

Dade County Courthouse

Interior Observations Report

73 West Flagler Street
Miami, Florida



Prepared by: Sarah K. Cody
Historic Preservation Chief
Office of Historic Preservation
Regulatory and Economic Resources Department
Miami-Dade County

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I. INTRODUCTION

On January 8, 2020, County Commissioner Sally A. Heyman addressed the Miami-Dade County Historic Preservation Board regarding the historic significance of the Dade County Courthouse. Given the anticipated redevelopment, she requested that the Historic Preservation Board and Chief consider examining whether significant interior features may warrant some level of preservation and/or protection. At that same meeting, the Historic Preservation Board adopted Resolution #2020-01, directing the Historic Preservation Chief to perform a visual survey and evaluation of the potential significance of interior features at the Dade County Courthouse and to prepare a report with various options for the Historic Preservation Board to consider at the next available board meeting.

II. GENERAL INFORMATION

NAME: Dade County Courthouse

LOCATION: 73 W Flagler St
Miami, FL 33128
Township: 54S
Range: 41E
Section: 01

PROPERTY OWNER: Miami-Dade County
Internal Services Department

LEGAL DESCRIPTION: MIAMI NORTH
PB B-41
ALL OF BLK 115-A LESS W50FT FOR
ST & AREA K/A AVE E LYG E OF BLK
115-A & LOTS 8 & 9 BLK 115-N
A/K/A DADE COUNTY COURT HOUSE

TAX FOLIO NUMBER: 01-0111-050-1060

III. BACKGROUND

The Dade County Courthouse was originally constructed from 1925 through 1928, built to replace the original two-story county courthouse. The Courthouse was designed to serve as both County Hall and Miami City Hall, and included facilities for courtrooms, records rooms, judicial chambers, a law library, and jails for both the County and City. It served as the County seat of government from its completion until the Stephen P. Clark Center was constructed and the County offices relocated in 1985. Noted Atlanta-based architect A. Ten Eyck Brown designed the 27-story Neo-Classical building. August Geiger, another prominent architect, served as the associate architect for the design of the new Dade County Courthouse.¹ At the time of its completion, the Courthouse was celebrated as the "tallest structure south of Baltimore, and believed to be the tallest municipal building in the United States."² It remained the tallest structure in downtown Miami until 1963, when development of high-rise towers in downtown Miami began to eclipse its 335-foot height.³



View of the first Dade County Courthouse, circa 1914. (Photo courtesy Reference Collection, Florida Memory Collection, Image No. RC19574)



View of steam shovel being used to excavate and clear the site for the new courthouse alongside the original courthouse, visible at left, 1925. (Photo courtesy Reference Collection, Florida Memory Collection, Image No. RC19573)



View of the Dade County Courthouse under construction in 1927. (Photo courtesy Reference Collection, Florida Memory Collection, Image No. RC10735)



View of the Dade County Courthouse in 1935. The Freedom Tower and Biscayne Bay are visible beyond. (Photo courtesy Reference Collection, Florida Memory Collection, Image No. N035092)

The design of the building was intended to meet the growing needs of the County government. The first three floors housed offices that were frequented by the public with office spaces for officials, courtrooms, and jails above. The jails and their administrative offices occupied floors 14 through 25 and were accessed from the basement via two dedicated elevators. Use of some of the interior for jail cells was discontinued in 1961, when the County moved that function off site.⁴ The character-defining ziggurat roof houses the wooden water tank that continues to service the building today.

Long recognized for its architectural qualities, the Dade County Courthouse was officially designated as a local historic site by the City of Miami Heritage Conservation Board (predecessor to the City's Historic and Environmental Preservation Board) on November 26, 1985. The site was noted as significant in Miami's

history of government, community development, and architecture. More specifically, it was evaluated as eligible for local designation for its service as the seat of government for Miami-Dade County for nearly 60 years; as an outstanding work of two prominent architects; as an outstanding example of architectural design, notably its use of materials, ziggurat roof, and Neo-Classical design; and as one of the County's most visually defining landmarks in the rapidly evolving skyline.⁵



Aerial view of downtown Miami in the early 1960s. The Dade County Courthouse remained the tallest building until 1963. (Photo courtesy Reference Collection, Florida Memory Collection, Image No. PR19914)

On January 4, 1989, the Dade County Courthouse was listed on the National Register of Historic Places. It was listed with a Period of Significance of 1900-1938, with the Areas of Significance noted as architecture, politics/government, and community development. The National Register of Historic Places nomination notes that the Courthouse lobby retains original features, such as the marble floors, bronze elevator doors, and mailbox and that some of the courtrooms retain original woodwork.⁶

While the Dade County Courthouse is owned by Miami-Dade County, it has been under the regulatory jurisdiction of the City of Miami, because it is physically located within the City. On July 24, 2018, the Miami-Dade Board of County Commissioners passed and adopted Ordinance 18-81, creating the Government Center Rapid Transit Zone Subzone. Among other things, the ordinance transferred regulatory jurisdiction over buildings located within the subzone – including the Courthouse – from the City of Miami to Miami-Dade County. Thus, while the ordinance transferred historic preservation jurisdiction over properties located in the subzone to the County, it also provided that eligible properties could continue to utilize the City's program to transfer unused development rights. Property owners can also apply for the City's Ad Valorem Tax Exemption for Historic Properties program.

IV. OVERVIEW OF BUILDING INTERIOR

The interior of the Dade County Courthouse has been continually adapted to meet growing and changing needs since its original construction in 1928. During the 1950s, the lobby with its second-floor atrium was altered; a false ceiling was installed and the physical and visual connection to the atrium was lost. In 1995, the County received a \$300,000 State Division of Historical Resources grant to restore the lobby. As part of this project, the false ceiling was removed and the connection between the historic lobby and its second-floor atrium restored. The third floor houses the law library today. Floors 4, 5, and 6 have courtrooms that reflect various states of alteration and preservation, particularly with regard to their original woodwork. The original etched brass elevator doors can be found on floors 1 through 6. The majority of the floors above 6 have been substantially renovated to accommodate modern office use. The original wooden water tank remains elevated inside the ziggurat roof structure, and continues to provide water throughout the building.

V. HISTORICALLY SIGNIFICANT INTERIOR FEATURES & INTEGRITY

The interior of the Dade County Courthouse holds historic significance as the setting of notable events and as the setting for the seat of the County government. Portions of the interior continue to convey the distinct Neo-Classical architectural style that defines the exterior. However, because the interior spaces have been continually altered over time to accommodate different uses and growing needs, it is important to assess not just the potential significance of the interior, but its integrity as well. In the context of historic preservation, integrity is defined as the ability of a property to convey its significance.⁷ Generally, it is best practice in historic preservation to prioritize protection of features that retain their historical integrity, in addition to being significant.



View looking down into the lobby from the second-floor atrium. Visible is the restored lobby floor, and the design details of the upper atrium, January 2020. (Photo courtesy Office of Historic Preservation.)



View of two of the original etched bronze elevator doors in the lobby with the original bronze mailbox and tube above, January 2020. (Photo courtesy Office of Historic Preservation.)

When considering the integrity and historic significance of the Courthouse interior, two areas are notable: the lobby with the open atrium above and Courtroom 6-1. The lobby has provided a defining first impression to everyone entering the Courthouse since its construction nearly 100 years ago. It boasts fully restored

features, including a black and white marble floor, etched brass elevator doors, and brass mailbox. Elaborate and colorful mosaics cover the ceilings at the north and south entry points and along the perimeter of the first floor. The lobby is open to the second floor above, where a balustrade mimics the terracotta exterior, which is glazed to give the appearance of granite. Decorative relief and dentils that run below the balustrade also evoke the detailing of the exterior.



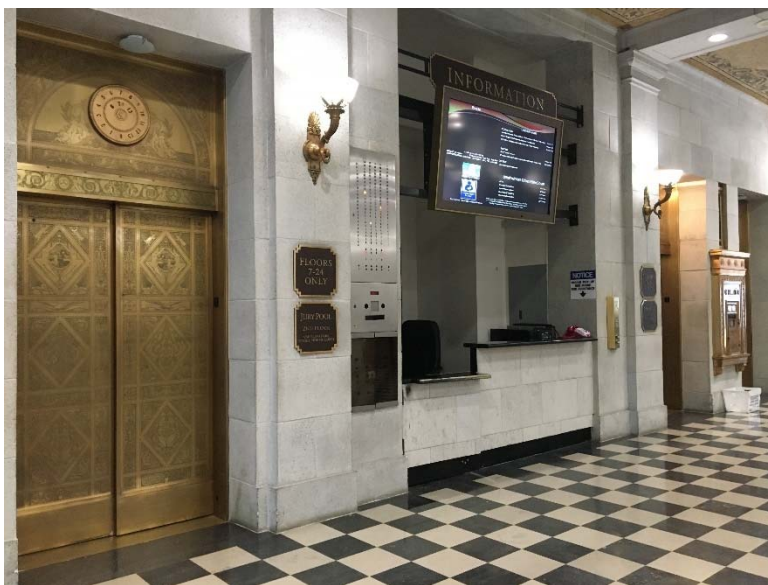
Detail view of one of the elaborate mosaics that adorn the lobby ceiling at the north and south entries, January 2020. (Photo courtesy Office of Historic Preservation.)



Detail view of one of the many of the mosaics that line the perimeter of the lobby ceiling, January 2020. This mosaic has been impacted by a wall build-out, though others remain unaltered. (Photo courtesy Office of Historic Preservation.)



View of the design details that define the second-floor atrium, including the balustrade, dentils, and relief that mimic the exterior architectural details, January 2020. Original elevator doors and the mailbox are also evident, and the mail chute can be seen above the mailbox and between the elevators on the second floor. (Photo courtesy Office of Historic Preservation.)



View of a modern information desk between original lobby elevators, January 2020. (Photo courtesy Office of Historic Preservation.)

Courtroom 6-1 is located on the 6th floor and underwent a full restoration in 2006, funded in part by a State Division of Historical Resources grant. This courtroom remains in use for trials as well as for special judicial events and ceremonial investitures.⁸ With the space fully restored, it embodies the Neo-Classical style of the building exterior

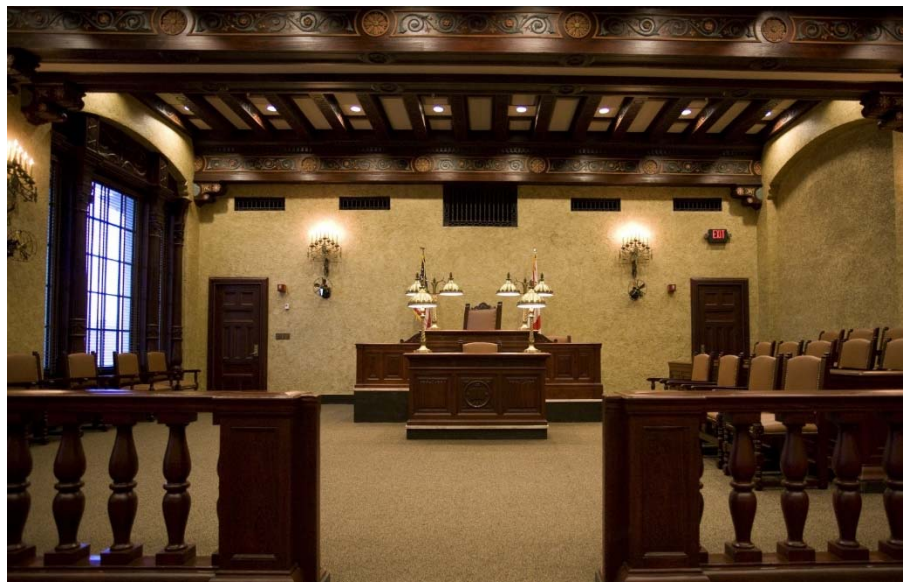
and retains almost entirely original features. This includes the rubber floor, wall sconces, and all the millwork and woodwork, such as the judge's bench, the jury box, and the wooden balustrade that separates the public seating area from the judicial proceedings. Even the chairs have been noted as original, though reupholstered. The fans and desk lamps were reproduced based on the originals. These features were carefully restored, and original motifs repainted on the woodwork that adorns the ceiling.



View from the judge's bench in Courtroom 6-1, 2008. (Photo courtesy Office of Historic Preservation.)



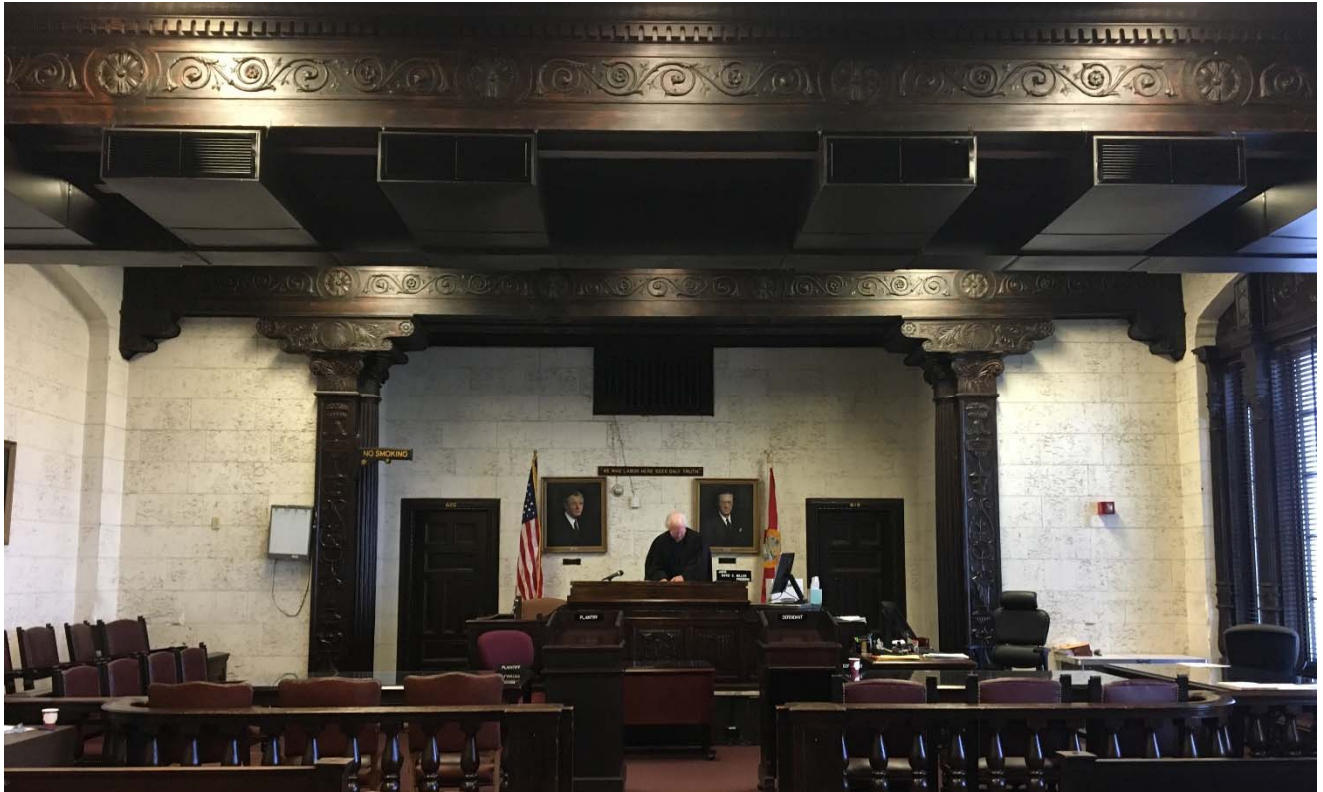
View of the restored wall sconce in Courtroom 6-1, 2008. (Photo courtesy Office of Historic Preservation.)



View looking towards the judge's bench in Courtroom 6-1, 2008. (Photo courtesy Office of Historic Preservation.)

This courtroom is also notable as the setting of major historic trials. Gangster Alphonse Al "Scarface" Capone was acquitted of perjury in this courtroom in 1930. Famed British aviator William Lancaster was tried for murder in 1932 in the same courtroom. It was also the site of the trial for Giuseppe Zangara, attempted presidential assassin of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Zangara shot and killed Chicago Mayor Anton Cermak in Bayfront Park during the attempt on Roosevelt. Zangara ultimately pled guilty in this courtroom in 1933.⁹

Additional courtrooms on floors 4, 5, and 6 retain varying degrees of their historic features, though none have been restored in the same manner as Courtroom 6-1, and are not known to have the same association with historic trials. Some of these features include original woodwork, like doors, ceilings, and benches. Panels of iron railings provide a decorative separation between the courtroom hallways and the public waiting areas on these floors.



View looking towards the judge's bench in Courtroom 6-3, January 2020. This courtroom retains much of its woodwork, though it has not been restored. (Photo courtesy Office of Historic Preservation.)



Detail view of former county seal on the judge's bench, Courtroom 6-3, January 2020. (Office of Historic Preservation)



Iron panels separate the seating area from the courtroom hallways, January 2020. (Office of Historic Preservation)



View of the domed, tripartite ceiling in Courtroom 4-2, January 2020. (Photo courtesy Office of Historic Preservation.)



View of the imposing wood door in Courtroom 4-2, January 2020. (Photo courtesy Office of Historic Preservation.)



View of Courtroom 5-3, which has original woodwork panels that have been painted white, January 2020. (Photo courtesy Office of Historic Preservation.)

Also located on the 6th floor is an original water fountain remaining from use during segregation. A plaque hangs on the wall over it with text that commemorates the history of black lawyers. The plaque was presented as part of Black History Month in February 2009. Directly across from the historic water fountain is a modern water fountain with a plaque above celebrating Barack Obama as the first African American president. While the setting and context of the segregation-era water fountain has been altered, this is a notable feature that speaks to an important era in the history of the Courthouse. The wooden water tank housed in the roof is another impressive historic feature. However, it is not readily viewable and is a functional part of the building's water system, which at some point may be subject to repair or replacement in connection with future alterations or improvements to the building.



View of the segregation era water fountain on the 6th floor, January 2020. (Photo courtesy Office of Historic Preservation.)



View of the wooden water tank housed in the ziggurat roof, September 2018. (Photo courtesy Office of Historic Preservation.)



View of an original doorknob, January 2020. (Photo courtesy Office of Historic Preservation.)



View of one of two brick rooms in the basement with vault doors and iron bars, January 2020. (Photo courtesy Office of Historic Preservation.)

While other original historic features are found throughout the interior, much of their integrity is diminished or lacking. Features that are original to the building, but largely devoid of their original context and integrity, include doorknobs, doors, desks, benches, ironwork, and woodwork. The original elevator that serviced the jails remains in place, though is in deteriorated condition. The basement has two brick rooms with large vault-style doors and windows above covered with iron rails. The original use of these rooms is unknown, though they may have served as some type of holding area for those waiting to be taken to the jail via the dedicated elevator.

VI. PLANNED SALE & REDEVELOPMENT

Miami-Dade County has identified the need for a new civil courthouse to accommodate growing needs and improved functionality. In 2017, the Miami-Dade Board of County Commissioners adopted Resolution No. R-559-17, which directed the County Mayor or Mayor's designee to commence the competitive processes to identify a site and developer for the construction of a new civil courthouse. On December 17, 2019, the Board of County Commissioners adopted Resolution No. R-1343-19, approving the contract for the design, construction, financing, operation and maintenance of the new civil and probate courthouse which will be located on a new Flagler site just west of the existing Dade County Courthouse. An integral part of the construction of a new courthouse is the sale or lease of the historic Dade County Courthouse. Once sold, the historic Courthouse could be redeveloped for a new, modern use. Any new use would be determined under the applicable zoning, and could include retail, hotel, residential, or similar uses. In addition to the planned sale or lease and redevelopment of the Courthouse, the County will continue to perform routine maintenance, repair, and capital improvements to the site as needed, including mold and asbestos abatement.

VII. STAFF EVALUATION

The Dade County Courthouse has historic significance associated with both the exterior and portions of the interior. While original features can be found primarily on floors 1 through 6 of the interior, many no longer retain their historic integrity. This is a result of many years of alterations and improvements to address use and functionality, which has largely removed the historic context in which these individual features were once located. These features include original doors, doorknobs, benches, elevator doors, and ironwork, as discussed above. The two interior spaces that retain their integrity and hold value with their own historic significance are the lobby, inclusive of the second-floor atrium, and Courtroom 6-1. The segregated water fountain is also a noteworthy original feature.

VIII. OPTIONS

If the Historic Preservation Board is inclined to ensure some level of preservation of certain interior spaces and features, there are a number of options, or combination of options, it could consider. For example, the Board could:

1. Amend the local historic site designation to include specific interior spaces and/or features. An amended designation report could identify specific interior spaces and features and require that they either be preserved in situ or that they be incorporated in a new design to the greatest extent feasible. If this option is pursued, Staff recommends that only spaces or features with historic significance and integrity be included in the designation, rather than the full interior of the building.
2. Recommend that ISD include language in the Request for Proposals to make any potential buyer aware of significant historic interior features and, through use of a covenant, require the preservation of specific interior spaces and/or individual features. In the event that the Courthouse is leased rather than sold, this could be accomplished through a lease agreement rather than a covenant. This option would not require any amendment to the original historic site designation.

3. Recommend that ISD include as a condition of sale that any potential buyer shall use best efforts to preserve in place any original features, and when not possible, that original features shall be salvaged and reused within the building to the greatest extent possible, with any features not reused donated back to the County for reuse elsewhere or for preservation within a museum or exhibit context. In the event that the Courthouse is leased rather than sold, this could be accomplished through a lease agreement. This option would not require any amendment to the original historic site designation.

When considering such options, the Board may wish to take into account potential future use of the Courthouse and the degree of flexibility necessary to permit the adaptive reuse and continuing viability of the site.

IX. ENDNOTES

¹ Eaton, Sarah, Historic Preservation Planner, "Dade County Courthouse Designation Report," City of Miami, June 7, 1985.

² Robinson, W.L., Sarah, "A Four-Million-Dollar 28 Story 'Tower of Justice,'" The American City, November 1928, 159-160.

³ George, Dr. Paul S, "Dade County Courthouses," Miami History, accessed February 12, 2020, November 1928, <https://miami-history.com/dade-county-courthouses/>.

⁴ Eaton, Sarah & Vicki L. Welcher, "Dade County Courthouse National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form," Bureau of Historic Preservation, October 1988.

⁵ Eaton, Sarah, Historic Preservation Planner, "Dade County Courthouse Designation Report," City of Miami, June 7, 1985.

⁶ Eaton, Sarah & Vicki L. Welcher, "Dade County Courthouse National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form," Bureau of Historic Preservation, October 1988.

⁷ National Park Service, "National Register Bulletin: How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation," U.S. Department of Interior, 1995.

⁸ Miami-Dade County, "Historical Resources Grant Application: Dade County Courthouse Courtroom Restoration Project," Florida Division of Historical Resources, 2006.

⁹ Miami-Dade County, "Historical Resources Grant Application: Dade County Courthouse Courtroom Restoration Project," Florida Division of Historical Resources, 2006.