

Growing art and museums in Miami: some success stories

S. Weiss

Library, Florida International University, Miami, Florida, USA

Abstract

This paper provides three case studies of the adaptive reuse of older buildings in Miami and Miami Beach, Florida for purposes of art and culture. Adaptive reuse recycles older buildings, sometimes abandoned, and gives them a new lease on life. One appeal of reusing older buildings in a time of rapid change is that these structures can provide a sense of continuity and a bridge to the past. This is an especially important benefit of preservation in an expanding urban area like Miami. The population here is transient, coming from all sections of the United States and from many countries in South America and the Caribbean, as well as from Europe and Asia. The forces of growth and real estate development have hastened the destruction of Miami's older residential and business districts in the drive for larger, newer, and more revenue-producing enterprises.

Keywords: adaptive reuse, historic buildings, museums, art institutions, synagogues, universities, education, community development.

1 Introduction

Cultural institutions such as museums and art centres have a vital place in the life of any city. Museums open our eyes to alternative visions and other lives and let us share in the results of the creative process from generations past and present. As depositories and repositories of objects and ideas of all kinds, they provide the opportunity to reach beyond our own time, and to experience different views of our own times, and of other eras.

Miami is a city of fairly recent vintage, as compared to other large cities in the United States. It was incorporated in 1896, just months after the first railroad connected it with the rest of the country. Before that, the only way to reach the area was by boat, as the surrounding area was swampy and heavily vegetated.



However, once the process of development began, the rate of growth was startling. Miami's downtown and surrounding areas were quickly cleared for housing and commercial development. A 350-room tourist hotel, situated on the edge of Biscayne Bay, was completed in January 1897, just six months after the city's incorporation. The United States Census for 1900 gives the population of Miami as 1,681 [1]. By 1920 it risen to 29,571. In 2000, the population was 362,470 [2].

The City of Miami Beach, situated on a barrier island a few miles east of Miami was incorporated in 1915. The mangroves and other native vegetation were cleared for the development of the new city. In 1920 the population of Miami Beach was just under 700 residents; by 1930 this number has grown by almost 1000% to 6,500. The 2000 census figures show a population of 87,933.

The entire area grew rapidly due to its popularity as a tourist destination for those seeking to exchange the cold winters of the Midwest and Northeast for warm temperatures and ocean breezes. While the growth of the resident, year-round population was great, the number of winter visitors was fantastic: in the Miami Beach the winter population in 1930 swelled to over 35,000.

People do not come to South Florida primarily to see art. There are established museums in the older cities whose cold climates they escape in coming to Miami. There was no public museum in Miami until 1952, when the University of Miami opened the Lowe Art Museum in Coral Gables. In 1964 a 1930s Art Deco library on Miami Beach became the Bass Museum of Art. The Metropolitan Museum and Art Centre had a brief life during the 1980s in the Biltmore Hotel, a Coral Gables landmark originally opened in 1925. In 1986 Dade County opened the Centre for Fine Arts (now the Miami Art Museum), and in the North Miami the Museum of Contemporary Art opened in 1996.

As is apparent by the examples just given, the recycling, or adaptive reuse of buildings for art purposes has some tradition in Miami. The reuse of old buildings for art and museum purposes goes back at least to the time of Hapsburg Archduke Ferdinand II, who, in the 16th century renovated a corn silo in order to display part of his art collection in Ambras, in the Tyrol [3]. An important recent example of this recycling is the Tate Modern, a gallery housed in a massive former power station, built in the 1960s on the Thames River in London. On a much smaller scale is the Edward Hopper House Art Centre in the town of Nyack, NY, on the Hudson River. Built in 1858 by his grandfather, this was the childhood home of the American painter Edward Hopper. He left there in 1910 and never returned. The house was preserved and now features exhibits of local and national artists, and serves as a community art centre.

1.1 Bakehouse Art Complex

Coconut Grove, an historic neighbourhood with a bohemian flair, was the site of Miami's artists' colony in the 1960s. In the late 1960s and early 1970s this enclave began to feel the effects of gentrification, as rents were raised to take advantage of the Grove's popularity. One group affected by this phenomenon was the artists in the Grove House, a facility which offered studies and a place to sell the artwork.



Artists from this now homeless group started to look for affordable places to set up their studios. Two factions emerged from the exodus. One group formed the South Florida Art Centre and took over empty stores on Lincoln Road in Miami Beach. This group was instrumental in the transformation of Lincoln Road from an economically depressed, deserted street into the vibrant, trendy hot spot it is now [4].

Another group of artists was looking for a facility to purchase. Beginning in 1983 they spent weekends looking for the right property. They eventually found a bakery building which had been vacant for a few years. The former Flowers Bakery, built in 1925 and owned by the American Bakeries Company, was available. Located in a high crime area, and despite having had security guards to watch over it, the building had already suffered the thefts of copper lines and the freight elevator. The building was built very strongly. The floors were maple, impervious to termites. The building's infrastructure, originally designed to serve the baking operations, turned out to be the right fit for artists. All the spaces for the studios had pipes to supply water. There were banks of windows and high-power ventilating fans at ceiling height. The bathrooms and showers would be useful for the tenant artists [5]. This would become the Miami Bakehouse.

The baking company agreed to sell their Miami building for 25% of its appraised cost. Then the process of fundraising began. The women who spearheaded this project had advantages that helped them in their pursuit of grant money from the city, county and state. One of them had been the assistant coordinator of the art in public places program for Dade County. This gave her some influence with the Dade County Commission, and allowed her to help the group negotiate with the county government. Another woman came from an illustrious Miami family, with roots in the community going back many generations. She used her contacts and connections with the Miami City Commission to help the Bakehouse project in that venue. Another activist with the group was a financial consultant who had previous experience working with the county government.

In 1985 the Bakehouse Art Complex, Inc. had raised enough money from the various government sources to purchase the 32,000-square-foot building, and undertook the necessary renovations. It opened in February 1987 with 65 artists and an alternative theatre company in residence. Since its opening the Bakehouse, in addition to providing affordable working space for artists, has housed a gallery for Latin American and Caribbean artists working in Miami, and has organized art workshops and sponsored art programs for Dade County schoolchildren. As a community arts venue, located alongside the interstate highway in a gritty working-class neighbourhood, its continued success has lived up to its founders' expectations [6].

1.2 The Jewish Museum

Other examples of this reuse are located across Biscayne Bay, in the Art Deco District of Miami Beach. This area, below 17th Street, is composed of hotels and



private residences built primarily between the 1920s and the 1940s and was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1979.

Beth Jacob synagogue was the oldest synagogue on Miami Beach. The congregation was chartered in 1927, and the 1936 building was designed by Henry Hohausser, a noted Miami Beach architect whose houses and hotels can be seen throughout the Art Deco neighbourhood. The synagogue measures 6,500 square feet, topped with a Moorish-style copper dome. The windows in the dome and along both sides of the nave, originally plain glass, were later changed to stained glass. These 76 windows feature signs of the Zodiac, Jewish holidays and other symbols of the Jewish religion [7].

During the early years of Miami Beach history, the Jewish population was restricted from living above 5th Street. Beth Jacob is located on 3rd Street and from most of the time it had been the cultural centre of a thriving Jewish community in the area.

The Miami Beach economy began to change for the worse in the 1970s. Other tourist destinations – DisneyWorld on Orlando, Las Vegas and the Caribbean – became more attractive, and the number of visitors coming to the beach declined dramatically. The population of the south end of Miami Beach was increasingly elderly and poor. Local politicians wanted to redevelop the entire area, so in 1976 the City of Miami Beach declared a total building moratorium. No building repairs were undertaken, building code violations were overlooked, and only superficial maintenance of infrastructure was carried out. One plan under discussion would have razed all the buildings, and rebuilt around a kind of Venice landscape, complete with canals. Simultaneously, a growing Art Deco preservationist movement began to clamour for saving the area from the wrecking ball [8].

Then, in 1980, came the Mariel boatlift. In a matter of a few weeks, 120,000 Cubans left Cuba for Miami. Low rents and alarmingly decrepit buildings in South Beach turned the area into a haven for the poor, the unemployed, prostitutes and drug users, many of them the recent Cuban arrivals. Crime rates increased, and the elderly Jewish residents were the primary victims [9].

In this environment the Beth Jacob Temple deteriorated, as the congregation decreased, and the remaining poor and elderly members were unable to provide the funds to maintain the structure. It became the target of vandalism, its stained glass windows destroyed little by little, devastated by termites and a leaking roof. By 1991, because of these wretched conditions, the congregation had been unable to meet in the building for several years.

Around this time, events brought about a change for the better. A compromise was reached between Art Deco preservationists and real estate developers as revised zoning laws allowed new construction in the designated Art Deco District, while saving historic buildings. Supporters and members of Beth Jacob had continued working towards a solution, to find a way to save the historic synagogue. In 1992 Miami Beach's Historic Preservation Board voted to recognize the synagogue as an historic site, and the City Commission approved.



In 1990 a travelling exhibition titled *Mosaic: Jewish Life in Florida* was shown at the Historical Association of Southern Florida in downtown Miami. This was a collection of over 6,000 artifacts, photographs and documents depicting the history of Jews in Florida, beginning in 1763, when they were legally allowed to live in Florida. It was the search for a permanent home for these objects that sparked the idea of transforming Beth Jacob into the Jewish Museum. With community support, the millions of dollars needed for the restoration were raised, from large and small donations, and state and local governments. After two years of remodelling, the museum opened in April 1995. In attendance that day was the man who had been the congregation's rabbi from 1937 to 1955 [10].

Now the Jewish Museum of Florida offers information, education and outreach to residents and visitors. Its own collections are displayed; it hosts travelling exhibitions; sponsors cultural programs; and houses a research centre reflecting Florida Jewish history [11].

1.3 The Wolfsonian

Seven blocks north of the Jewish Museum is the Wolfsonian, consisting of one man's eclectic collection.

The building that houses the Wolfsonian on Washington Avenue and 10th Street on Miami Beach was originally the Washington Storage Company. Built in 1927, the three-story structure is in the Moorish style, with a Spanish renaissance relief façade. Because it was a storage facility, there are no windows, but these are suggested in a pattern of blank panels. In the early years the storage company would store the furniture, cars, furs and other belongings of the wealthy winter visitors to Miami Beach when the "winter season" was over. In 1936 two floors were added for additional space [12].

Mitchell (Micky) Wolfson, Jr., is a wealthy man who has spent a lifetime assembling his collection, mainly from Europe and the United States. Included among these 100,000 objects are: furniture, paintings, sculpture, silverware, parts of old buildings, toys, wallpaper, advertising and tourist memorabilia, household items, and other ephemerae. He had been using the Washington Storage Company as it was intended, to store these possessions; he bought the building in 1985. After this purchase Wolfson established the Wolfsonian Foundation in an effort to raise money from the public to help maintain his collection. Two more floors were added to the building in 1992. After the remodelling the Wolfsonian Museum opened to the public in November 1995 with the exhibition: *The arts of reform and persuasion, 1885-1945* [13].

Micky Wolfson could not afford to keep his museum going; facing financial difficulties he needed additional funds to continue its operations. The State of Florida and Florida International University provided the solution. Wolfson donated his collection, worth between \$70 million and \$100 million, and the building to the State of Florida. In November 1997, just two years after it had opened to the public, the Wolfsonian merged with Florida International University, the public university in Miami. It is now known as the Wolfsonian-Florida International University: a Museum of Modern Art and Design [14].



The museum's resources provide material to support many of the university's programs, from the visual arts and architecture, to political science and women's studies. The faculty of FIU work with museum staff to integrate relevant parts of the collection into the curricula. The Wolfsonian-FIU also serves teachers and students throughout South Florida by providing workshops and classes through its education department [15].

2 Conclusion

The entire population of South Florida has benefited from the success of the three cultural institutions profiled here. The efforts of the people and groups involved provide some proof of the efficacy of citizen action towards the preservation and reuse of Miami's remaining historic past.

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