



MIAMI DESIGN PRESERVATION LEAGUE

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June 9, 2021

Chair and Members
Historic Preservation Board
City of Miami Beach
Via email

Dear Chair Finglass and members:

As instructed by a vote of the Board of Directors of the Miami Design Preservation League, I request that the Historic Preservation Board seek the reclassification of two structures as contributing. (HPB members Jack Finglass and Nancy Liebman, who are also MDPL Board members, recused themselves from the discussion and vote on this item before the MDPL Board.) The buildings (listed below) are located within the Flamingo Park Historic District and owned by the City of Miami Beach. Their significance lies in their architectural merit, contextual relationship with the neighborhood and city, and association with an important era in Miami Beach history.

Both buildings were designed by Morris Lapidus and Associates and are owned by the City of Miami Beach, which has recognized Lapidus for his contribution to its built environment by naming a historic district in his honor and inducting him into its Hall of Fame. While these buildings do not share the reputation of Lapidus' hotels, they are examples of how Lapidus' designs were influenced by Miami Beach environs and his personal struggle of being an outsider in his profession. As noted in Gabrielle Esperdy's important study, the decade of the 1960s was a period of soul searching for Lapidus as to what direction he should take his architectural practice. In 1969, the *Miami Herald* quoted Lapidus as saying "I don't always want to be referred to as the architect of the Fontainebleau." Alison Hotten in her Ph.D. dissertation outlined how Lapidus' work shows a decided move toward modernism in the 1960s. Moreover, Lapidus, in his autobiography, stated that his architectural principles could be expressed in unadorned concrete.

1. Fire Station Number 1, 1051 Jefferson Avenue, designed by Morris Lapidus Associates in 1966.

Historical Significance: Coming after significant criticism of the "Miami Beach style" at the American Institute of Architects Convention in 1964, the city seeks a new image for civic architecture. The fire station was one in a series of buildings (including the South Shore Community Center) that followed prevailing architectural trends and culminated in Miami Beach's embrace of the brutalist style for the new city hall by Bouterse, Perez, and Fabregas.

Architectural Significance: The fire station was the first of this building type designed by the firm. While Lapidus is celebrated for his exuberant designs, the firm did “all styles of buildings.” The building also demonstrates the influence of Robert Swedroe on Lapidus’ practice who was chief designer for the firm and principal for the fire station. Swedroe experimented with a stylized gable roof on the station which is further developed in the design of 930 Washington Avenue in 1967. (The outlining of Swedroe’s contribution to the Lapidus firm also provides a foundation for understanding his substantial contribution to the architectural landscape of southern Florida.)

2. South Shore Community Center, 833 Sixth Street. Designed in 1969 and completed in two phases by Morris Lapidus Associates.

Historical Significance: The South Shore Community Center is integral to local and national history of the 20th Century. It is both product and symbol of the rise of the elderly as a distinct and politically powerful social class in America. National issues related to aging were played out in microcosm in Miami Beach at the Community Center and were acted upon by the federal government because of local Congressman Claude Pepper. Pepper not only worked to transform the South Shore neighborhood of Miami Beach for his constituents, he employed it as a proving ground for the provision of services that addressed the whole range of human and social needs of the elderly. The South Shore Community Center housed these programs, served as a national model for advancements in aging, and was the site of a Congressional hearing on the persistent needs of the elderly, which was chaired by Senator Edward Kennedy. When the neighborhood demographics changed in the 1980s and 90s, the Community Center adapted with the times. The city enlisted the Little Havana Activities Center in merging the needs of the elderly community for social interaction with the needs of newer residents for childcare. The resulting program, the Rainbow Intergenerational Daycare Center, continues to operate in the Community Center to this day.

Architectural Significance: The South Shore Community Center is the embodiment of Lapidus’ architectural principles stripped of ornamentation. Lapidus noted that his designs “form follows function,” borrowing a famous architectural maxim. But Lapidus thought his designs went further. They were in sync with their location and conformed to the needs and mindset of the people who visited them. The architectural historian Gabrielle Esperdy noted that “Lapidus fused the functionalist tenets of modernism with a romantic responsiveness to human emotions, modulating the response according to his analysis of program and building type.” In the design of the South Shore Community Center, Lapidus creates a subtle interplay with the surrounding structures by his use of massing and through a reinterpretation of a prevalent Miami Beach building type (*i.e.*, garden court apartment building). Instead of restricting his design on the Community Center’s specified activities (*e.g.*, provision of programs and services), Lapidus looked beyond function to concentrate on the visitor experience. This also supported a goal stipulated in the HUD guidance for the building.

[N.B.: An in depth analysis of the South Shore Community Center is found on the MDPL website: <https://mdpl.org/blog/2020/09/south-shore-community-center-the-case-for-its-preservation/>]

These buildings are equally important to the city's overall architectural landscape. As noted in a letter to you from architectural history professor Richard Guy Wilson, "the city is in the unique position of having examples of [Lapidus'] work across the decades that he practiced," and the architect Denise Scott Brown has noted that Miami Beach is "a progression through recent American architectural history from the 1930s to the 1970s."

The preservation of the fire station and the community center will ensure that this progression remains intact. Just as the city had the forethought to recognize Art Deco and MiMo for their merit, MDPL believes that it is important that the city identifies the important structures of the 1960s and 70s as part of the city's historic fabric.

We urge you to seek the reclassification of these buildings and offer our assistance to document and preserve these important architectural landmarks.

Thank you for your consideration in this matter.

Sincerely,

Jack D. Johnson, Chair
Miami Design Preservation League