

# Sea-Level Rise Could Destroy Miami's Historic Architecture

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The seas are rising. And Miami is in grave danger of going under. Anyone who lives in South Florida and isn't living in a Marco Rubio-size bubble of denial knows these facts by now, and the national media has been pounding the story into the ground in recent months.

But one aspect of sea-level rise hasn't been widely debated in public or in political policy circles: What do the rising seas mean for Miami's wealth of historic buildings, from South Beach's art deco hotels to MiMo-style architecture across the bay?

"Things can be raised, things can be rebuilt, but not everything," says land use attorney Wayne Pathman, chair of Miami's sea-level rise committee. "Economically, a lot of it won't make sense."

Last night, a panel of experts gathered at the welcome center of the Miami Design Preservation League (MDPL) on Ocean Drive to debate whether Miami can save its history while also keeping its head above water. The consensus: Things don't look good.

There have been some promising developments, though. Last week, preservationists were pleased to see a 1931 Star Island mansion raised and moved to a different spot on the property, elevated three feet above the flood plain.

But guys like Reinaldo Borges, an architect on several local sea-level rise committees, say that's not a realistic option for, say, an entire city or a whole historic neighborhood like Miami Beach's Art Deco District.

"When we get all excited about this, great, we can have a party and have some mojitos and celebrate. The reality is the concern, the danger, and the long-term detrimental impact that sea-level rise is going to have on this community are way beyond what one singular billionaire does with his private property," Borges told an audience of about three dozen people at Wednesday's presentation.

Borges says he thinks of preservationists as the romantics of the conversation and folks like developers as the pragmatists. Although he gently criticized "romantics" like Tony Goldman,

who restored the historic Park Central Hotel, by saying Goldman "basically gave it a paint job," Borges insisted all sides need to come up with practical and realistic solutions — and fast.

"We're underdesigning these buildings for a future that is happening whether we like it or not," he cautioned. "It's so difficult when we enjoy the beauty of this place to kind of imagine the catastrophic impact that permanent flooding will have on the streets of this beautiful community... We've just got to be sure that these assets have a long life, that we do things with intelligence, that we can expand the life of these assets and they won't be damaged because of our lack of futurism."

Pathman warned of the economic impact sea-level rise is expected to have on property owners, including those in historic districts. Particularly, insiders predict flood insurance rates will skyrocket, particularly for homes built before 1975 that predate flood maps.

"When you look at that and you see the rates that they're charging and the direction that they're going, it's going to be very hard to maintain small buildings, small businesses," Pathman said. "And even larger buildings and homes, the cost of insurance is going to be astronomical... If people can't afford to live here or buy homes, that's going to be very distressing for property values."

Because of this, the crisis is also an affordable-housing issue. Smaller, older apartment buildings could find themselves on the hook for hugely expensive insurance bills, the cost of which will likely be passed onto renters and homeowners.

Daniel Ciraldo, a historic preservation officer with MDPL, told *New Times* he owns and lives in a condo in one such building in South Beach, a two-story, eight-unit complex, and has concerns about its future.

"My hope is one day we'll be able to figure out a way to elevate the property," he said.

For Ciraldo and other preservationists, the elevation of the Star Island mansion was significant and a glimmer of hope that other historic homes and buildings could be saved this way. Ciraldo said Brownie, the company that performed the elevation, estimates it would cost in the low \$100,000s to elevate a 2,000-square-foot home above flood. Ciraldo said he's pushing for incentives for property owners who elevate their buildings or make them flood-resistant in other ways.

Although there's tension among preservationists, developers, politicians, and property owners, Ciraldo said he's hopeful Miami can get its act together and figure out a way to preserve the area's historic architecture while being mindful of what's to come.

"We could all be part of the solution, I think, so to me that's the exciting part, even though it's very daunting," he said. "I think about it obviously all the time, because my gig is saving old buildings. And in some ways it's like, oh crap, it's hard enough to save them as they are, and now with the sea-level rise, it adds this whole other degree of uncertainty, but at the same time,

the prize is so great if we can figure out a way to do it right and set a model for the rest of the coastal communities."