

Two Miami icons designated historic landmarks

Miami's preservation board approved the designation of the famous Coppertone ad sign and Marine Stadium as local historic landmarks.

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Miami Marine Stadium and the big Coppertone Girl sign that hung over Biscayne Boulevard for nearly 50 years, long-neglected icons of Miami's golden age of the '50s and '60s, should be saved for posterity, the city's historic preservation board decided Tuesday.

In unanimous 8-0 votes, the board conferred historic designation on both the stadium and the sign -- a move that protects the endangered stadium from demolition and allows the Coppertone Girl to be erected in a new home on upper Biscayne Boulevard, in the recently designated MiMo-centric historic district.

The votes represent a ringing endorsement of two extremes of Miami's mid-century architectural legacy, the high-modernist design of the stadium and the Coppertone Girl's sunny vernacular.

Designation alone won't save the deteriorated, city-owned stadium on Virginia Key. It has been closed since 1992 and would require millions of dollars in repairs to reopen. But supporters say official historic status opens the door to substantial grants, tax credits and other sources of money that can help pay for the work.

PROPOSALS

The city also plans to issue a request for proposals soon for a private operator willing to manage the stadium, once the popular and fondly recalled site of concerts, powerboat races and Easter sunrise services.

Friends of Miami Marine Stadium, a nonprofit group that has pushed to save the facility, says numerous potential users have stepped forward, including the country's three main powerboating associations, the producers of the Orange Bowl game halftime show, and music promoters such as the Concert Association of Florida and the Rhythm Foundation.

"We're going to have a wonderful future for this stadium," said Becky Roper Matkov, executive director of Dade Heritage Trust, a designation supporter.

Both decisions, coming on the heels of the designation of the Miami Modern/Biscayne Boulevard district, also confirm growing interest by preservationists and the city in saving once-disdained buildings and designs of the modern era.

The stadium, which opened in 1963, falls short of the usual threshold guideline of 50 years to be considered for designation. But the city's preservation officer, Ellen Uguccioni, concluded it was so significant culturally and architecturally that it merited protection now.

Architect and University of Miami Professor Jorge Hernandez, a key backer of efforts to save the building, called it "a sculptural, structural tour de force of modern design."

Board members not only agreed, but expanded the boundaries of the protected stadium site far beyond what Uguccioni recommended to encompass the entire adjacent basin built to accommodate speedboat races. The board also included a chunk of the property fronting the stadium all the way to the Rickenbacker Causeway to ensure the stadium would remain visible from the roadway.

For the stadium, designation marks a watershed moment in a campaign that has drawn international interest. Until a group of preservationists, architects, rowers and boaters began lobbying to save the 1963 stadium earlier this year, the city was moving ahead with a new master plan for Virginia Key that likely would have done away with it.

PRIVATE GROUP

Since then, however, members of Friends of Miami Marine Stadium have garnered support from several producers and concert and boat-race promoters, as well as the World Monuments Fund, a major private group that promotes preservation of architectural and cultural sites.

Supporters, including its architect, Hilario Candela, say a renovated stadium could become a symbol of a revitalized Miami.

But one board member, Jim Broton, expressed deep reservations even as he voted in favor of protecting the stadium. He said he hoped taxpayers would not be stuck paying tens of millions of dollars to repair a facility without a clear use. City officials have said the stadium's future would hinge on finding feasible uses. Stadium supporters say they will work closely with the city to do so. "We're in it for the long haul," Hernandez, the UM professor, said.

The designation of the Coppertone sign also came as a result of grass-roots efforts. The nonprofit MiMo Biscayne Association arranged for the deteriorated sign to be restored and hung on the facade of an office building at 7300 Biscayne Blvd.

The Coppertone Girl's neon lights dazzled Biscayne Boulevard for decades, until its home was demolished 13 years and it was moved -- sans neon guts -- to a far less-visible building on Flagler Street. The weather-worn sign was removed in May for restoration and donated by its owner -- Dade Heritage Trust -- to the MiMo Biscayne Association. The nonprofit group promotes revitalization of the historic district that highlights the 1950s Miami Modern architecture of upper Biscayne Boulevard.

Historic designation will give the sign an exemption from signage laws, said MiMo association president Fran Rollason.

Coppertone will cover restoration costs. Plans are to replace the sign's vanished neon with low-voltage LED lights, Rollason said. Solar panels could power the sign.