

MIAMI BEACH

PLANNING DEPARTMENT

Staff Report & Recommendation

Historic Preservation Board

TO: Chairperson and Members
Historic Preservation Board

DATE: April 22, 2025

FROM: Thomas R. Mooney, AICP
Planning Director



SUBJECT: HPB25-0648, **1700 Washington Avenue, Jackie Gleason Theater – Possible Designation of an Historic Site.**

A presentation by the City of Miami Beach Planning Department to the Historic Preservation Board of a Preliminary Evaluation and Recommendation Report relative to the possible designation of the Jackie Gleason Theater located at 1700 Washington Avenue, as a local historic site.

RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends that the Historic Preservation Board **not** direct the Planning Department to prepare a formal historic designation report for the possible designation of the Jackie Gleason Theater as a local historic site, and that no further action be taken.

BACKGROUND

On November 20, 2024, the Mayor and City Commission adopted Resolution No. 2024-33392, directing the Planning Department to prepare a Preliminary Evaluation and Recommendation Report relative to the possible historic designation of the Fillmore Miami Beach at Jackie Gleason Theater as an individual historic site.

DESIGNATION PROCESS

The process for historic designation is specified in Section 2.13.9 of the Land Development Regulations of the City Code. An outline of this process is delineated below.

- Step One: A request for designation is made either by the City Commission, the Historic Preservation Board, other agencies and organizations as listed in the Land Development Regulations of the City Code, or the property owners involved. Proposals for designation shall include a completed application form available from the Planning Department.
- Step Two: The Planning Department prepares a preliminary evaluation report with recommendations for consideration by the Board.
- Step Three: The Historic Preservation Board considers the preliminary evaluation to determine if proceeding with a designation report is warranted.

The designation report is an historical and architectural analysis of the proposed district or site. The report:

1. Describes the historic, architectural, and/or archeological significance of the property or subject area proposed for Historical Site or District designation.
2. Recommends Evaluation Guidelines to be used by the Board to evaluate the appropriateness and compatibility of the proposed Developments affecting the designated Site or District.
3. Will serve as an attachment to the Land Development Regulations of the City Code.

Step Four: The designation report is presented to the Historic Preservation Board at a public hearing. If the Historic Preservation Board determines that the proposed site or district satisfies the requirements for designation as set forth in the Land Development Regulations of the City Code, the Historic Preservation Board transmits a recommendation in favor of designation to the Planning Board and City Commission.

Step Five: The Planning Board will hold a public hearing on the proposed designation and shall consider the proposed historic designation as an amendment to the Land Development Regulations of the City Code and, subsequently, transmit its recommendation to the City Commission.

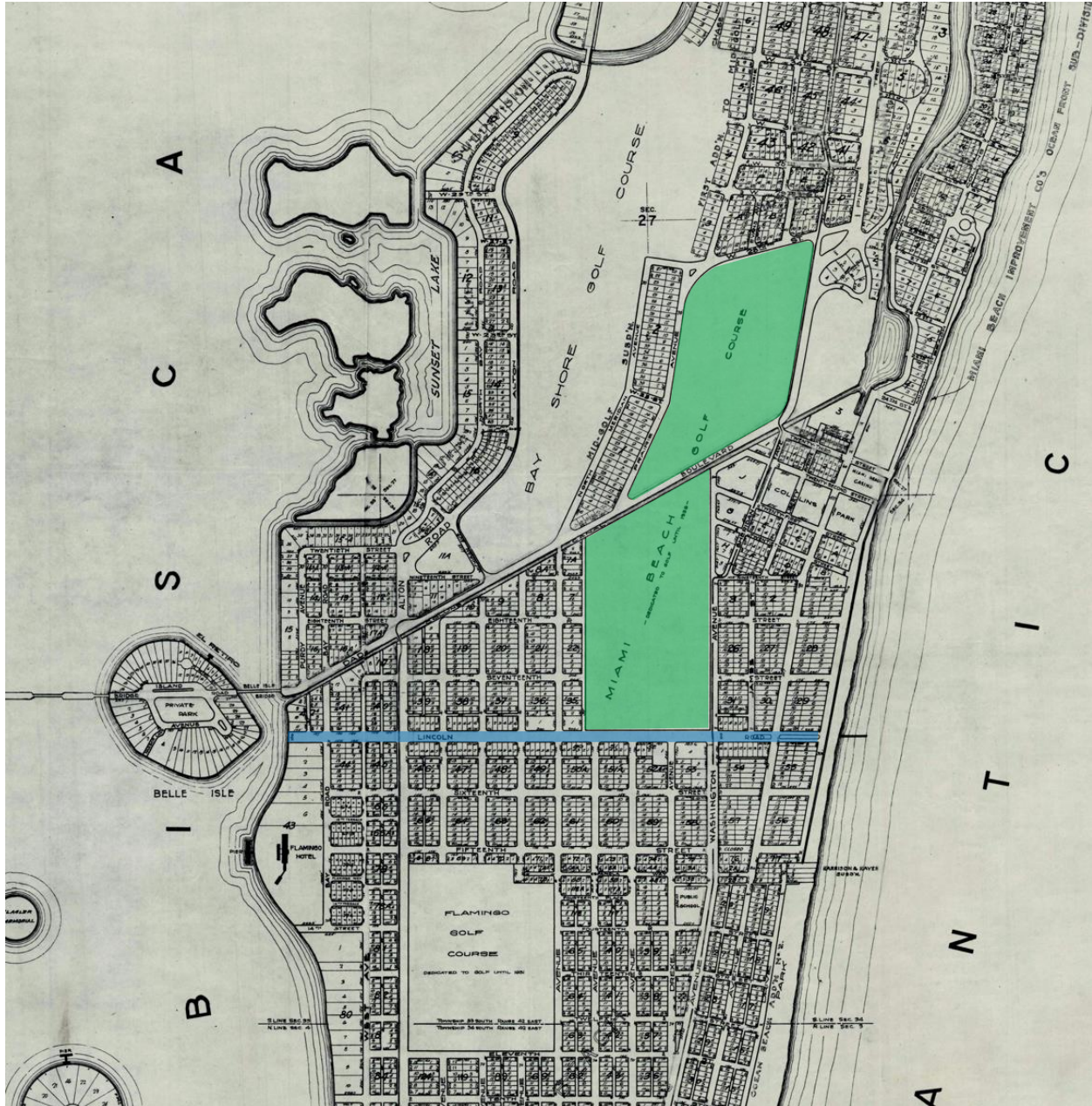
Step Six: The City Commission may adopt an amendment to the Land Development Regulations of the City Code which thereby designates the Historic Preservation Site or Historic District after (1) public hearing for a parcel of land less than ten (10) contiguous acres or after (2) public hearings for a parcel of land which is more than ten (10) contiguous acres.

PRELIMINARY EVALUATION

Historical Context

The development of Miami Beach as an urban environment began in July of 1912 with the first platting of land by the Ocean Beach Realty Company. Ocean Beach's first plat included the area south of 5th Street and subsequent plats in 1913 and 1914 included nearly all of current day South Beach, south of 14th Street. John Collins, a horticulturalist from New Jersey, owned the land north of 14th Street to just south of 69th Street between the Atlantic Ocean and Biscayne Bay. His company, the Miami Beach Improvement Company, platted some of their land holdings for sale in 1912, and also planned two other ambitious projects: a canal linking Indian Creek to Biscayne Bay and a 2.5-mile-long wooden bridge across the bay. The canal was completed in 1912, and in 1913, the bridge was finished with the financial aid of Carl Fisher—in exchange for 200 acres of land. Carl Fisher was a highly successful Indiana industrialist who acquired a fortune by developing the Prest-O-Lite automobile headlamp; he is also credited for building the Indianapolis Speedway, the Lincoln Highway from California to the east coast, and the Dixie Highway from Chicago and Upper Michigan to Miami. The area that Fisher acquired was located approximately between current day 14th and 19th Streets, from the Atlantic Ocean to Biscayne Bay. His newly

formed company, the Alton Beach Realty Company, platted its first subdivision along the ocean in 1914 along the ocean and continued to plat property toward the bay with Lincoln Road running down the middle.



1925 city map, Miami Beach Golf Course highlighted in green, Lincoln Road highlighted in blue

Fisher subsequently acquired additional property and began the process of filling land, constructing roads and planting trees in order to sell the newly created lots. He also introduced a number of recreational amenities throughout his properties including, indoor tennis courts, polo fields and notably, several golf courses. It is believed that planning for the first golf course, started in 1914. This course would eventually become known as the Miami Beach Golf and Country Club (later the Miami Beach Golf Course or the Miami Beach Municipal Golf Course) and was first

opened to the public in 1916. The 18-hole golf course spanned from Lincoln Road on the south, across the Collins Canal and Dade Boulevard, north to present day 28th Street, in the area that currently includes Soundscape Park, the Miami Beach Convention Center campus, Miami Beach City Hall, Pride Park, the Holocaust Memorial, the Miami Beach Botanical Garden, Miami Beach Senior High School and Bayshore Park. As part of the golf course, a club house was constructed in 1916 at the intersection of Dade Boulevard and Washington Avenue and is the oldest remaining City owned building. Shortly after, in January of 1917, Fisher opened the second hotel within the city (the first hotel was the Brown's Hotel located at 112 Ocean Drive, constructed in 1915), the Lincoln Hotel (demolished in 1940 and replaced by the 420 Lincoln Road office building), which fronted onto the south side of the golf course. Fisher continued to develop hotels in Miami Beach including the Flamingo Hotel (1920), the Nautilus Hotel (1924), the King Cole Hotel (1925) and the Boulevard Hotel (1926).



1920 photograph of the Lincoln Hotel viewed from the Miami Beach Golf Course

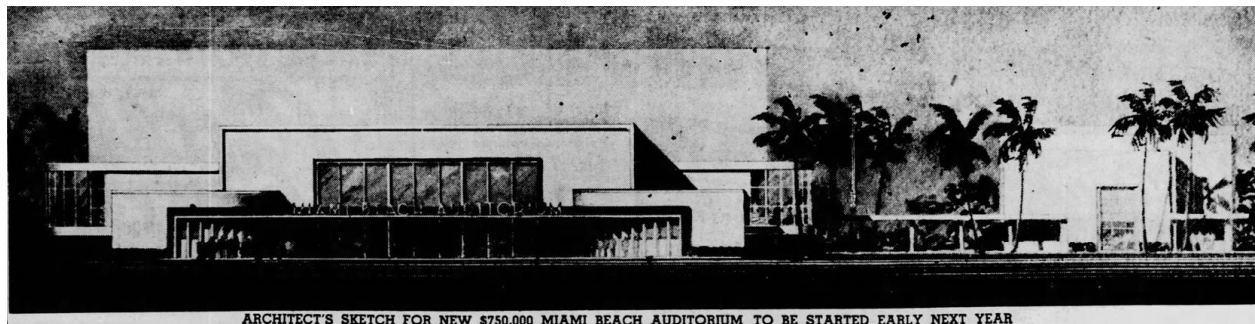


Ca. 1925 photograph of the Miami Beach Golf Course viewed from the Lincoln Hotel

In 1927, the Miami Beach Golf Course was leased to the City of Miami Beach and became a municipal course. Three years later, in 1930, the golf course was purchased by the city for \$900,000. The golf course remained in operation until 1942, when it was leased to the U.S. government for the training of soldiers during World War II. It appears that once the golf course was turned back over to the city in 1946, operations did not continue.

Miami Beach Auditorium

In 1945, the city held a special election to issue bonds for the construction of an auditorium, a hospital, ocean front parks and parking areas. The bond issues were approved but were ultimately invalidated by the Florida Supreme Court due to a lack a participation of the minimum voters required. In 1947, the city held another special election for the issuance of bonds including \$750,000 for the construction of an auditorium. The bond measures passed, and the city hired an architectural board consisting of L. Murray Dixon, Henry Hohauser and Russell Pancoast to prepare preliminary plans for the construction of an auditorium within a portion of the former Miami Beach Golf Course site.



ARCHITECT'S SKETCH FOR NEW \$750,000 MIAMI BEACH AUDITORIUM TO BE STARTED EARLY NEXT YEAR

On August 27, 1948, an article entitled "Beach Busy On Plan For Auditorium" (including the illustration above), was published in the Miami Herald which gives an overview of the project:

"Work will be started "the first of the year" on a \$750,000 municipal auditorium for Miami Beach, Assistant City Manager Kenneth Thompson said Thursday.

Bids for the building will be advertised soon and final specifications are now being drawn up. To be built on the eastern fringe of the Miami Beach Municipal Golf course at 17th St. and Washington Ave., the auditorium will seat 3,700 persons.

Though this is not financially covered by the first construction phase, the structure eventually will be air-conditioned. Someday it may be augmented by a 500-capacity theater building to the north and a giant stage nine stories high and 150 feet wide.

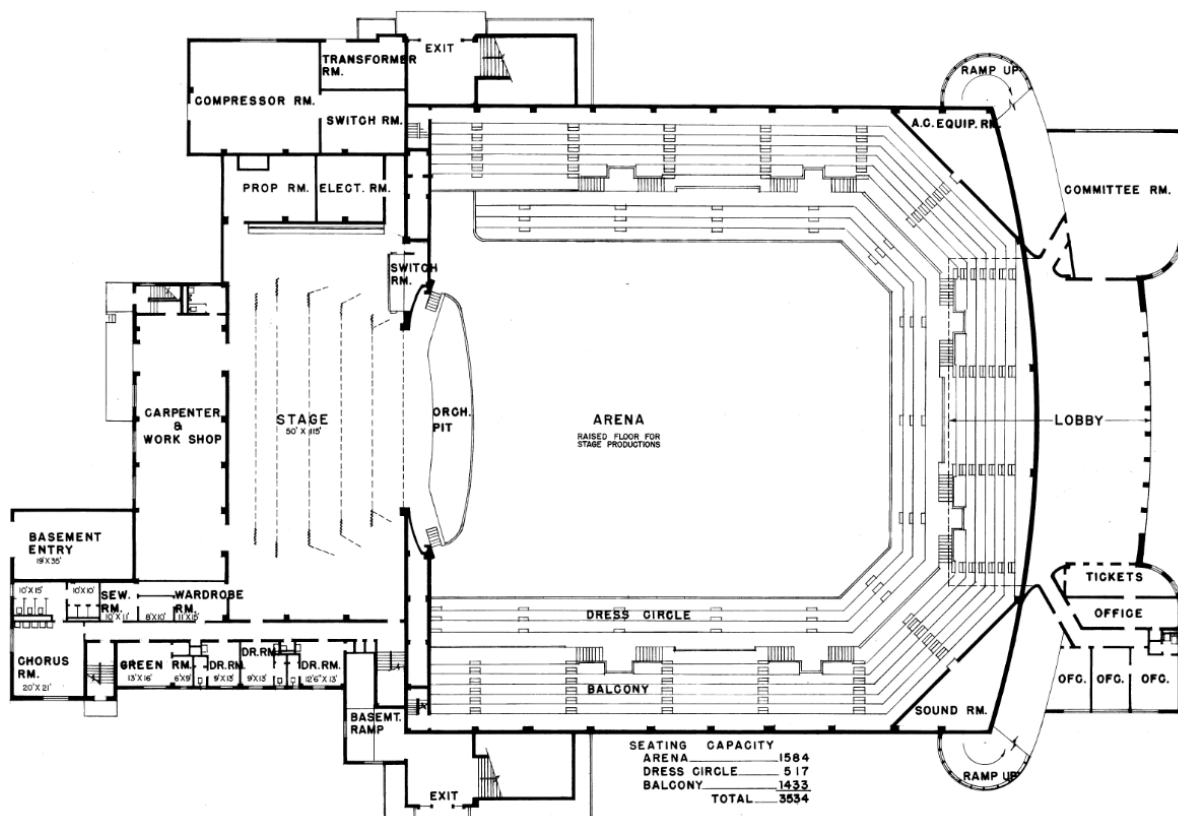
Of contemporary design, the building will make use of Florida materials wherever possible. The architects are Russell Pancoast, Henry Hohauser and Murray Dixon.

There will be no major stair-ways in the building. Access to balconies will be by ramps on either side leading up from the lobby..."

Construction commenced in 1949, and the auditorium (with air conditioning) was completed in 1950. Concurrently, plans for the stage were developed by the same architects, and construction of the Miami Beach Auditorium was fully completed in 1951.



1951 photograph, Miami Beach Auditorium



1951 as-built floor plan, Miami Beach Auditorium



Ca. 1950s photograph, Miami Beach Auditorium arena



Ca. 1950s photograph, Miami Beach Auditorium lobby

The original Miami Beach Auditorium was designed in the Post-War Modern style of architecture and can be described in three parts:

- The front double-height lobby flanked on each side by 1-story administration areas and sweeping ramps that accessed the balcony level
- The main arena volume; and
- The stage volume and ancillary back-of-house spaces.

The auditorium hosted many types of events including symphony concerts, musical performances, operas, school performances, conventions, pageants and boxing matches. In 1958, construction was completed on the adjacent 108,000 sq. ft. Miami Beach Exhibition Hall, positioning the city to host much larger events.



Ca. 1960s postcard, Miami Beach Auditorium

In 1964, it was announced that the Jackie Gleason Show was moving to the Miami Beach Auditorium. An article entitled "How Sweet It Is! It's Definite; Gleason Moving Show to Beach" appeared in the February 18, 1964 issue of the Miami Herald:

"The CBS Jackie Gleason Show will move definitely to Miami Beach next fall to make this area the only one outside of Hollywood and New York from which a weekly TV series has ever originated.

Announcement of the moved was made jointly Monday by CBS and Miami Beach Publicist Hank Meyer. It followed a week of negotiations in New York between Gleason's staff and Miami Beach officials.

Meyer said the comedian will do 38 consecutive shows from Miami Beach Auditorium, beginning in September, with eight of the best of them to be repeated in the summer of 1965.

The television show will have the use of the auditorium two days a week—one for rehearsal and the other for taping the actual performance. Gleason's staff originally wanted three days but settled for two during the recent conference in New York.

All of the shows will be done on tape to avoid the high cost of live transmission. WTVJ, the CBS station here, will be the technical subcontractor, providing the show with technicians and completely new camera, sound and taping equipment.

The Miami Beach City Council two weeks ago appropriated \$250,000 for the installation in the auditorium of technical facilities to bring the 3,500-seat building up to network studio standards..."

The Jackie Gleason Show was filmed from the auditorium beginning in the 1964 season and each show would open with a fly-over of Miami Beach and the announcer exclaiming: "From the sun and fun capital of the world, Miami Beach!". The show continued to be filmed in the auditorium until its cancellation in 1970. In 1987, shortly after Gleason's death, the city renamed the auditorium the Jackie Gleason Theater of the Performing Arts in his honor.

In 1970 the voters of the city approved a \$4,000,000 bond (ultimately costing over \$6,000,000) for the conversion of the auditorium into a theater of the performing arts. In 1973, the city hired architect Morris Lapidus and theater designer Ralph Alswang to design the new interior.



Rendering of the Lapidus/Alswang theater design

Lapidus had just completed designs for the Gusman Hall at the University of Miami and renovations to the Olympia Theater in downtown Miami. Lapidus' proposal transformed the original open arena style auditorium into a performance theater. The interior of the theater was gutted, and a new design was introduced which incorporated proper theater seating, mezzanine and balcony levels and a grid of futuristic shaped acoustical panels and lighting dropped below the exposed ceiling structure. Ramped aisles were introduced along the north and south sides of the theater volume, composed of a complex network of columns and beams, to access the upper levels. Although the transformation of the theater space was dramatic, the lobby and exterior remained relatively unchanged except for new stair towers along the north and south sides of the building.



Ca. 1976 photograph, renovated Theater of the Performing Arts (new stair tower visible)

The renovated auditorium officially re-opened as the 2900-seat Miami Beach Theater of the Performing Arts in 1976. The design of the theater interior was described in an article in the January 18, 1976 issue of the Miami Herald:

"Inside the finished theater, the main floor is two-thirds orchestra seats (each about 18 inches wide) and one-third a slightly raised mezzanine. To the rear over the mezzanine is the balcony, curving forward like a suspended half circle, to complete the effect of intimacy.

The spacious interior soaks you in a sea of rich, subdued colors. The seats are covered with soft velour, in a color the designers call apricot, a sort of cross between rust and gold. The walls along each side are giant dark mahogany panels grooved for better sound wave bounce; while overhead a grid of white acoustic "clouds" criss-crosses, leaving space for enormous air conditioning ducts. Carpet

the color of claret will run up and down the aisles and all across the rear wall when installed...”



Ca. 1976 photograph, view to stage



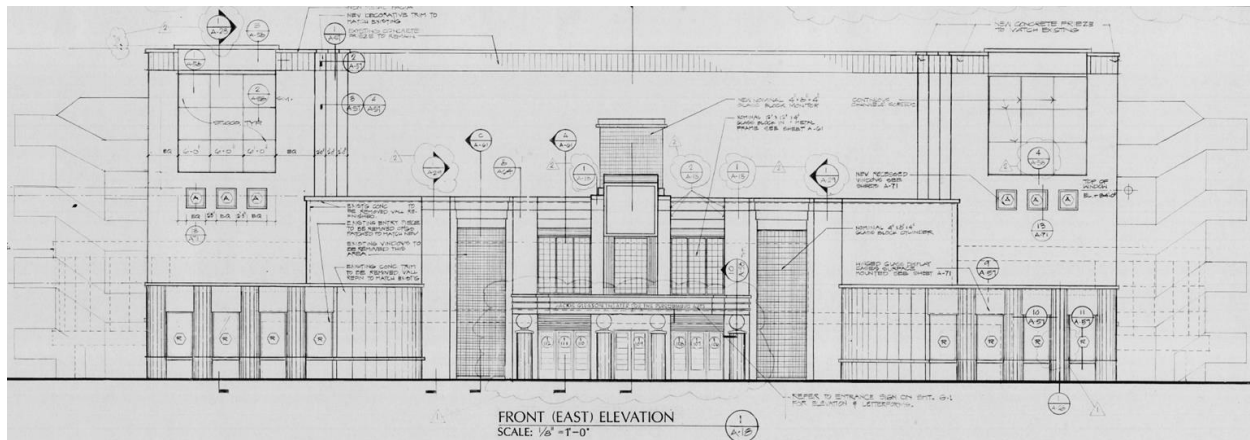
Ca. 1976 photograph, view from stage



Ca. 1976 photograph, view of aisle

Notwithstanding the design, the theater suffered from poor acoustics. After several attempts to tweak the sound, the city sued Lapidus. The matter was sent to arbitration and Lapidus prevailed; however, the acoustical issues remained. In 1983, the city hired a new architectural firm to redesign the theater. After flaws were found in this design, in 1986 the city hired the firm of Borrelli, Frankel, Blitstein, Sasaki Associates to redesign both the interior and exterior of the theater. The original sweeping exterior ramps of the 1950 design were demolished, and the front façade was renovated and decorated with exaggerated art deco elements. Further, in 1999, the existing overhang that was introduced as part of the 1986 renovation was extended east for a new porte-cochere.

Unfortunately, the alterations that took place in 1986 included the demolition of nearly all significant exterior and interior architectural elements of the building and new inappropriate elements were introduced. Based upon the physical observations and substantial historical documentation, staff strongly believes that the alterations have irreparably destroyed the architectural integrity of the building and that these alterations cannot be reversed.



1986 renovation, east elevation drawing



Current photograph

RELATION TO ORDINANCE CRITERIA – Preliminary Evaluation

Sec. 2.13.9 Historic Designation

b. Criteria for designation

1. The historic preservation board shall have the authority to recommend that properties be designated as historic buildings, historic structures, historic improvements, historic landscape features, historic interiors (architecturally significant public portions only), historic sites, or historic districts if they are significant in the historical, architectural, cultural, aesthetic or archeological heritage of the city, the county, state or nation. Such properties shall possess an integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling or association and meet at least one of the following criteria:
 - A. Association with events that have made a significant contribution to the history of the city, the county, state or nation.
 - B. Association with the lives of persons significant in the city's past history.
 - C. Embody the distinctive characteristics of a historical period, architectural or design style or method of construction.
 - D. Possess high artistic values.
 - E. Represent the work of a master, serve as an outstanding or representative work of a master designer, architect or builder who contributed to our historical, aesthetic or architectural heritage.
 - F. Have yielded or are likely to yield information important in pre-history or history.
 - G. Be listed in the National Register of Historic Places.
 - H. Consist of a geographically definable area that possesses a significant concentration of sites, buildings or structures united by historically significant past events or aesthetically by plan or physical development, whose components may lack individual distinction.
2. A building, structure (including the public portions of the interior), improvement or landscape feature may be designated historic even if it has been altered if the alteration is reversible and the most significant architectural elements are intact and repairable.
3. The historic preservation board shall consider if the historic buildings, historic structures, historic improvements, historic landscape features, historic interiors (architecturally significant public portions only), historic sites, or historic districts comply with the sea level rise and resiliency review criteria in chapter 7, article I, as applicable.

Below are staff's preliminary findings:

1. The historic preservation board shall have the authority to recommend that properties be designated as historic buildings, historic structures, historic improvements, historic landscape

features, historic interiors (architecturally significant public portions only), historic sites, or historic districts if they are significant in the historical, architectural, cultural, aesthetic or archeological heritage of the city, the county, state or nation. Such properties shall possess an integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling or association and meet at least one of the following criteria:

B. Association with the lives of persons significant in the city's past history.

Satisfied; *the theater is associated with Jackie Gleason (1916-1987), an actor and comedian who was referred to as “The Great One”. His eponymously named variety show—The Jackie Gleason Show—was filmed in the Miami Beach Auditorium from 1964 to 1970. Gleason often ended his show exclaiming “Miami Beach audiences are the greatest audiences in the world!” In 1987, shortly after Gleason’s death, the City of Miami Beach renamed the Miami Beach Auditorium the Jackie Gleason Theater of the Performing Arts in his honor.*

2. A building, structure (including the public portions of the interior), improvement or landscape feature may be designated historic even if **it has been altered if the alteration is reversible and the most significant architectural elements are intact and repairable.**

Not Satisfied; *the Jackie Gleason Theater retains little to none of its architectural integrity. Virtually nothing remains of the original 1950 design with the exception of the general volume of the building. The alterations that took place as part of the 1986 renovation removed nearly all of the significant architectural elements of the building and new inappropriate elements were introduced. The design of the building is routinely referred to as Art Deco, confusing an important Miami Beach architectural style with 1980s pastiche. Based upon the physical observations and substantial historical documentation, virtually all significant interior and exterior architectural elements have been removed. These alterations have irreparably destroyed the architectural integrity of the building cannot be reversed.*

3. The historic preservation board shall consider if the historic buildings, historic structures, historic improvements, historic landscape features, historic interiors (architecturally significant public portions only), historic sites, or historic districts comply with the sea level rise and resiliency review criteria in chapter 7, article I, as applicable.

Criteria for ordinances, resolutions, or recommendations:

- A. Whether the proposal affects an area that is vulnerable to the impacts of sea level rise, pursuant to adopted projections.

The unified sea level rise projection for Southeast Florida updated in 2019 projects the anticipated range of sea level rise from 2000 to 2120. The projection highlights three planning horizons:

- Short term: by 2040, sea level is projected to rise 10 to 17 inches above 2000 mean sea level.
- Medium term: by 2070, sea level is projected to rise 21 to 54 inches above 2000 mean sea level.

- Long term: by 2120, sea level is projected to rise 40 to 136 inches above 2000 mean sea level.

[ESTIMATED from LIDAR] The structure is located on a site that is at an elevation of approximately 7.0' NGVD. The ground floor elevation has not been determined.

- B. Whether the proposal will increase the resiliency of the city with respect to sea level rise.

The proposal may be in conflict with near, mid-term and long-term efforts to increase the resiliency of the city with respect to sea-level rise. Modifications to the building, including building elevation will be likely necessary to further the City's resiliency initiatives.

- C. Whether the proposal is compatible with the city's sea level rise mitigation and resiliency efforts.

The proposal may be in conflict with near, mid-term and long-term efforts to increase the resiliency of the city with respect to sea-level rise. Modifications to the building, including building elevation will be likely necessary to further the City's resiliency initiatives.

RECOMMENDATION

Based upon the research and evidence presented herein, the historical and architectural significance of the proposed historic structure based upon the applicable designation criteria noted herein, and in accordance with Section 2.13.9 of the Land Development Regulations of the City Code, the staff of the City of Miami Beach Planning Department **does not** recommend that the Historic Preservation Board direct staff to prepare a formal historic designation report for the proposed Jackie Gleason Theater Historic Site.

CURRENT SITE PHOTOGRAPHS







