

MIAMI-DADE COUNTY MAY 12, 2016 7:00 AM

Miami Dade College grabs grand, unused old Miami U.S. courthouse

HIGHLIGHTS

The 1933 architectural masterpiece has been shuttered since 2008

U.S. General Services Administration ceded the landmark to MDC

MDC will renovate and convert the building to academic use



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Miami's old federal building, a Depression-era Neoclassical masterpiece that's among the grandest of the city's historic structures, has been vacant and moldering since 2008, its fate uncertain. But now a rescue is in the offing that will restore it to public use.

After years of negotiation, the federal government has agreed to cede the 1933 landmark to its neighbor, Miami Dade College, for use as an academic and civic building. The college and the government's property-management arm, the General Services Administration, signed a 115-year, one-dollar-a-year lease agreement Wednesday evening.

News that the building will be saved and eventually restored overjoyed historians and preservationists, who have watched with concern as the former post office and courthouse, known in latter years as the David W. Dyer building after a prominent judge, sat shuttered and unused behind a grim concrete street barrier for years.

"I can't tell you how thrilled I am," said Miami historian Paul George, a professor at MDC. "It's one of the most important buildings in all Miami-Dade County. It's grand-scale, it's picturesque, it's a little daunting, like all great federal buildings. A really special place."

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The monumental structure, which occupies most of a city block at Northeast First Avenue and Third Street, will require extensive renovations and interior alterations likely to run into the millions of dollars. MDC officials don't yet have a firm plan for the building's use, though they contemplate housing in it the college's architecture school, a paralegal-training program and its fashion institute.

The building, whose *piece de resistance* is a vast central courtroom adorned by a mural depicting the role of justice in Florida's development, would also serve as a site for lectures, meetings and cultural events, the school said.

George noted that MDC will be an ideal steward for the courthouse, which is on the National Register of Historic places and is also a city of Miami designated historic landmark.

MDC has acquired significant expertise in recent years in restoring and reusing historic buildings, including the Tower Theater in Little Havana and the iconic Freedom Tower just a few blocks from the Dyer building. College officials say they expect government grants available for restoration of historic buildings will help pay for work on the courthouse. The college is also renovating the modern tower at the corner of Southwest Eighth Street and 27th Avenue for use by its adjacent Interamerican campus.

"The college tends to do a great job with these buildings," George said.

The federal building, which housed the central Miami post office and all federal agencies but the weather bureau when it opened in 1933, was designed by Coral Gables' chief architect, Phineas Paist, and Miami architect Harold Steward, with an assist from Marion Manley, the first licensed female architect in Florida and designer of early University of Miami buildings. Paist and Steward also collaborated on the design of Coral Gables' City Hall and the buildings at the Liberty Square housing project. (Another Gables connection: that magnificent courtroom mural, *Law Guides Florida Progress*, is by artist Denman Fink, designer of the Venetian Pool.)

Though it was the height of the Great Depression, the government spared no expense on the building, believed to be the largest structure in South Florida made of Florida limestone. Window surrounds are made of marble, as are the floors and former post-office tabletops still in place in its elongated lobby. Spandrel panels running beneath the second-story windows on the main facade depict scenes from Florida history. That facade is defined by a towering row of Corinthian columns. Inside, original chandeliers and coffered ceilings are still in place, the college said.

1933 Year in which the federal courthouse building, which also housed the central Miami post office and most federal agencies, opened.

The American Institute of Architects' Miami Architecture guide published by University of Florida Press calls it "Miami's grandest Neoclassical structure."

The building also boasts a two-story open courtyard with a covered gallery and a latter-day abstract fresco by artist David Novros. The GSA once tried to remove the mural on the basis that it did not fit in with the building architecture, but relented after protests from the artist and art patrons.

Because it housed the main post office, and was in its early years surrounded by homes and residential buildings, George said, the building was once familiar grounds to many Miamians. The central courtroom was also the scene of some historic legal events, including the Congressional Kefauver hearings into organized crime that were televised to the nation in the 1950s, and the trial of deposed Panamanian dictator Manuel Noriega in 1991.

But use of the building gradually declined after the post office moved out in 1976. Most federal judges moved to a modern tower annex which opened in 1983, leaving mostly magistrates in the old courthouse. The last moved out after the newest courthouse opened a block away in 2008. The tower annex remains in use by the courts and is not part of the MDC deal.

The GSA then shuttered the historic building, which had been plagued by mold and complaints from court workers about respiratory ailments that had led to closure of some courtrooms and portions of the structure in 2006. The agency has continued to run the air conditioning to keep humidity and deterioration of the interior under control.

But the GSA came under fire from some Republican members of Congress, who during a 2012 hearing in the Dyer building's central courtroom scolded the agency for wasting taxpayer resources by failing to find a new tenant or sell the courthouse. A member of that delegation, Florida U.S. Rep. John Mica, is a Miami-Dade grad who pushed for the deal to give the college use of the building.

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The building itself is in good shape, said Miami architect Richard Heisenbottle, a specialist in historic preservation who was hired by MDC to evaluate the feasibility of reusing it. The GSA recently replaced the roof, he noted.

“It's a spectacular building, extremely well built,” Heisenbottle said. “The good news for the college is, it's also very adaptable to new uses.”

Much of the interior, except for the central courtroom, lobby and other public spaces, would likely be gutted, he said. The building needs new lighting, electrical and AC systems and likely contains asbestos, he said. Drywall partitions installed to create offices and courtrooms are not historically significant and can be easily removed, he added.

No cost estimates for the renovation and conversion work will be available until the college develops a specific plan.

“It's a tremendous opportunity for the college,” Heisenbottle said. “It will turn out to be a source of pride for the college and the community.”



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COMMENTS