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Gloria Estefan joins campaign to save Miami Marine Stadium

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Singer Gloria Estefan poses at the Miami Marine Stadium with its architect, Hilario Candela, for the National Trust for Historic Preservation's campaign to save the iconic 1963 structure.

The long campaign to resurrect one of South Florida's least-seen architectural gems, the shuttered Miami Marine Stadium, is getting a turbo boost from one of the town's most recognizable figures: Songstress, entrepreneur and — did you know this? — preservationist Gloria Estefan.

Estefan has agreed to be the public face of a new national campaign to raise the stadium's profile and help activists raise the millions of dollars needed to renovate the historic, city-owned structure, closed since 1992. Though in disrepair and slathered in graffiti, the 1963 stadium on Virginia Key, with its dramatically suspended, folded-concrete roof, is now widely regarded as a design and engineering marvel with no equivalent in the world.

Estefan, who played on the stadium's famous floating barge in the mid-1980s with the Miami Sound Machine just as they were achieving worldwide fame with Dr. Beat and Conga, called it "magical" and "an amazing piece of architecture" that should be restored to a central place in the city's cultural landscape.

"We are a very young city, but we've been here long enough to have a history, and it behooves us to save places like this," Estefan said in an interview with *The Miami Herald*. "I've been around the world, and there is nothing like this anywhere that I've been."

The daringly innovative, raw-concrete stadium also stands as a signal contribution of Cuban exiles to their adoptive city, said Estefan, who arrived in Miami as a toddler. The building was designed by a young, newly arrived exile, Hilario Candela, who went on to become one of Miami's leading architects. Candela collaborated with engineer Jack Meyer.

The campaign will be coordinated by the National Trust for Historic Preservation, which has designated the stadium as one of 34 "National Treasures" in need of saving, along

with the quake-damaged National Cathedral in Washington, D.C., and the hospital complex on Ellis Island.

Estefan, who joined the organization's board of trustees in November, has long played a side role as a preservation-minded developer along with her husband, producer and businessman Emilio Estefan. The couple undertook restorations of the Art Deco Cardozo Hotel on Ocean Drive in Miami Beach, a 1920s Mediterranean building on Lincoln Road Mall and, more recently, a mid-Century Modern hotel in Vero Beach.

The campaign comes at a critical juncture in local activists' five-year effort to restore the marine stadium, which sits at the edge of a large artificial basin off the Rickenbacker Causeway in Biscayne Bay. A nonprofit group, Friends of the Miami Marine Stadium, is awaiting a long-delayed vote by the city commission on a much-vetted plan it developed for the facility's resuscitation.

Under the plan, the group would have two years to raise most of the estimated \$30 million needed for renovation privately, and the stadium and a proposed waterfront park and marine museum and exhibition center next to it would be operated without public subsidy. But the vote has been put off as the group and the city hammer out a complicated legal agreement to allay concerns by some commissioners over awarding the contract to the Friends group without competitive bidding.

Friends co-founder Don Worth said the group already has \$10 million in funding commitments, including \$3 million from a county preservation fund, but can't proceed with full-fledged fundraising without a formal deal.

Estefan's and the National Trust's high-profile public backing and acumen, Worth said, should go a long way in cementing confidence in the renovation effort and helping raise money. Estefan said she's ready to "reach out" to city leaders and make public appearances on the group's behalf.

"To have a champion like Gloria is going to give us a great burst of enthusiasm and energy at a key time," Worth said. "She's loved and adored by this community and around the world. She's really a symbol of this community. And she's smart, focused and kind. We're ecstatic."

To engender public appreciation and support, campaign backers plan to conduct tours of the stadium, which few people except for trespassers or rowers who use the adjacent basin have seen up close in 20 years.

The Coral Gables Museum will also host an exhibit in which curators hope to immerse visitors in the Marine Stadium experience through video, sound, photos and a 3D computer animation based on a scan of the building done by the University of Florida. The exhibit would focus on its years as a popular venue for speedboat races and concerts by artists as diverse as Jimmy Buffett, Ray Charles and Afro-pop superstar Fela, as well as its curious after-life as an ever-changing canvas for graffiti artists.

It would also highlight future plans for its re-use as a multi-purpose facility that would again host concerts, boat races, triathlons and events tied to Art Basel or the annual boat

show.

“We want to give life to the idea that we need this building, that not saving it would be like not saving South Beach,” said art and architectural conservator Rosa Lowinger, who is curating the exhibition. “We have this fantastic building in our midst, and we are a cultural capital now. The time for this building is now. It could be our Hollywood Bowl and our High Line wrapped into one.”

The stadium had long been a money-loser in spite of its popularity when the city decided to close it in 1992, citing damage from Hurricane Andrew that later engineering studies concluded was minor. It was slated for demolition when an ad-hoc group of architects and preservationists under the aegis of Dade Heritage Trust persuaded the city to declare it a protected historic landmark and give them a chance to develop an economically viable plan to reopen it.

Engineering studies since then concluded the stadium and its grandstand, which sits on pilings over the water, are in remarkably good shape and structurally sound, though they requires repairs to support columns and beams as well as new plumbing, electrical systems, lighting, sound systems, seating and bathrooms.

Estefan said the marine stadium immediately jumped to the fore as she and Coral Gables architect Jorge Hernandez, also a National Trust board member and a Friends group co-founder, discussed possible preservation projects for her to get involved in.

That she made the right choice was confirmed when she took along her high-school-age daughter, Emily, to a recent photo shoot at the stadium. As a boating family, she said, the Estefans have cruised by the stadium many times.

But nothing can beat the view from the grandstand — the water and a nature preserve across from it with the downtown Miami skyline as a backdrop, under the cooling shade of the roof, Estefan said.

“She went in there and she flipped,” Estefan said. “There is such an energy there. A lot of people don’t even know it’s there. We want to get it in the public eye. Once they’re aware of it, people will want to keep this place.”

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