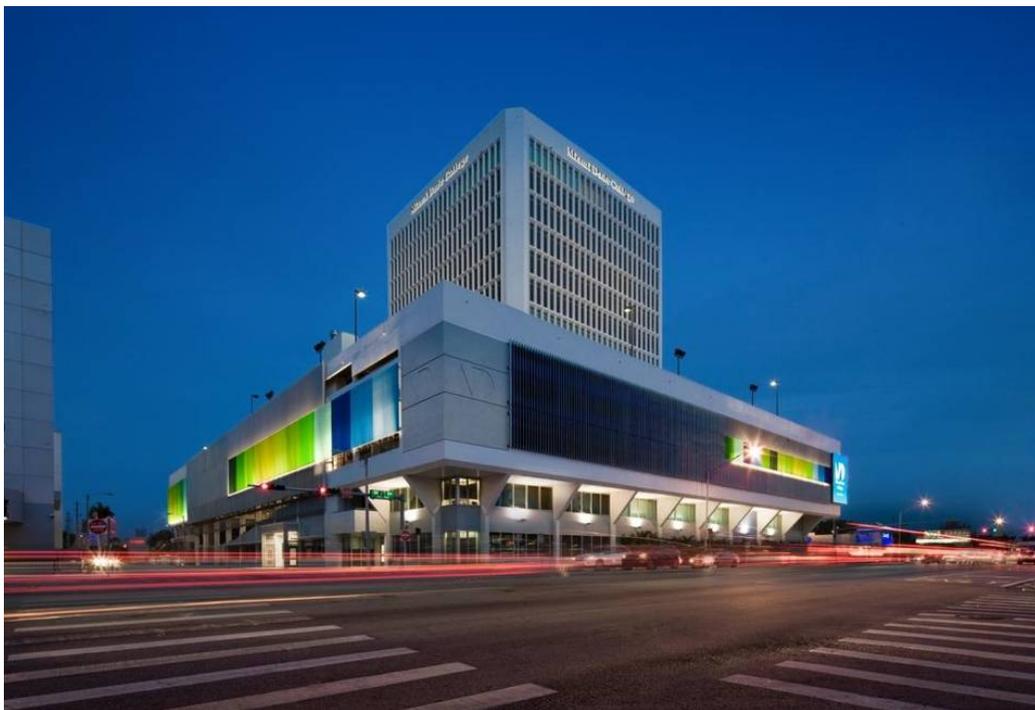


LITTLE HAVANA - FLAGAMI

August 31, 2017 2:41 PM

This was the ugliest building in Miami. Now see what Miami Dade College did with it.



The renovated tower at the corner of Southwest Eighth Street and 27th Avenue that's now part of Miami Dade College's InterAmerican Campus. **Dan Forer** - MC Harry and Associates



BY ANDRES VIGLUCCI
aviglucci@miamiherald.com

This may have been the ugliest building in Miami, a 1970s concrete brute that long marred one of the city's most prominent intersections, the gateway to Little Havana's Calle Ocho.

But, oh, what a difference fresh paint, new windows and some simple creativity can make.

The spiffy new look for the dreary old Interamerican Tower at the corner of Southwest 27th Avenue comes thanks to its new owner — Miami Dade College, which purchased and fully rehabbed the former office building for a big expansion of its InterAmerican Campus next door.

All it took, on the outside at least, was off-white paint, clear new windows to replace dark-tinted glass that gave the tower a Darth Vader look, and aluminum fins and a lighting scheme with a streak of color to mask the hulking parking garage that loomed nakedly over an entire city block. Crowning the corner of the garage: a 1,000-square-foot, high-resolution LED screen that displays video images promoting the school's programs and, not incidentally, considerably magnifies its heretofore modest profile.

"It's a massive transformation of what that building was previously," said InterAmerican campus president Malou Harrison.

She's not talking just about the exterior. Harrison said the real magic worked for MDC by the Miami architectural firm of MC Harry Associates was inside the tower and its expansive open-air courtyard, once a dank space that's been converted into a series of airy patios that invite students, faculty and visitors to linger and will host film screenings, fairs and cultural events.



Most significantly, the two-year, \$35 million project converted the tower's office floors into high-tech classrooms, labs and study spaces for the InterAmerican campus' fast-growing enrollment, which MDC says now stands at 16,000 students. There's a game room and meeting spaces for student groups, two cafes and a new college bookstore.

"This is now an A-plus-plus building in terms of functionality and aesthetics," Harrison said. "We've always believed our students deserve the very best."

Some spaces in the renovated tower were first used in the last academic year, but the complex came into full use with the start of classes this week, MDC said.

The college seized a chance to buy the tower, which had fallen into a state of deterioration, for \$25 million in 2012. It now doubles the capacity of the InterAmerican Campus, home to the college's school of education, which grants four-year degrees, and an extensive slate of two-year degree programs, including its signature dual-language and translation and interpretation programs.

The 1973 building has long stuck out in the neighborhood, and not just because of its forbidding design, which came at the end of a still-controversial mid-20th Century architectural trend fittingly known as Brutalism. (The name was derived not from its effect on users, however, but from the French term for unfinished concrete, *béton brut*.)



The building, a lot taller than anything else around it and visible from blocks away, consists of a tower that's covered in precast concrete window panels that give it a honeycombed look, and plunked atop a massive parking garage that occupies the entirety of a wedge-shaped block.

In an intriguing twist, MDC's acquisition of the tower represents an accidental architectural continuity. Its North and South campuses, the school's first two, are today considered exemplary instances of Brutalism adapted for South Florida's subtropical climate. Designed by a leading Miami firm known as Spillis Candela and Partners in a final incarnation before its absorption by international behemoth AECOM, the original buildings on both campuses are monumental in scale and feature covered breezeways and large, open-air interior spaces.

The school's InterAmerican campus buildings, also arranged around an open courtyard though in a cleaner Modernist style far removed from Brutalism, were designed by Spillis alums at the firm of Rodriguez & Quiroga Architects.

While the architectural quality of the tower is not in the same category as those other structures, said MC Harry senior partner Jim Piersol, its enclosed atrium echoes their inside-outside aesthetic and allowed the firm to carry through that MDC tradition.

"The fact that this old office building had some of the basic bones that the MDC buildings have was fortuitous," Piersol said.

Much of the renovation budget went into a new exterior elevator and stairway addition required to ensure that thousands of students and faculty could easily and safely navigate the tower, as well as new electrical and air-conditioning systems, Piersol said. That meant badly needed improvements to the exterior and the courtyard spaces had to be smart and economical, he said.



The result, he said, is a building with a “crisper, cleaner, brighter-looking” public face.

For MDC, the new complex – prosaically dubbed Building 6 – represents a chance to encourage InterAmerican campus students, all of whom live elsewhere, to gather, mingle and create a true collegiate community to a significantly greater degree than before. Such informal interactions, Harrison noted, can provide a key element in students’ education.

“We were fully committed to making the campus welcoming. We wanted a sticky space for students to not just come and go to class, but to be able to really develop,” she said. “They’re really being treated to a high-quality educational experience.”



MORE LITTLE HAVANA - FLAGAMI

COMMENTS
