

Fly away with
FREE Airline Tickets

Click Here

NEWS

Published Monday, April 26, 1999, in the Miami Herald

Tug of war renewed over fate of Miami's historic sites

By PETER WHORISKEY

Herald Architecture Writer

In the shade of Brickell Avenue's towers sits a small park, and beneath the park lies an unmarked Tequesta Indian burial site so shallow that even light digging can disturb the graves.

The city of Miami parks department had been warned of the remains in early 1994, but soon afterward installed a 10-station exercise course in the park that required digging dozens of three-foot-deep anchoring holes. One station wound up directly over the graves.

"They say they never hit any bones, but the truth is, they really wouldn't know," said Miami-Dade archaeologist Bob Carr, who had



**DEFENDER OF
HISTORIC SITES:**
Archaeologist Bob

Miami Herald: Tug of war renewed over fate of...

Carr.

warned of the graves in a February 1994 letter and noted that disturbing graves is a felony. "Bones that old are typically in small fragments -- maybe two inches long -- and they're the same dark color as the soil."

The ongoing controversy over the Miami Circle property, the ancient Tequesta site that the city is trying to develop and Miami-Dade County is trying to preserve, has revived long-suppressed grievances about the city's commitment to its heritage.

The cradle of the South Florida metropolis, the city of Miami today is the guardian of an awesome array of historic sites, from landmarks as majestic as the Freedom Tower to the relatively humble 1857 Wagner House, a weathered wood-frame structure built when the city's then largely Caribbean population totaled about 150. Its archaeological possibilities are likewise rich, because the disappeared Tequesta Indians occupied both banks of the Miami River.

But the city's program for protecting these resources has been stymied from its start, in 1982, by a lack of commitment from a City Commission more concerned with property owners' rights and development than with preserving the past. Even now, with South Floridians' fascination with history piqued by the Circle, some recently drafted preservation reforms may not pass.

"A person who buys a piece of property has a reasonable expectation of developing it as he wishes," says Miami City Commissioner J.L. Plummer, one of the city's most persistent defenders of development rights. "I think that's a reasonable expectation."

The legacy of this stance is a preservation effort riddled with loopholes -- big enough for landmarks to fall through:

- Miami's historic preservation ordinance is relatively weak, granting the city's historic preservation board the right to stall, but not block, demolition of a designated historic site. If owners of the Freedom Tower wanted to demolish that landmark, for example, the city couldn't deny the demolition permit on the grounds of historic preservation.
- The City Commission has refused to grant historic designation to several important Miami buildings, such as the Scottish Rite Temple on the Miami River and the Congress Building downtown. Several other buildings significant enough to have earned a listing with the National Register of Historic Places have been denied historic status by the city as well.
- The city's historic preservation department is staffed by only one person, who works part-time on the issue. The employee, Sarah Eaton, is required to do painstaking historical research and review construction plans affecting dozens of historic properties throughout the city. Other smaller cities, like Miami Beach and Coral Gables, devote a work force of three or more people to preservation.
- The city's archaeological preservation efforts also have recently come under fire, with the county charging in court that the city has failed to apply its own ordinance to excavated sites. The city denies the charge, but archaeologist Carr estimates that since 1991, 20 development sites in downtown Miami could have had a more

Take the lead, Mr. Mayor

Miami Mayor Joe Carollo definitely has his eye on the right prize — a solvent city that works. However, he needs to adjust his vision a bit for distance; and if he takes the long view, he'll see that the Miami Circle, left where it is, could be worth more to the city than any revenues realized from the waterfront condominium complex under construction on that little spit of land at the mouth of the Miami River.

The fact that Miami, given its recent history, at last has a leader expressly concerned about the state of the city's revenues and its ability to improve the quality of life for its residents is gratifying. Mr. Carollo earns commendations for what he has done.

Almost lost in the hoopla over the Miami Circle was the city's report Thursday that it expects to see a \$5 million surplus. It didn't come easily, recognizing that it started in a \$68 million hole. The city, with a solid, professionalized staff, tighter fiscal controls, and a "nanny" — the Financial Oversight Board — is clawing its way back. But it still is precariously perched.

So when Mr. Carollo expressed concerns last week about the city's financial

CAROLLO AND THE CIRCLE

He's right to make Miami revenues a priority, but not to be at odds with stone's preservation.

matic.

However, Mr. Carollo must take his commitment to the city and its people, and fashion a new covenant, one rooted in the belief that a city that works for its residents will attract the kind of revenue from new businesses and residents who want to be here; one that sees the city as a model steward of its precious land, where its waterfront is valued as a public place, where greenspace is created and maintained — and yes, one in which the city, although poor, can pick up its trash regularly.

These missions are not at odds, they are inextricably linked. A park at the Miami Circle site can be the beginning of a huge reclamation project, one that begins to restore the city's shamefully abused, and disappearing, waterfront.

Miami-Dade Mayor Alex Penelas has taken an admirable lead here — with a little bluster in evidence. But Mr. Carollo, too, has what it takes to be a leader with long, clear-eyed vision.

Miami: A lost civilization



TOM
FIEDLER

EDITORIAL
PAGES EDITOR

Miami Mayor Joe Carollo revealed more than he intended the other day in response to the county's move to snatch away the site at the mouth of the Miami River where archaeologists have unearthed the now world-famous Miami Circle, the remnant of a centuries-old lost civilization.

"What he is proposing," Mr. Carollo fumed after county Mayor Alex Penelas blocked construction crews from dismantling the treasure for relocation elsewhere, "is the destruction of the city of Miami as an entity."

I wish it would be so easy.

The Miami mayor understandably was bemoaning the loss of some \$1.1 million a year in potential tax revenues from the twin-towered condominium that developer Michael Baumann intends to erect atop the circle. I don't mean to sniff at that money. And I applaud the investment in residential living near downtown.

But Mr. Carollo's complaint points up the city of Miami's precarious existence as a solvent operation. And that precariousness should be of concern to all of us.

If \$1.1 million in taxes is all that stands between the city of Miami and, in the mayor's words, its "destruction ... as an entity," then South Florida would be the better for it if the city government were to go the way of the Tequesta village. In short, we may need to abolish city government to save the city.

Keep in mind that the municipality called Miami occupies just 36 of Miami-Dade County's 1,955 square miles and serves just 17 percent of its population. Yet it controls some of the most precious waterfront real estate in South Florida, if not the world.

And what has the city done with it? With the exception of a few stretches in Coconut Grove, along South Bayside Drive and downtown's Bayside shopping mall, the city has either walled it off from the public with massive towers of glass and steel or let it go to seed, as in Bicentennial Park and on Watson Island and Virginia Key.

You need only visit the waterfronts of such cities as St. Petersburg, Chicago, San Francisco, San Diego — even Cleveland, for heaven's sake — to recognize what a mash we're making of this priceless asset.

Too poor to improve

We can lay part of Miami's mishandling of its treasure to corruption and venal politics, hopefully all in its past. But mostly the city's problem has been that it has too long lived a hand-to-mouth existence, too poor to make the public investments that would have repaid huge dividends, financial and otherwise.

Imagine how valuable downtown Miami property would be if there were a bayside drive, a Miami Corniche, running the city's full length. Imagine something like a tropical version of Chicago's 17-mile lakefront park, a greenbelt around the city.

At some point in its history, Chicago was willing to forgo the allure of the quick bucks offered by developers, who naturally want to snuggle concrete monstrosities next to the water so the rich few can live at the expense of the many. Fort Lauderdale voters also did that

years ago, barring attempts to move AIA inland so hotels could line its beach.

The problem in Miami is that the city is so desperate for dollars, as Mayor Carollo made clear, that it not only can't invest in those things that would take advantage of its bayfront, but it seems intent on selling off whatever it has.

Miami is not unlike an impoverished nation all too eager to liquidate its irreplaceable natural resources to snag enough dollars to buy blue jeans and VCRs. Last week Mayor Carollo offered up the Miami Circle site; next it might be condos on Virginia Key.

Bayfront of parks, gardens

The tragedy is that in a region as wealthy as ours, it shouldn't be this way. If voters would see the wisdom of consolidating the city of Miami into Miami-Dade County so that they operate as a single governmental entity, we wouldn't be enduring the spectacle of Mr. Carollo grabbing for bucks while Miami-Dade Mayor Alex Penelas races to court to stop him.

What's more, money would be available to transform Miami's bayfront into the jewel it should be. Imagine, for instance, if public parks and gardens lined the banks of the Miami River where the Tequesta lived centuries before.

The circle, of course, would be a magnet for tourists and would become an icon for Miami. And as an added benefit, even more — and higher quality — investment would be drawn to the site, just as the native Americans were at a time when Columbus set sail.

Only one thing stands in the way of this dream. A struggling and irrelevant city government.

E-mail: tfiedler@herald.com