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LIFE

A Miami Architect Inspired by a Marine Stadium Relic

The country's first stadium purpose-built for watching powerboat races



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By **HEIDI MITCHELL**

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Many Miami residents don't know the country's first stadium built expressly for spectators of powerboat races floats in the waters just off Miami Beach. For architect Rene Gonzalez, the dilapidated structure is a Modernist icon and a source of inspiration.

"I think I first saw it from the water, just after I moved back to Miami in the 1990s," says Mr. Gonzalez, who studied architecture at University of California, Los Angeles. In southern Florida, he says, locals often spend Sundays boating on Biscayne Bay. It was

during one of those jaunts that he noticed “this hovering concrete element floating over the water,” he recalls. “It could have been a very heavy structure and yet it appeared so light, like it could take flight.”

Mr. Gonzalez researched the Miami Marine Stadium, which was damaged during Hurricane Andrew in 1992 and then closed. The stadium had been designed by another Cuban-born architect, Hilario Candela, in 1963.



Architect Rene Gonzales in front of the mosaic mural that serves as the facade of the contemporary Cisneros Fontanals Art Foundation, or CIFO, that he designed in Miami. *PHOTO: JEFFERY SALTER*

“Candela created a memorable experience,” says Mr. Gonzalez. He “solved the complex problem of wanting seating for people to see the boat races, the water and the city with a simple cantilevered stadium that is entered by a series of ramps over the water.”

Mr. Gonzalez, 52, is known for designing buildings that explore the relationship between the architecture and the environment through inventive use of space and material. One of his first jobs was working with architect Richard Meier on Los Angeles's Getty Center, a collection of structures and gardens built on a challenging site atop the Santa Monica Mountains.

When Mr. Gonzalez set up his own practice in Miami in 1997, he took on the expansion and revamp of an 18,000-square-foot landmark Palm Beach house designed in 1936 by Maurice Fatio. "There I built a pavilion with a wall of onyx that continues from inside to the exterior, creating a glass portal to the outdoors and a heightened experience between the user and the architecture," he says.

His 10-person firm, Rene Gonzalez Architect, splits its work among high-end residential clients, cultural buildings and hospitality projects, including hotels and restaurants. Mr. Gonzalez is currently finishing up the luxury Glass condominium project in Miami, an 18-story translucent tower.



Mr. Gonzalez's UNIDAD Community Center in Miami has cantilevered roofs to shade the glassy structure from the sun, while still retaining a feeling of being open to the elements, much like the Miami Marine Stadium, from which Mr. Gonzalez took some cues in his design. *PHOTO: MICHAEL STAVARIDIS/RENE GONZALEZ ARCHITECT*

He points to two of his completed projects that he says were directly inspired by the Miami Marine Stadium. The UNIDAD Community Center in North Miami Beach incorporates perforated aluminum panels and walls of glass to reflect the ocean, much as the floating stadium enhances user interaction with the water, he says. And the Cisneros Fontanals Art Foundation's facade is composed of more than a million glass tiles that together form a jungle mosaic. "Both the Marine Stadium and the Cisneros Foundation are public buildings with simple programs that share an explorative use of

materials to amplify their surroundings,” Mr. Gonzalez says. “In this case, the mosaic tiles create an unexpected experience of the tropics within an urban environment.”

The architect is also working on a handful of elevated houses that address issues global warming is expected to play in the evolution of Miami. The Prairie House, for example, is a private home made of exposed concrete, with walls suspended on metal brackets to appear as if they are floating. “I am constantly exploring different ways to use rising sea levels as an opportunity rather than a challenge, so that we are all more in tune to what is happening around us,” he says.

Projects in New York, Michigan and Guatemala have Mr. Gonzalez traveling quite a bit, but he prefers living and working in Miami. “It’s a young city, like Los Angeles, and because of that it offers the opportunity to develop concepts that are more experimental and daring,” he says.



Mr. Gonzalez is currently working on the Prairie House in Miami, a private home raised on pillars should water levels rise.
PHOTO: MICHAEL KLAUSMEIER/RENE GONZALEZ ARCHITECT

The cantilevered Miami Marine Stadium, even though it hasn’t been used in nearly 25 years, is a great example of architectural innovation in his hometown, Mr. Gonzalez says. A movement to preserve the stadium has gained a local and celebrity following.

“It is amazing how it frames the views of Biscayne Bay and the skyline of Miami. I think it provides an important lesson for me and Miami as we are creating new buildings for the future,” he says.

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