

May, 29th 2021

Mayor Daniella Levine Cava

111 NW 1st Street, 29th Floor

Miami, FL 33128

CC: Commissioner Raquel A. Regalado

Stephen P. Clark Center

111 NW 1st Street, 220

Miami, FL 33128

Dear Mayor Levine Cava and Commissioner Regalado:

I was pleased to hear from Callie DeHaven, Director of State Lands at the Department of Environmental Protection that Miami Dade County has secured all areas of access to the Coconut Grove Playhouse, and that there is no evidence of vandalism to the interior of the building. Her assurance effectively dispels rumors perpetuated throughout Coconut Grove that appear intended to deceive residents into believing that due to vandalism, there is no other alternative but to demolish our 1926 Playhouse that is on the National Register of Historic Places.

A lot of deception has been occurring in Coconut Grove in recent years. In 2009, members of Saint Stephen's Episcopal Church discovered that the former City of Miami District II Commissioner advised church leaders and their Architect, a former Arquitectonica Vice President, on how to lie to the other Commissioners, the Planning and Zoning Board, the Historic and Environmental Preservation Board, as well as the general public — to get approvals for their project, which included a demolition permit for the 1912 chapel, which sat on Main Highway, just 600 feet from our historic Playhouse. Today our community is united in the belief that Saint Stephen's should have led by example, rather than engaging corrupt politicians to set a terrible precedent. The loss of Miami's first chapel built by northern pioneers, has left a scar on Coconut Grove that will never heal.

The willful abandonment of a building that has stood the test of time, to quench a narcissistic desire for temporary recognition and profit, is a slap in the face of previous generations. To discard the trial, error and labor of those who have come before us, to choose not to preserve a living tradition, is to commit cultural murder. Saint Stephen's act of defiance, aided by the former Commissioner, was the foundation for the autonomy that is robbing Coconut Grove of its cultural identity today.

According to community leaders, in 2012 the former Commissioner helped organize a campaign called "Give it Back," which misled the community into believing that the effort was about restoring our Playhouse. This fraudulent campaign was never about giving the Playhouse back to the taxpayers and voters who voted for complete restoration in 2004. It was about leveling our historic Playhouse, and giving the valuable cleared site to FIU to establish a satellite campus for a new Bi-lingual MFA program in Theater Direction, amongst an array of other programmatic activities for other special interests. FIU officials, department chairs and professors have been instructed by the Board of Trustees to not discuss this and their other Coconut Grove satellite campus project at the National Tropical Botanical Garden (located on Douglas Road near the Playhouse) with anyone, under any circumstances.

The taxpayers and voters are dismayed to learn that the former Commissioner currently sits on FIU's Board of Trustees Finance and Facilities Committee, which is tasked with providing policy guidance and strategic oversight of real estate type activities. And they are alarmed to hear from FIU affiliates and County employees, that he advised Miami Dade County, Arquitectonica and FIU — using the same tactics that led to the demolition of the 1912 chapel — on how to mislead City Commissioners, the Planning and Zoning Board, the Historic and Environmental Preservation Board, and the general public, to get the approvals for Arquitectonica's design, which includes a demolition permit application for our nationally designated historic playhouse.

The community is not falling for it this time. As you may know, the concrete block used to build the Playhouse in 1926 is larger, denser, and has a much longer design life than the block that is manufactured today. The Dade County pine floor joists and roof trusses are as strong as concrete, and they are literally irreplaceable. We can't build with Dade County pine anymore, because it's almost extinct.

A beloved building on the National Register that has already exceeded the design life of nearly all of the buildings around it, including the ones that are proposed to take its place, is worthy of our respect. In less than five years the Playhouse will be 100 years old, and with proper restoration, it can last another 100 years! Is there deterioration? Yes. And in 2004 the voters of Miami Dade County voted to use their tax money for the complete restoration of their historic Playhouse. They did not vote for a brand new, multiple phase, multistory, mixed-use megaproject to replace their historic Playhouse.

As you know, The National Park Service, the entity that listed the entire 1926 Playhouse on The National Register of Historic Places, has precise guidelines for complete restoration. “Deteriorated features from the restoration period will be repaired rather than replaced. Where the severity of deterioration requires replacement of a distinctive feature, the new feature will match the old in design, color, texture and, where possible, materials.”

I have reviewed Arquitectonica’s plans. The repurposed front facade, the only remnant of the original Playhouse that I could find in their design, falls extremely short of the guidelines established by the National Park Service for restoration. Their proposed promenade and courtyard surrounded by retail space that Miami Dade County is calling a “compromise,” appears to be a recreation of CocoWalk, the indoor/outdoor mall that sat three blocks away, which had such a short design life (less than 25 years) that it’s already been demolished, and has been replaced with an office complex that also has a design life of less than 25 years.

The only reason that a 300-seat theater “room” is in Arquitectonica’s building program at all, is because the deed requires that a theater be located on the Playhouse parcel, anywhere, even in the belly of a brand new, steel and glass, multiple phase, multistory, mixed-use megaproject, which by default, requires oversized pilings and footings. And the only way to excavate and drill for those, is to clear the entire site. That’s the only reason to demolish the existing historic Playhouse. It’s in the way. The intention all along has been to max out the FAR (floor area ratio) in order to clear the way for FIU’s new satellite campus and for CocoWalk 2.0, at the expense of our precious historic cultural resource.

If approved, Arquitectonica’s design (CocoWalk 2.0), along with FIU’s second brand new Coconut Grove satellite campus, will sit on the corner of Main Highway and the historically designated Charles Avenue, on the site of the demolished Coconut Grove Playhouse, and will serve as the gateway to Miami’s first black settlement.

The recently passed ordinance that changes zoning from single family residential to low-density restricted commercial, enables plans for the construction of a 66-room hotel on six residential lots adjacent to the Playhouse parcel, between Charles Avenue and William Avenue. The planned conglomerate of buildings on the Playhouse parcel would provide several amenities and support spaces for the new hotel. The two megaprojects will collectively accelerate the gentrification of Charles Avenue, all the way down to the historic Bahamian Charlotte Jane Memorial Park Cemetery and beyond. Because this community cannot withstand any further loss of its heritage, they must be looked at as a whole, and should not move forward without the City and County working together to create a proper cohesive master plan and impact study.

The Coconut Grove Playhouse represents our cultural identity that has evolved over a long period of time. The stories and memories embodied within the building are deeply rooted in the community that shares it. The compulsory urge to reject a building that has stood the test of time in an attempt to create something new is an egocentric impulse to innovate for innovation’s sake and will likely result in a curious and shockingly disappointing outcome, hence the architectural one-liner that Arquitectonica is known for.

It’s safe to say that Arquitectonica’s design does not respond appropriately to its historic context or to the needs of the clients, the taxpayers. The County is the agent tasked with representing the expressed interests of the taxpayers (the clients) who voted for complete restoration of the nationally designated theater. There is no need for compromise. The clients did not change their minds. They just didn’t realize that they were being lied to and taken advantage of. But now they know.

Imagine the grandiosity of the centennial celebration and who the guests may be who arrive to walk the red carpet. Imagine how a fully restored Playhouse will stand out as a beacon of community pride among the deluge of iterations of hasty developments that surround it. Imagine a gateway to the historically designated Charles Avenue that is punctuated with a building that already embodies fame and nostalgia that is impossible to re-create.

With your guidance and leadership, we can take control, restore sanity and set a new precedent — one that respects the rights of the voters and taxpayers of Miami Dade County, and stays true to the declarations set forth by the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966. Please assist the architects with adhering precisely to the guidelines established by The National Park Service for complete and total restoration of our entire 1926 nationally designated historic Coconut Grove Playhouse.

Sincerely,

Melissa Meyer Assoc. AIA LEED AP BD+C
Adjunct Professor Miami Dade College
School of Architecture and Interior Design