

Miami Dade College is spending \$60M to rescue a downtown architectural masterpiece.

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A panoramic view of the David Dyer Federal Building in Downtown Miami in 2016. MIAMI DADE COLLEGE

Three years after [taking possession](#) of Miami's grandly historic but long-vacant federal building, Miami Dade College is nearing completion on the initial phase of a massive \$60 million renovation that will return the 1933 Neoclassical masterpiece to public use.

The public college has wrapped up clean-up work to remove asbestos and mold from the vast former courthouse and post office, which has been shuttered since 2008. Next comes remodeling and restoration, a job expected to take two years, said Miami Dade's interim president, Rolando Montoya, in an interview.

Once that's done, the monumental building will house the college's architecture, interior design and fashion design programs in appropriately splendid surroundings. The college

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also plans to install flexible-use classrooms, robotics and computer labs, faculty and administrative offices, and a conference center with capacity for 400 people.

“I think this is going to be beautiful,” Montoya said: “The building will be an interesting combination of several historical facilities with some high-tech, very modern facilities. It’s very nice architecturally, this combination.”

But, he added: “It’s a lot that has to be done. The building was in very bad shape.”

The limestone-clad federal building, widely regarded as one of the finest works of architecture in Miami, occupies most of a city block at Northeast First Avenue and Third Street across the street from the college’s Wolfson Campus in downtown Miami. Known in latter years as the David W. Dyer building after a prominent judge, the building is on the National Register of Historic places and is also a city of Miami designated historic landmark.

As part of the renovation, the college will restore the Dyer building’s *pièce de résistance*, an ornate [central courtroom adorned by a mural](#) depicting the role of justice in Florida’s development. The federal General Services Administration meanwhile will do its best to restore the badly deteriorated contemporary abstract [frescoes by artist David Novros](#) that grace the building’s interior courtyard, Montoya said.



The interior courtyard and arcade with contemporary frescoes by David Novros in the David W. Dyer federal building in 2015. *MIAMI DADE COLLEGE*

A pair of offices that belonged to the court’s chief judges and their original wood detailing and furnishings will also be restored for use as “elegant” conference rooms, Montoya said.

Under way now is work to separate the historic building from a modern tower addition, which is still in use by the federal district court. The two buildings, though structurally distinct, were connected through hallways that are being blocked off for security reasons. The utilities must also be split, with the college installing all new plumbing, electrical and air conditioning systems, Montoya said.

The building renovation plans, by [Leo A. Daly](#), a national architectural firm with a Miami office, are nearly complete and demolition of interior partitions and construction work will begin “soon,” Montoya said. The contractor is Turner Construction Company.

The school is footing the \$60 million cost of renovations out of its fiscal reserves, though it expects to supplement the funding with grants for historic preservation and other sources as work progresses, Montoya said.

The federal building project is only the latest rescue by the college of a notable Miami building, though it's perhaps the most complex the school has tackled. Miami Dade took over management of the city-owned, historic Tower Theater in Little Havana in 2002, and it restored the iconic Freedom Tower, on Biscayne Boulevard just blocks from the Dyer building, after it was donated to the school in 2008.

In 2011, the college acquired and renovated the 1929 [Koubek mansion](#) in Little Havana, formerly owned by the University of Miami, for use as a cultural and community center.

Most recently, the school [bought and fully rehabbed](#) a modern office tower at the corner of Southwest 27th Avenue in Little Havana for a major expansion of what was known at the time as the InterAmerican Campus — now [renamed](#) the Eduardo J. Padrón Campus in honor of the college's longtime president, who retired earlier this year.

Then, in 2016, the federal government agreed to lease the Dyer building, vacant since the completion of a new U.S. courthouse nearby in 2008, to the college for 115 years at \$1 a year following prolonged negotiations.

“We have already demonstrated that we are really good stewards of historical facilities,” Montoya said. “I think the federal government will be very, very happy with the results.”



The ornate central courtroom with a mural by Denman Fink in the David W. Dyer federal building in 2015. *MIAMI DADE COLLEGE*

When it opened in 1933, the federal building housed the central Miami post office and all federal agencies except the weather bureau. It was designed by Coral Gables' chief architect, Phineas Paist, and Miami architect Harold Steward, with an assist from Marion Manley, the second licensed female architect in Florida and designer of several early University of Miami buildings.

The American of Institute of Architects' [Miami Architecture](#) guide, published by University of Florida Press, calls it "Miami's grandest Neoclassical structure."

Although it was built at 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.



The front hall of the David W. Dyer federal courthouse with marble-topped post office tables in Miami in 2015. *MIAMI DADE COLLEGE*

Its great central courtroom was the scene of several historic legal events, including the Congressional [Kefauver hearings](#) into organized crime that were televised to the nation in the 1950s, as well as the trial of deposed Panamanian dictator Manuel Noriega in 1991.

After the last remaining judges and magistrates moved out, the GSA shuttered the historic building, which had been plagued by mold. Complaints from court workers about respiratory ailments led to closure of some courtrooms and portions of the structure in 2006.

When it's complete, Montoya noted, the restoration will turn the federal building into the third corner of a "historic triangle" of revitalized landmark buildings north of Fifth Street,

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including the Freedom Tower and the 1926 Central Baptist Church, now also undergoing renovation.

“It is going to be a beautiful experience to visit for anyone who loves history and architecture,” Montoya said. “It will be the best of Miami.”