miami Marine Stadium. "It is a group that for whatever reason has a real connection to this structure and this site."

Hernandez, a board member of the preservation organization Dade Heritage Trust, and co-

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The original purpose of the Miami Marine Stadium was to provide spectator seating for powerboat racing. That concept was short-lived due to the quick improvement in boat speed and size, making it not feasible to race in the Biscayne Bay.

Stadium built to provide spectator seating

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founder Worth, a representative of the Miami Museum of Modern Art (MiMo) preservation movement that seeks protection of modern mid-century architecture, began a series of dialogues.

"We got very excited about the coincidence," said Hernandez of the passion and dedication to the stadium both men share and the stadium-related projects that brought them together.

Another key player in the Friends group is Violette Sproul, whose son and Hernandez's son row on the same crew team at Belen Jesuit Preparatory School. Sproul, Hernandez and several other parents were sitting on the lawn at the Head of the Hootch regatta on the Chatahoochie River in Chatanooga, Tennessee. Head of the Hooch is one of the largest rowing regattas in the country.

"Here we were sitting on the banks of a beautiful facility in this not-so-affluent community asking each other, why doesn't Miami do something like this?" said Sproul.

According to Hernandez, because of all the bayside development, the only logical choice would be Miami Marine Stadium. The group started having lunches to discuss options.

"The preservationists came out to join us," said Hernandez. "Then some Key Biscayne residents came out because they have a vested interest in the neighborhood. Then we reached out to the rowing clubs, because rowing seems to be a growing sport. It was an amazing ground swell/perfect storm for the preservation of this place," he said.

Since then, many others – architects, lawyers, politicians, historians, more preservationists and those who are simply passionate about saving the structure – have gotten on board.

Sproul has been instrumental in organizing events and introducing interested parties

to the cause through tireless networking.

A rich history

The Miami Marine Stadium was built in 1964 to provide spectator seating for powerboat races. That was short lived. As boats got faster and motors got better, the length of the basin became obsolete.

In the late '60s and early '70s, the thought of using the stadium as a concert

for boat races

venue came to light. Arthur Fiedler, the Miami Pops, Mitch Miller, Bonnie Raitt, REO Speedwagon, Air Supply, Ray

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Some feel 'historical' buildings must be more than

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Charles and Jimmy Buffett are only a few of the well-known artists who performed there. Portions of the Elvis Presley movie *Clambake* were filmed at the stadium. It also was home to Easter Sunrise Services and other community events. The Jimmy Buffet concert filmed at the stadium still airs on public television.

In 1992, Hurricane Andrew swept into South Florida, leaving a swath of destruction. The stadium survived with moderate damage, but since the hurricane it has sat shuttered and forgotten.

Some claim, however, it was forgotten long before the forces of Mother Nature interfered, having suffered under poor management.

Part of an important architectural movement

Miami has always searched for its defining image, said Hernandez, and the early '60s and '70s was a time of the city's adolescence. Miami was becoming aware of itself as an international hub. Young Cuban-American exiles began to assert their professional leadership on the community.

Enter Hilario Candela, a young Cuban, Georgia Tech-educated architect of remarkable talent and vision. Only in his mid-20s, Candela was put in charge of the stadium project after it was commissioned to his new boss, the architectural firm of Pancoast, Ferendino, Grafton, Skeels and Burnham, one of the most respected and important firms in the country for several decades.

Miami Marine Stadium belongs to an important architectural movement that ties Miami with the rest of the hemisphere, said Hernandez.

"This very gestural exposed concrete structure of the '60s is a mid-century phenomenon. You find structures like this up and down the hemisphere."

Hernandez named internationally-recognized architects Oscar Niemeyer in Brazil and Felix Candela in Mexico as pioneers in this style of work, all protected by UNESCO, a world heritage monument protection organization. Felix Candela, a distant relative of Hilario Candela, under whom the young Candela studied, made concrete a genuine expression of modern Latin American architecture.

Max Borges and other Cuban architects also were exploring the style of concrete sculptural expressionism. Borges designed the famous Tropicana nightclub in Havana. Stadium designer Candela also worked under him.

"There are direct linkages between the Miami Marine Stadium and an important international architectural movement," said Hernandez.

Hilario Candela, now in his 70s, is firmly behind the historic designation efforts orchestrated by Friends of Miami Marine Stadium.

The structure

Currently, the Miami Marine Stadium sits in a graffiti-painted and vandalized elegance, surrounded by miles of fence, heaved concrete walkarounds and overgrown vegetation. Still, it is a structure of exceptional quality that is perfectly positioned against the skyline of the Magic City.

"This thing has been called concrete origami, sails, petrified waves, profile of a crustacean claw - all those things that evoke the sea," said Hernandez. "It has and always had this magnificent vista of the Miami skyline."

The 6,566-seat grandstand is poured entirely in concrete, with a hyperbolic paraboloid roof structure. It consists of a dramatically cantilevered folded-plate ceiling supported by eight big slanted columns anchored in the ground through the grandstand.

50 years old

Since Hurricane Andrew, there have been two independent reports on the viability of rejuvenating the structure. Both say that while it needs a lot of work, the stadium is structurally sound. An engineering study commissioned by the City of Miami soon after the hurricane noted the damage was modest and could be repaired. Unfortunately, the repairs were not made.

The structure exhibits spalding, according to Hernandez, a condition that was evident in all the old Art Deco buildings on South Beach before they were renovated. Early contractors used concrete mixed with native sand as a building material. The sand, naturally, contains salt. Over time, the sand rusted the reinforcing bar, causing the concrete to fall away. Spalding is easily remedied, said Hernandez, by clearing away loose concrete, coating the rebar and mending the damage.

"That's what they did with the Art Deco buildings. They didn't tear those down because of spalding," he said.

Debunking the 50-years-or-older rule

What about the general consensus that a building must be 50 years old to qualify for historic designation?

"That is such a non-issue," said Hernandez.

Back in the early days of historic preservation, the resources being analyzed were Colonial, Federal and 19th Century structures, he explained.

"A threshold was put in place when the preservation movement had such a daunt-

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ing task.”

The first preservation ordinance in the country was in 1930 in Charleston.

“At the time, 50 years was a drop in the bucket,” he said.

Luckily, we’ve come a long way in 70 years, noted Hernandez.

Now, mid-century modern monuments are starting to be imperiled and are also being recognized as an important part of Florida. The Department of the Interior has already issued an important bulletin which modifies its previous standing on the 50-year threshold, said Hernandez.

There are a number of cities, including San Francisco and New York, that have already rolled back the 50-year threshold to a 30-year threshold because they realize the number of cultural resources that would be lost if the 50-year threshold were applied literally, Hernandez explained. Some structures under the 50-year threshold have already received historic designation. For example, North American architect Eero Saarinen, son of Finnish architect Eliel Saarinen, designed the St. Louis Archway, the TWA terminal and Dulles International Airport, an expressive free-flowing concrete structure.

“[The airport building] was designated a national landmark 16 years after it was completed in 1962,” said Hernandez.

The Vision

During the stadium’s heyday, international stars floated on a barge in the middle of the basin. Seven thousand sitting in the stands, and arguably 7,000 more in boats around the performer, viewed each show, mused Hernandez.

“Where else, other than here, can a mid-century modern performance structure boast that half the audience is afloat? It is so Miami,” he said. “It could be our Sydney Opera House, our iconic structure of the city. It was once; it could be again.”

It’s true, as Hernandez points out, you can’t have a marine stadium, say, in

Ohio.

“It is a tour-de-force of mid-century modern design that marks a long Cuban influence,” said Hernandez. “It would be a shame to destroy this.

“This structure can receive, at the very least, State Historic Landmark designation,” said Hernandez. “It is certainly significant in the region and in the country.”

But the way to build on each different level is to start locally, according to Hernandez, who says his group is trying to educate other people and have other people educate the group.

“Everyone we speak with has another memory, another story,” he said. “In the short time that we have been advocating for the preservation and designation of the structure, so many people and organizations have come forward saying things like, ‘I think this is a good idea,’ or ‘We could really get on board for this,’” he said.

As Hernandez explains, “The Dragonboat” organization could have a home here at Marine Stadium, and the Miami Rowing Club, too. And maybe the Shake-A-Leg Foundation.

There was talk about Art Basel staging a floating art gallery, and, of course, many opportunities for performance.

“If they tear it down now,” stressed Hernandez, “we lose every opportunity.

“We need to reprogram and reactivate,” said Hernandez. “We need a designation and a commitment to say that this is a worthwhile piece of Miami history. Then have everybody – public and private officials – join hands and find the best public use for the land and (help the) public access this facility.”

The vision does not include more condominiums or a deep water marina.

A marina would affect the quality of life on Key Biscayne, Hernandez is quick to point out, not to mention the effect dredging would have on the natural resources already in place. And more

condominiums is just foolish given the state of the economy and the dozens-upon-dozens of empty condos throughout Miami, he said.

“To lose a resource of this quality and demolish this building, with the history it has and the architectural value that it has, and use the basin for those who can afford big boats or the land for condos, particularly since it is public land, is wrong,” said Hernandez.

The Friends of Miami Marine Stadium are committed for the long haul, said Hernandez. “We’ll get public and private money together to repair the structure and issue a master plan that makes it a viable public destination, one that is low impact to the environment. [Miami City Commission’s] outlook for the city was so visionary back in the ‘60s. The decision-makers had the ability to look ahead,” said Hernandez, referring to the

\$2 million price tag on the completed complex in the ‘60s.

“Now they shudder at spending \$5 million when [the stadium] is worth \$100 million at least. Yet, they are willing to spend money on a new baseball stadium and for tunnel under the river, but not here. To lose this stadium as a public resource would be a crime.”

If the quest for historic designation gets a “no” vote during the Historic and Environmental Preservation Board meeting in October, the structure can be demolished. If the vote is a “yes,” all protections granted to historic structures kick in. In the meantime, Friends of Miami Marine Stadium and their supporters are clearing their calendars to focus on building a case for historic designation.

“I hope we’re partying here in mid-October,” said Hernandez.