

DOWNTOWN MIAMI

Dirty work: Sewage station needs new look

Miami officials would like to turn an unsightly sewage pump house on Biscayne Boulevard into a work of art.



MARICE COHN BAND / MIAMI HERALD STAFF
This sewage pump house in Bicentennial Park on Biscayne Boulevard could someday have a complete face lift.

DawnTown '08 Waterworks competition

Nov. 17 -- Deadline for registration for the competition. For details, go to www.dawntown.org.

Nov. 21 -- Deadline for entries.

Dec. 5 (9 a.m. to 11 a.m.) -- Three prize winners will be announced and discussed at Miami Dade College's Chapman Conference Center in downtown Miami.

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There it sits, on the edge of a planned new waterfront park and museum campus, front and center in a resurgent downtown Miami: A sewage pump house, the very definition of trashy architecture.

And we're stuck with it.

So, thought a group of architects and downtown boosters, why not try to make lemonade out of the big pile of, er, lemons?

Thus was launched the first international architectural competition in Miami in years: Dubbed DawnTown '08 Waterworks, it seeks the best ideas for burying, dressing up, screening off or otherwise remaking the windowless sewage station on Biscayne Boulevard, maybe even transforming it into a beacon of civic pride. No bull.

To organizers' happy astonishment, the world has responded: One week before the Nov. 17 deadline, some 250 teams of architects from Brooklyn and Seattle to Germany, Finland and Japan -- and, of course, South Florida -- had registered to compete for an \$8,000 first prize.

Competitors have until Nov. 21 to turn in conceptual proposals -- radical ideas welcome.

A jury will select a winner and two runners-up, to be unveiled in downtown Miami during the Art Basel fair on Dec. 5. Second prize is \$4,000 and third \$2,000.

Functional doesn't have to mean ugly, competition organizers say.

One early entry, from Italy, proposes veiling the entire pump building under clean, cascading waterfalls.

"When you have a competition, especially an ideas competition, you are taking the lid off and letting people take a crack at the problem," said juror and Miami Art Museum director Terence Riley.

"They will see it in ways that will surprise you."

Whether the winning entries will be put to use is anyone's guess. Miami-Dade County water and sewer officials say they are open to ideas but aren't promising anything.

But delighted competition sponsors, including MAM and the Downtown Development Authority, say they have already succeeded in one goal: Drawing international attention to the ambitious plans for downtown Miami.

The idea was born in a conversation during an Urban Land Institute meeting in Shanghai between Miami lawyers Andrew Frey and Neisen Kasdin, a former Miami Beach mayor and now the DDA chairman.

'BIG AND BOLD'

"The most exciting urban story in Miami is downtown, and we were talking about what we could do to tell that story to the cultural elite that's here for Art Basel," said Frey, who spearheads DawnTown, a project that seeks to ensure that downtown Miami shares in the Art Basel spotlight. "The idea was to do something big and bold."

They quickly hit on a conundrum that the master planners and developers plotting out the contours of a revitalized downtown have tip-toed around for several years -- what to do about the gray concrete pump station, which occupies a prominent corner of what is now Bicentennial Park.

Bicentennial is slated for a multimillion dollar transformation into Museum Park, an expansive new green oasis and campus for new homes for MAM and the Miami Museum of Science -- a centerpiece of city plans to create a lively and livable waterfront.

But the unpretty sewage station is in the way.

Fronting directly on a newly refurbished Biscayne Boulevard, it sits right across the way from four massive new condo towers that will eventually bring thousands of new residents to that long-bedraggled corner of downtown.

Until county sewer officials got odor problems under control, powerfully unappealing aromas would sometimes waft through.

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CAN'T MOVE IT

The station is a late remnant of an era when city leaders thought nothing of placing industrial infrastructure on the downtown bayfront. When it was built in the 1950s, the area was occupied by an oil plant and the old Port of Miami.

The station collects raw effluent from the northeast portion of Miami, filtering out solids which must be trucked out. Five pumps push the sewage through a pipe under Biscayne Bay to the water-treatment plant on Virginia Key.

The station remained when the area was turned into Bicentennial Park in the 1970s, half hidden from the adjacent green space by berms, but fully exposed to Biscayne Boulevard, which provides truck access. Now as then, county water administrators say, it would cost too much to move the station and the underground lines connected to it.

But the water department recognizes the utilitarian shell of the facility is no longer compatible with its changing surroundings, and is willing to improve the exterior's appearance, said Vicente Arrebola, assistant director for wastewater operations.

That could provide an opening for something novel, competition organizers hope. Miami Mayor Manny Diaz is also on board.

CITY SYMBOLS

The idea, they say, hails back to a day when public works projects, including pump buildings, were well-designed symbols of civic prowess -- a tradition that has lately been revived in other U.S. cities, said University of Miami architecture professor Jean-Francois LeJeune, a competition organizer.

For examples, look no farther than the classic 1924 water plant in Hialeah, an elegant limestone structure in the Mission style. New and historic examples abound elsewhere, from pump stations that look like Greek temples in Philadelphia to a grand Romanesque waterworks in Boston.

Rather than hide the sewage station, LeJeune and competition organizers say, they want competitors to revel in its function, perhaps exposing views of its powerful pumps.

One competition rule requires an information area to tell passersby exactly what the mysterious structure does.

The organizers note the Science Museum will sit across the new park from the station, offering an opportunity to explain how sanitation -- the removal of human waste -- makes modern cities possible.

"If that could be rebuilt, one could do a fabulous building there," LeJeune said. "Why not?"