

Posted on Sunday, 05.08.11

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## A design competition sets dreams and imaginations swirling over long-neglected Miami Marine Stadium

A design competition sets dreams and imaginations swirling over a long-neglected Miami landmark



BY BETH DUNLOP

SPECIAL TO THE MIAMI HERALD

The Miami Marine Stadium Floating Stage Competition, which concluded last week, could teach us lots of lessons about ideas and dreams. The energy that radiated from the 90 entries, one more exuberant than the last, should tell us just how unimaginative we've been toward our public waterfront in the past two decades, or longer.

We've built and built and overbuilt to the point that we think of the bay as the back yard of Condoland. We've allowed No Fishing signs to go up along our bridges and causeways and erected Jersey barriers to keep us from pulling off to the side of the road to enjoy a slower glimpse of the sparkling turquoise water or a particularly

spectacular sunset. Buildings, big ones — among them the Jungle Island complex and AmericanAirlines Arena — fill former public lands, separating us from the water's edge. We even — preposterously and beyond the imagination of the most satirical fiction writers — briefly delegated a portion of the waterfront as an encampment for sex offenders. As a city, and as a culture, we've turned our backs on our most priceless, most precious public asset.

Think of it: once upon a time we had a band shell by the bay, at Bayfront Park. Then we had Miami Marine Stadium at Virginia Key. We dismantled the band shell long ago. And after Hurricane Andrew in 1992, the damaged Marine Stadium was left to deteriorate to the point where it took a massive grassroots effort to persuade the city's planners and politicians to save it. Its former floating stage, a tethered barge, sits half sunk on the bay bottom.

But now comes a little competition that begins to set our thinking straight. Initiated by the Friends of Miami Marine Stadium (an arm of Dade Heritage Trust) and run by DawnTown (that organization responsible for three previous high-profile competitions), the competition was sponsored by the National Trust for Historic Preservation and the Miami Chapter of the American Institute of Architects and open to architects and students around the world.

In the end, it yielded ideas for stages that swooped and soared. One entry recalled the Sydney Opera House, another a carnival ride and another a space station. There were boats galore — schooners, clippers, pirate ships, racing boats. Stages were barge-shaped, sail-shaped, bridge-shaped, turbine-shaped and even slinky-shaped, really the gamut. Some came with a dose of humor. Others were plenty serious. Importantly, this competition was billed — and judged — as a contest of ideas and not practicalities, of inspiration rather than actualities.

The submissions were judged by a stellar jury that included an architect, the Los Angeles-based Lawrence Scarpa, and an artist, Michele Oka Doner of New York, along with one of the country's foremost preservationists — Frank Sanchis, who is director of American programs for the World Monuments Fund — and an up-and-coming urban designer, Walter Meyer of the New York-based Local Office. Miami was represented by Hilario Candela, who designed the stadium in 1963, and University of Miami architecture professor Jorge Hernandez.

The jury spent a full day scrutinizing, studying, analyzing and discussing the proposals, ultimately endorsing five.

Their top pick, called The Pearl, is an elegant, inspiring floating bauble designed to portray the dichotomies of a dynamic city that opens out onto a "tranquil and infinite sea." The work of Jiong Wu + Gengxin Ou from Abingo Wu Studio of Lincoln, Neb., the design is most likely unbuildable, though inspirational. The second-place winner — from Pink Cloud.DK. Design of Copenhagen, Denmark — offered a slightly more pragmatic approach with a lighted helium disc or cloud (what else?) that would hover over a converted barge.

The "Water Box" from Igor Reyes of Coral Gables is indeed a box, or cube, but one with a cascading waterfall as a curtain — ideal when the performance would be in the water rather than on the stage.

The fourth place winners (Marcin Husarz, Wojciech Motylski, Jan Jermanski of biro architektoniczne SCOLIOSIS, Wroclaw, Poland) designed a structure that would open and close, becoming a waterborne skateboard park when not in use as a stage, while the last endorsed entry (Chris Carrasquilla + Shamir Panchal of Roco Co from Toronto, Canada) proposed "a traveling family of structures" that could roam the bay when not in use at the stadium.

Open competitions have many virtues, among them the opportunity to find unknown talent and embrace new ideas. Too seldom do we let our minds roam the way the entrants in the Floating Stage Competition let theirs. Too seldom do we embrace impracticality, knowing that in our time, there are technological solutions that make the impossible come to fruition. And where would we be without the crazy, wacky, far-fetched, utopian, idealistic ideas that architects sometimes have? The Eiffel Tower comes to mind right away. But then, so does Miami's Marine Stadium.

If someone (in this case Hilario Candela and a team of architects and engineers) hadn't thought it would be possible to build a stadium out in the bay and cover it with a daring and dramatic cantilevered thin-shell concrete roof, Miami would never have had this iconic, bold statement of modern architectural bravado that was — and still is — unique in American cities.

The hyperbolic parabola of the thin-shell concrete roof created an indelible image for all those who listened to Mitch Miller or Elvis Presley or Jimmy Buffet there, or watched the sun come up at Easter or set (just before the fireworks) on the Fourth of July. It was a prime spot to witness boat races and other waterborne spectacles, and then, suddenly, it wasn't.

After Hurricane Andrew, the structure was left to suffer — targeted for vagrants and graffiti artists, degraded by heat, wind, water and humidity. Then, a decade-and-a-half after the stadium fell to disaster and disuse, a determined group of preservationists operating under the umbrella of Dade Heritage Trust began to champion it. The Friends of Miami Marine Stadium has succeeded in protecting it as a local landmark. It was named as one of this country's 11 most-endangered places by the National Trust for Historic Preservation in 2009 and put on the World Monuments Fund's "Watch List" (along with Machu Picchu and Old Jerusalem) in 2010. Last summer, the City of Miami approved a plan for Virginia Key that puts restoration of the stadium at the forefront.

But that's just the first step. There's money to raise, there are plans to be made. Preservation is far too often like the child's game of "Mother May I" with a giant step forward and a baby step back, or vice versa. It requires constant vigilance and unrelenting advocacy — and any number of creative ideas.

The floating stage of competition fame may never get built, but in our world propelled by ideas and optimism (rather than the fear and cynicism that tend to rule us), it should, or something akin to it.

Ideas are dreams, and they add up to progress.

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