
COCONUT GROVE PLAYHOUSE

3500 MAIN HIGHWAY

Designation Report



City of Miami

REPORT OF THE CITY OF MIAMI
PRESERVATION OFFICER
TO THE HISTORIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL PRESERVATION BOARD
ON THE POTENTIAL DESIGNATION OF THE
COCONUT GROVE PLAYHOUSE
AS A HISTORIC SITE

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Consultant

Prepared by Sarah E. Eaton, Preservation Officer

Passed and
Adopted on _____

Resolution No. _____

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I. GENERAL INFORMATION

Historic Names:

Coconut Grove Theatre
Grove Theater

Current Name:

Coconut Grove Playhouse

Location:

3500 Main Highway
Miami, FL

Present Owner:

Coconut Gove Playhouse LLC
3500 Main Highway
Miami, FL 33133

Present Use:

Performing Arts Theater

Zoning District:

G/I - Government/Institutional

Tax Folio Number:

01-4121-045-0140

Boundary Description:

That portion of Lot 10 located northerly and westerly of Ingraham Highway and northerly of Charles Street of the plat of MONROE'S PLAT, as recorded in Deed Book D at Page 253, of the Public Records of Miami-Dade County, Florida; together with the easterly 140 feet of northerly 117 feet, and the easterly 52.5 feet less the northerly 117 feet of Block 29 of the plat of FROW HOMESTEAD, as recorded in Plat Book B at Page 106, of the Public Records of Miami-Dade County, Florida;

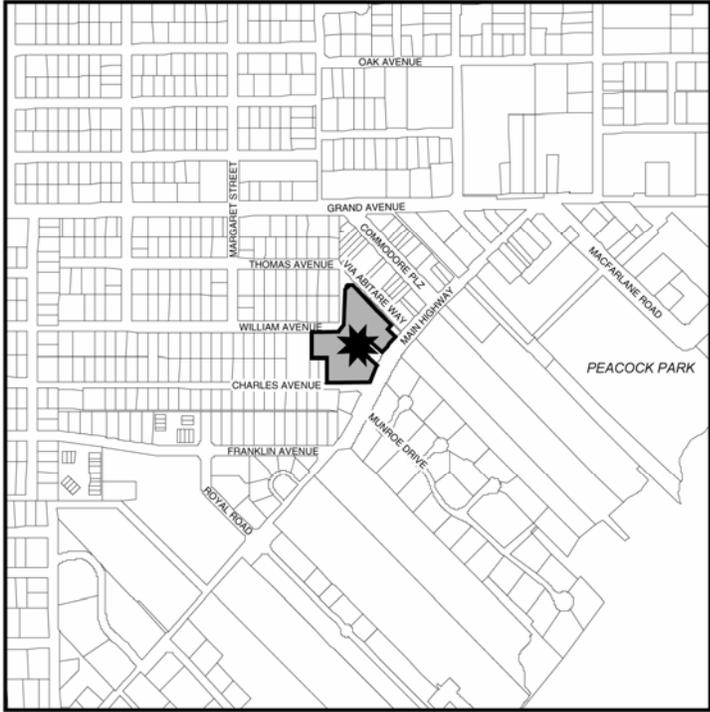
together with Lots 1 and 2 of the plat of ENGLE SUBDIVISION, as recorded in Plat Book 64 at Page 43, of the Public Records of Miami-Dade County, Florida.

Classification:

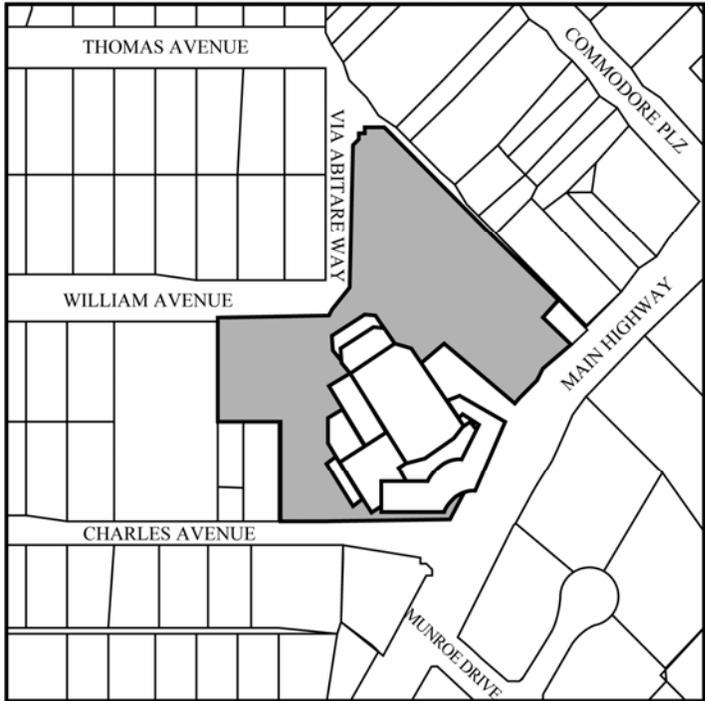
Historic Site

COCONUT GROVE PLAYHOUSE

3500 MAIN HIGHWAY



location



site plan

II. SIGNIFICANCE

Specific Dates:

1926

1955 – Remodeling

Architects:

Kiehnel and Elliott – 1926

Alfred Browning Parker – 1955

Builder/Contractor:

Albert V. Peacock – 1926

Statement of Significance:

The Coconut Grove Playhouse is a noteworthy expression of the Florida Land Boom that has survived to the present day. The original design by the critically important architectural firm of Kiehnel and Elliott, was a fanciful Spanish Rococo movie palace. The theater was intended to be Miami's most elaborate theater with the largest seating capacity of any theater in Miami. In 1955, under the hand of noted architect Alfred Browning Parker, the theater was remodeled to accommodate the Coconut Grove Playhouse, Miami's first live, legitimate theater, which evolved into one of the most important regional theaters in the country. In many ways, the Coconut Grove Playhouse embodies the metaphoric Boom and Bust cycles that Florida has experienced, and continues as a signature building reflecting the heyday of Coconut Grove.

On January 15, 1926, ground was broken for a new theater at the corner of Main Highway and Charles Street in Coconut Grove. The theater was a project of the Irving J. Thomas Company, which had been brokering real estate in Coconut Grove as early as 1912.

Almost one year later, before its opening, Thomas turned over the theater to Paramount Enterprises, Inc., the moving picture studio and theater builders. Mr. Thomas explained that with Paramount running the movie house, it would better serve the citizens of Coconut Grove, as they were likely to have access to more attractions. The Coconut Grove Theater became the eleventh Paramount Theater to open in southeastern Florida.

In the announcement for the theater's construction, the article boasted that the auditorium would contain more seats than any other theater in Miami, and would be equipped with the latest model of an orchestral pipe organ. The building

would be climate controlled year-round through the use of a “pressure system of ventilation” that could produce cool air during the hottest of days. The building was designed for mixed uses, and included seven storefronts on the ground floor, and offices on the second. The third floor contained apartments.

On Saturday, January 1, 1927, actor Adolf Menjou headlined D. W. Griffith’s production of the *Sorrows of Satan*, the opening night feature at the Coconut Grove Theater. Accompanying the movie was the 12-piece orchestra of Arnold Johnson, and Celia Santon playing the Wurlitzer Concert Grand Organ. The theater accommodated 1,500 patrons anxious to experience the fantasy world created by the moving pictures. The Reverend J. D. Kuykendall of Plymouth Congregational Church gave the dedicatory address, comparing the growth of the motion picture industry with that of Coconut Grove itself. The house was packed for both showings of the film.

The theater opened at perhaps the worst possible time, as the financial climate in South Florida was at an all time low. The theater managed to stay open until the 1930s, after which it closed. The theater served a new purpose during World War II, when it was used as a school to train Air Force navigators.

Following the war, the building was shuttered, and would remain so until 1955, when George Engle purchased the theater for \$200,000 with the intent of creating a legitimate performing arts theater. Finding the theater in an advanced state of disrepair, Engle hired Coconut Grove architect Alfred Browning Parker to refurbish it and decorate it for a more contemporary era. The cost of the alterations was estimated at \$700,000. Renamed the Coconut Grove Playhouse, the renovated theater reopened on January 3, 1956, with the U.S. premiere of Samuel Beckett’s existential play, *Waiting for Godot*.

Engle found the succeeding years disappointing in terms of financial success and attracting audiences. He closed the theater in 1960. After leasing the building for several years, producer Zev Buffman bought the building in March 1966 for more than \$1 million. In 1970, the Playhouse changed ownership again when former actor Eddie Bracken and his associates purchased the building. When Bracken’s group failed to pay its debts, the Playhouse was ordered sold at auction on the steps of the county courthouse.

The Playhouse survived destruction when Arthur Cantor and Robert Fishko managed to buy the theater, which reopened for the 1971–72 winter season. Cantor and Fishko sold their interests to the Players Repertory Theater in 1977, which renamed the theater as the Players State Theater.

The State of Florida acquired the playhouse in 1980 by purchasing its \$1.5 million mortgage. The State contracted with the Coconut Grove Playhouse, Inc. to operate the theater, and in 2004 transferred the title to the Coconut Grove Playhouse LLC Inc.

When it was built, the Coconut Grove Playhouse was an extraordinary example of the style that relied on architectural prototypes from around the Mediterranean Sea. The design became the preeminent choice for architecture in South Florida during the Florida Land Boom of the 1920s. At the time, journalists described it as “Spanish,” “Spanish Rococo,” and even as “Domestic Spanish type produced in Valencia and Catalonia along the shores of the Mediterranean Sea during the 15th century.”

In an article entitled “The New Mediterranean Architecture of Florida,” written by Matlack Price and published in the June 1925 edition of *House Beautiful*, the author describes the style that became the pre-eminent choice for buildings in Florida during the Land Boom of the 1920s. He begins by describing the Spanish-derivative forms in California, specifically referencing the Mission Revival, and then continues to Arizona and Texas to describe Pueblo designs.

It is Mr. Price’s contention that the “Mediterranean style” is a composite of the trends occurring in California and the West that has a singular character expressed only in Florida, and particularly the Greater Miami area. He states:

It might be said that the architects of Coral Gables recognized, as California recognized, the rightful heritage of Spain, but they did not confine their vision, and scanning the shores of the Mediterranean perceived certain elements of Italian architecture could be effectively blended with Spanish, and that there were other lands on the horizon, as well, lands full of excellent architectural material.

When Mr. Price spoke of “other lands on the horizon,” he was referring to Italy, the French and Italian Riviera, as well as the Northern Coast of Africa, which had a rich Moorish heritage.

The Mediterranean Revival style was not limited to Florida, but finds examples across the country, notably in California, Arizona, and Texas. Contemporary architectural historians have differed in their choice of names for this Florida phenomenon, but all agree that there is an eclecticism that capitalizes on a number of design traditions.

Virginia and Lee McAlester, in their best seller *A Field Guide to American Architecture*, begin their explanation with a section entitled “Eclectic Houses 1880–1940.” They then call out variants of what has been generically called Mediterranean Revival. They include the following styles: Italian Renaissance, Mission, Spanish Eclectic, Monterey, and Pueblo Revival.

Professor David Gebhard, in his article for the *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* entitled “The Spanish Colonial Revival in Southern California,” provides a simpler explanation. He states that in the broader application, the style is best called “Spanish Colonial Revival.” He then notes that

the Spanish Colonial Revival had two distinctive variations, first the Mission Revival and later the Mediterranean Revival.

In South Florida historians are comfortable with the stylistic identity of Mediterranean Revival. The Coconut Grove Playhouse is indeed a particularly fine example. The hallmarks of the Mediterranean Revival style include masonry construction with broad areas of uninterrupted surfaces covered with stucco that is frequently textured; cast stone or concrete ornament, typically reserved for the embellishment of windows and doorways; a combination of roof slopes including flat, gabled and sometimes hipped; the use of arcades, loggias, and colonnades to provide sheltering, yet open areas; the juxtaposition of one and two stories; clay barrel tile roofing; awnings; decorative ceramic tiles; and wrought iron accents.

The Coconut Grove Playhouse expresses the style of the Mediterranean Revival in its dramatic entrance portal, which is emphasized by the use of cast ornament that continues to the third floor. The spiral or twisted columns and the classically-inspired entablature that runs above the entrance doorway are also characteristic of the style. The loggias on each side of the theater express a key concept of the Mediterranean Revival style as they allow an open, yet sheltered area that maximizes the opportunity to be outdoors.

Richard Kiehnel (1870–1944) studied at the University of Breslau (Germany) and L'Ecole Nationale des Beaux Arts. In 1906, he began a practice with John B. Elliott in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Kiehnel was named as the designer, and apparently Mr. Elliot dealt with the construction end of the projects. His first commission in Florida came in 1916 when John Bindley, President of Pittsburgh Steel, decided to build a home in Coconut Grove. The home, dubbed "El Jardin," was completed in 1917.

Some architectural critics note that El Jardin is one of the earliest, if not the earliest, Mediterranean Revival designs in South Florida. The home, now a part of the Carrolton School for Girls complex, fronts directly on Biscayne Bay, and is a magnificent Italian Renaissance palace featuring a wealth of picturesque design detail, including the highly intricate Spanish Churrigueresque ornament associated with Baroque architects Jose, Joaquin and Alberto Churriguera. Their lavish surface ornamentation, that some call "over decoration," was a hallmark of the Spanish Baroque style, and can frequently be seen in the works of Richard Kiehnel.

An obituary published in the *Miami Daily News* noted:

It is with deep regret that the *Miami Daily News* notes the passing of Richard Kiehnel, one of the most gifted architects of his time, monuments to his genius are the many prominent Miami buildings he designed. Other architects were quick to follow his leadership in design, thus he may truly be called the father of Miami's distinctive architecture.

Kiehnel's designs include:

The Scottish Rite Temple	471 NW 3 rd Street, Miami
Coral Gables Congregational Church	3010 DeSoto Boulevard, Coral Gables
Miami Senior High School	2450 SW 1 st Street, Miami
Rollins College	Multiple Buildings, Winter Park
Shorecrest Hotel	1535 Collins Avenue, Miami Beach

Alfred Browning Parker (1916–) is the architect who made the change from Richard Kiehnel’s Mediterranean movie palace interiors to the stark modernity that characterized his own era. Parker, considered one of the outstanding and precedent-setting architects from the 1950s and beyond, was in fact a contemporary of Kiehnel and, at one time, they both were associated with the magazine *Florida Architecture and Allied Arts*. In 1935, Kiehnel was the first publisher of the magazine, and he served on the editorial board until his death. In 1947, Parker became a member of the editorial staff along with Kiehnel, Robert Law Weed, Robert M. Little, Wahl Snyder, G. Clinton Gamble, and Frederick G. Seelman.

Alfred Browning Parker received his B.S. in Architecture at the University of Florida in 1939. He served as an associate professor at the school from 1942 until 1946, the year he began his architectural practice in Miami.

Parker was certainly aware of the South Florida predilection for buildings of an Art Deco or Mediterranean design. However, Parker chose to abandon any sense of historicism in his own designs, favoring instead an approach that capitalized on the environment, structure, and materials.

Parker became a leading voice in the new contemporary architecture of Florida. He was a prolific writer and expressed his opinions in the *American Institute of Architects Journal*, the *Architectural Forum*, and the *Architectural Record*. In 1965, he published *You and Architecture*, a book that dealt with good architectural design targeted at the layman.

Parker has designed residential, commercial, religious, and institutional buildings during his long career. He is probably most noted for his residential designs. In 1954, *House Beautiful* magazine chose a Parker design for its “Pace Setter House.” The 1958–59 edition of *Florida Architecture* magazine published the Don Gayer House in Coconut Grove. Here Parker separated the living and sleeping quarters with an outdoor living space.

Parker’s alterations focused on the interior of the theater. Exterior alterations were limited to the removal of the ornamental parapet in the center and side bays of the entrance and the removal of the storefronts, although the reveal of the storefronts is still present. The roofline is now straight, with ornamental tile coping terminating the wall.

Relationship to Criteria for Designation:

As stated above, the Coconut Grove Playhouse has significance in the historical and architectural heritage of the City of Miami; possesses integrity of design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling and association; and is eligible for designation under the following criteria:

3. Exemplifies the historical, cultural, political, economical, or social trends of the community.

The Coconut Grove Playhouse exemplifies the historical, cultural, economical, and social trends of Coconut Grove during the twentieth century, particularly the Boom and Bust cycles that characterize the history of Miami. The theater was built as the Coconut Grove Theater during the heyday of the 1920s real estate boom. Designed in a flamboyant "Spanish Baroque" style, the theater reflects the optimism and disposable wealth of Miami's citizens and the fascination with Mediterranean architectural precedents. Reborn in 1955 as the Miami's first live, legitimate theater, the Coconut Grove Playhouse evolved into one of the most important regional theaters in the country.

5. Embodies those distinguishing characteristics of an architectural style, or period, or method of construction.

The design of the Coconut Grove Playhouse embodies the Mediterranean Revival style, and featured a highly decorative entrance, enriched window surrounds, and decorative detail associated with the design. Despite a few alterations, the Playhouse still retains enough integrity to convey its original Mediterranean Revival style and still exhibits its major character-defining elements.

6. Is an outstanding work of a prominent designer or builder.

The Coconut Grove Playhouse is associated with two of South Florida's most prominent architects. Richard Kiehnel, who designed the original building, is considered one of South Florida's most outstanding architects. Kiehnel completed much of his work during the real estate boom of the 1920s, but also went on to make contributions into the 1930s and 1940s. As editor of the publication *Florida Architecture and the Allied Arts*, Kiehnel also influenced generations of new architects. Alfred Browning Parker is considered an outstanding living architect whose work is more aptly described as "Modernist." Parker remodeled the interior of the theater, dramatically changing its style from a highly decorative Mediterranean Revival *tour de force* to a building that reflected the "clean," unornamented, geometrically defined architecture of the era to which he belonged.

III. DESCRIPTION

Present and Original Appearance:

Setting:

The Coconut Grove Playhouse is located on the northwest corner of Main Highway and Charles Avenue. The main entrance is canted at the junction of the two streets. A parking lot is located immediately to the north.

The building has a zero-foot lot line, and is directly adjacent to the sidewalk.

Original Appearance:

A *Miami Herald* article, dated January 1, 1927, announced the grand opening of the Coconut Grove Theater. The physical description of the theater in the article was quite detailed and allows a thorough understanding of the subsequent changes.

In addition to the theater, which could seat 1,500 patrons, the building housed seven storefronts on the ground floor, ten offices on the second story, and apartments on the third story. The mass of the building was arranged as two wings that hugged the sidewalk, bridged by the highly ornamental entrance bay, which was canted at the corner.

The entrance bay was intended to be the focus of the composition, and was recessed from the two wings at the corner, lending it even greater prominence. The ground floor featured cast concrete spiral columns that framed the entrance to the lobby and terminated in an elaborate cornice. Above it, the cast treatment extended only to the three windows in the center bay. The third floor was dressed in elaborate window surrounds in anticipation of the termination of the building, an elaborately shaped parapet that extended well beyond the roof. The division of each floor was emphasized by a projecting stringcourse that extended around to the sides of the building.

The design by Kiehnel and Elliott maximized the year-round Florida climate. On each side of the theater, the architects created a loggia, or patio, eight feet in width that was framed by arches with panels containing ornamental wrought iron grilles. A fountain element banked in lush greenery was a focal point on both sides of the patio.

The ornamentation of the sidewalls was purposefully simpler. On the ground floor, the rectangular storefronts were spaced evenly across the sides, with their only embellishment a striped canvas awning. The second floor was left unadorned, with only the rhythm of the casement windows enlivening the space. The third floor was the most decorated with a tripartite arrangement of windows, featuring

an elaborate cast surround that mimicked the ornament of the front entrance, placed intermittently across the façades.

Present Appearance:

In 1955, Coconut Grove architect Alfred Browning Parker was hired by then-owner George Engle to redesign the theater. The great majority of the exterior of the building, however, remains as it did when first designed. The most obvious change is the loss of the ornamental parapet in the center and side bays of the entrance. The roofline is now straight, with ornamental tile coping terminating the wall.

Although the entrance bay originally terminated in an elaborately shaped parapet, **the building still expresses its Spanish identity by the flat roof and barrel tile coping that extends across the now unadorned parapet and the original cast ornament surrounds.** The storefronts were removed, although the original reveal remains.

Additions:

Although somewhat inconclusive, a comparison of available building records, photographs, and newspaper clippings seems to reveal that what had previously been freestanding, independent buildings were incorporated into the main theater building sometime in the early 1970s. A one-story hyphen connects the north wall of the theater with a two-story building that fronts on Main Highway and the adjacent parking lot immediately north.

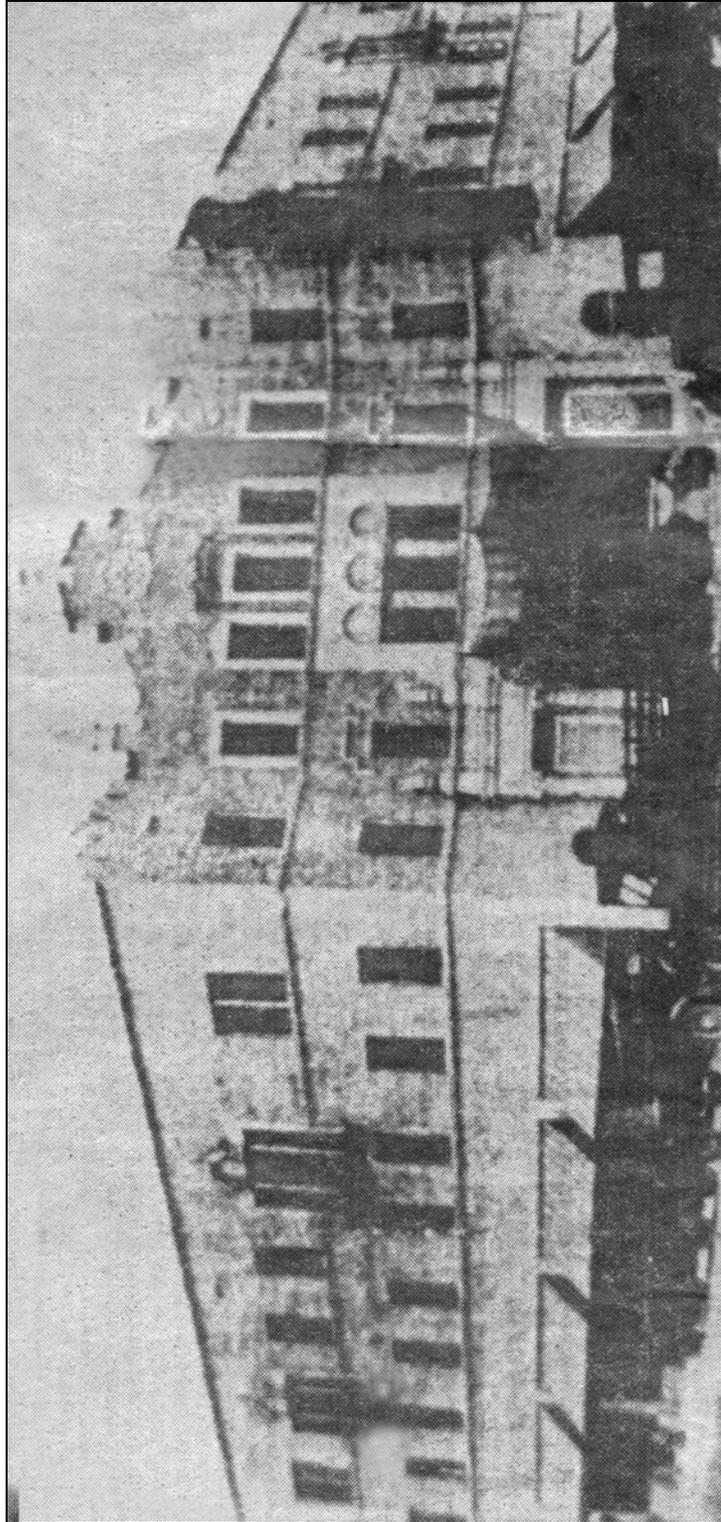
These one- and two-story buildings seem out of character with the original theater building, as the treatment of the connecting bay on Main Highway, while maintaining the rhythm of the bays, is fenestrated with a geometrically disproportionate window. The narrow windows of the second story of the end building also seem not to reflect the proportions of the original building, and the rustication of the exterior appears as an incongruous element.

Contributing Structures and/or Landscape Features:

Contributing structures within the site include the Coconut Grove Playhouse itself. **Only the south and east facades possess architectural significance.** There are no contributing landscape features.



Coconut Grove Playhouse
3500 Main Highway
South and southeast façades
2002



Coconut Grove Playhouse
3500 Main Highway
South and southeast façades
1927

IV. PLANNING CONTEXT

Present Trends and Conditions:

The Coconut Grove Playhouse ranks high among the landmark buildings in Coconut Grove, along with the Plymouth Congregational Church and The Barnacle (Commodore Ralph Monroe Estate). The previously mentioned buildings represent the nineteenth century pioneering era and the early twentieth century, when Coconut Grove was a sleepy residential enclave. The Playhouse is one of the very few remaining structures in downtown Coconut Grove that typify the flamboyant and frenetic era of the real estate boom of the 1920s.

When the State of Florida transferred ownership of the Playhouse to the Coconut Grove Playhouse LLC Inc. in 2004, it paved the way for the next phase in the evolution of the property. In order to provide a long-term endowment for the theater, the Playhouse has announced its intention to team with a developer to preserve as much of the exterior of the theater as possible, while constructing a new theater, condominiums, and a parking garage on the site.

Preservation Incentives:

Because of the nonprofit status of the Coconut Grove Playhouse LLC Inc., most historic preservation tax incentives are not applicable. The Playhouse, however, has been approved for \$15 million from the 2004 Miami-Dade County General Obligation Bond program. These bond funds will be paired with \$5 million from a previous bond issue to fund a program to restructure the Playhouse.

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