

A lifeline for Miami Marine Stadium

Posted on 22 May 2009

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A group of University of Miami architecture students has developed a master plan for the restoration and renaissance of Miami Marine Stadium, an iconic structure once popular for powerboat races and concerts

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Bulldozers and construction workers will start hauling away the first mounds of dirt this summer. Their work will be part of the initial phase of laying the foundation for the Florida Marlins' new home, a \$515 million retractable-roof ballpark in Miami's Little Havana.



Abandoned: Closed down by the City of Miami in 1992, Miami Marine Stadium is now nearly covered in graffiti.

Miles away on the city's Virginia Key inlet, the outlook is not as certain for a stadium that already stands.

A popular site for powerboat and hydroplane races, Easter sunrise services, and concerts in its heyday, Miami Marine Stadium is fighting for its future. For nearly 17 years it has sat dormant, shut down in 1992 by City of Miami officials, who called it a money-losing venue with a companion water basin made obsolete by bigger and more powerful speedboats.

Since its closing, the stadium has become an abandoned monolith, a giant concrete canvas covered in graffiti. A dedicated band of preservationists and community activists who hope to save it fear that if ambitious developers have their way, the structure will be razed to make room for new marina facilities.

Now, the restoration and development proposals put forth by a group of University of Miami School of Architecture students could help show the city why the structure is worth saving.

A FACELIFT

“What [the stadium] needs is a life around it, and our young architects have envisioned one for it,” says Jorge Hernandez, a UM professor of architecture and noted preservationist who led a semester-long design studio that resulted in a master plan for the structure’s rebirth.

In their proposals, the students have given the stadium and the land surrounding it a facelift, restoring its grandstand, installing new ramps to make the structure accessible to the handicapped, introducing “green” parking options, boat slips and dry-dock storage facilities, and proposing a nearby public park.



Glory days: In its heyday, the stadium and its companion water basin hosted powerboat and hydroplane races.

Students even came up with a way to incorporate the graffiti into the restoration, devising a plan that would showcase some of it as an art form to help document the stadium’s history.

“It’s been an amazing experience,” says Lacey Block, a first-year graduate student whose contribution to the project included designing a fore court to the stadium’s grandstand and a

maritime precinct with markets, a floating restaurant, and a new marina. "As a student, it's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to work on a project that has the potential to become reality."

Block's hope that the stadium's restoration will come to fruition could actually happen one day.

A "Save the Marine Stadium" grassroots campaign, spurred by local citizens and longtime residents who fell in love with the stadium after it was completed in 1963, is building momentum, helped by the placement of the structure on the National Trust for Historic Preservation's annual list of 11 most-endangered sites.

The stadium's restoration would be "a marvelous opportunity for Miami," says Don Worth, who along with Hernandez founded Friends of Marine Stadium (www.marinestadium.org), an organization fighting for its refurbishment. "The stadium and basin can be reestablished as an icon and public gathering space...for a community with a very short history."

Worth, whose group has explored potential new uses for the site and crunched the numbers on what it would cost to save it, claims a restored Miami Marine Stadium would give an economic boost to Miami, comparable to what "the preservation of the Deco buildings did for Ocean Drive."



Parking plan: During a semester-ending student-presentation forum at the Miami Rowing Club, architecture student Peter Miller explains to an audience his idea to introduce 'green' parking options to the area surrounding Miami Marine Stadium.

He and Hernandez note that several groups have already expressed interest in using the stadium and basin for aquatic activities.

RECAPTURING PAST GLORY

The architectural renderings and plans proposed by the UM students evoke memories of the structure's past glory, when the stadium and its basin served as a venue for powerboat races and concerts in which bands and orchestras performed on a floating barge that served as the stadium's stage.

Concertgoers not only included the 6,000 spectators who would pack the stadium grandstand but also people aboard boats anchored nearby.

"The actors became spectators and the spectators became actors," says Hilario Candela, the Cuban-born architect who designed the stadium, a Modernist-style work of architecture with an overhanging roof folded into a V shape and a grandstand that overlooks the water.

Candela was on hand for the entire studio dedicated to the renaissance of his creation, giving advice to the students and telling them what he set out to accomplish when he designed the structure.

While speedboat races and regattas were the original intended uses for the site, the stadium became so much more, hosting stars like Tony Bennett and Jimmy Buffett. "I didn't anticipate there would be concerts there," Candela says. "But it turned out to be a wonderful bonus."

His participation in the studio was a "thrill" for Peter Miller, a second-year graduate student whose proposed parking plan for the site incorporates Australian pines and other vegetation to offset carbon emissions. "To get into the mind of the man behind the stadium was fabulous," he says.

'A FEAT OF ENGINEERING'

The stadium's beauty, Hernandez says, lies in its simple design.

"It's a work of sculpture, forged out of a feat of engineering," he says. "It's raw. It's naked. And that is its beauty. It doesn't have a lot of gilding, a lot of layers of finishes. Its beauty is in its simplicity. It's like the pelvic bones that Georgia O'Keeffe painted when she found them in the desert."

Greta Wilhelm, a fifth-year architecture student who took part in the design studio, says "tearing it down would be a travesty. It's part of Miami's history, and we need to preserve it." The 23-year-old from Ithaca, New York, wants to pursue a career in historic preservation.

A recent structural analysis of self-weight and wind dynamics conducted by Wimal Suaris, a UM associate professor of civil engineering, found the structure sound. Next he wants to conduct a chloride test to determine the integrity of its concrete.



A look at the future: A Friends of Marine Stadium rendering of what the structure could look like in the near future.

For now, it's a waiting game. "I feel like there's an angel hovering over the edifice that wants it to be saved," Hernandez laughs.

The latest: In a unanimous 8-0 vote, the city's Historic Preservation Board last year named the site a historic landmark. Meanwhile, UM architecture students have nominated the stadium for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places, a designation that would save it from demolition and generate a hefty historic tax credit that could be used toward restoration costs. And a master plan for Virginia Key developed by a private firm at the behest of the city has been completed.

The design proposals put together by students are being offered as a gift to the city, Hernandez says.

"It's academic work," he says, "and we hope that it will enter the public ground for discussion. We're offering it as assistance to whatever professional work may go on there. We've told everyone at the city that we are now here to help."