

Letter to the Editor

Coral Gables is an oasis of many styles

To the Editor:

On behalf of the Historic Preservation Association of Coral Gables (HPACG) Board of Directors, please allow us the opportunity to address the many inaccuracies in the article by Freddy Balsera [*Coral Gables News*, Jan. 21, 2020].

Let's start from the beginning.

In Mr. Balsera's opening paragraph, he states that this is the first time "a ranch style home [will] be designated historic." This is incorrect. The City of Coral Gables has historically designated at least two other Ranch style structures: 915 Bayamo Ave. and 625 Candia Ave.

The author also adds that "the historic preservation staff is seeking to designate a home built in 1937 and stop the new owners from demolishing" and that "the move for designation came only after it was purchased."

In answer to the above, please know that the 1937 home is not just any home. It is a Russell Pancoast custom-designed home with a unique blend of Art Deco elements that were incorporated into a new architectural style now known as Ranch. In fact, the Pancoast home was a precursor to the Ranch style.

At the time, Pancoast was creating something new that had not been designed before. The home was so innovative in its design that it made the pages of the 1938 Miami Herald "Book of Homes" publication. The home is described as a Modern Florida-Style Bungalow "with no precedent."

As for the implication that the "move for designation came after it was purchased" — this is not a fair statement. The real estate listing at the time of the Pancoast sale disclosed that the home had the potential for historical designation. The actual listing stated: "Take advantage of the opportunity to restore this Art Deco 1937 gem to its original charm. This beautiful home may qualify for historical designation..."

Yes, it is a fact that the "City rules essentially allow historic designation to be sought if a property is over 50 years old." The City of Coral Gables Historic Preservation Ordinance has among its requirements that the property initially be at least 50 years old or older and meet one of several criteria including whether or not the property possesses sufficient historical, cultural, aesthetic or architectural significance to qualify. Properties that are 50 years and older do not

automatically qualify for historic landmark status.

The article continues by observing that the "The introduction of [Ranch] style... represented defiance by residents at the time to Merrick's insistence on Spanish Mediterranean architecture..." Again, please note that this particular Pancoast home had no precedent as described in the Miami Herald publication referenced above and could not be "introduced as Ranch" nor did the style represent "defiance by residents" because simply Ranch style [as we know it today] did not exist. At the time the home was designed, architect Russell Pancoast was creating a custom home with a unique style.

The maverick architect designed this home between 1936 and 1937 when little construction was occurring in South Florida due to the Depression, and it became a trendsetter. With this design, he blended Art Deco elements into a sprawling one-story design.

Pancoast was one of South Florida's most prominent architects and has become known as the "Dean of Miami Architects" for his lifetime of achievements in design and innovation. He was one of the leading architects that helped to develop a local subtropical modern design philosophy. Pancoast also designed two of Miami Beach's greatest landmarks: The Bass Museum and the Surf Club.

The statement "Merrick's insistence on Spanish Mediterranean architecture..." is a stretch. George Merrick was an innovator of architectural style. Coral Gables architecture does not begin and end with Mediterranean. Yes, Merrick, founder of Coral Gables, did envision a predominant architectural style, influenced by the Mediterranean style, yet, Merrick also provided for thematic "villages" to highlight other architectural styles, and today we have the Italian Village, Chinese Village, Dutch South African Village, Pioneer Village, French City Village, French Country Village, and the French Normandy Village.

Had there not been a collapse of the real estate market in the late 1920s, George Merrick's vision also would have provided for a Mexican Hacienda Village, a Spanish Mission Village, a Persian Village, an African Bazaar Village, a Tangier Village, and a Neapolitan Baroque Village. Bungalow and Arts and Crafts styles also were used in early coral rock structures such as 1032 Coral Way.

The statement that "Ranch style homes are not emblematic of Coral Gables nor are they

original to Coral Gables" is correct. Ranch style homes are not original to Coral Gables, but the Pancoast home is and it is "without precedent." Pancoast created a new style, period. The Ranch style was developed in California and inspired by earlier Spanish architecture of the state — an inspiration shared in Florida architecture. The Ranch style blends well with the earlier Spanish style homes that are the antecedent to the Ranch style such as the 1937 Pancoast custom-designed home.

The article goes on to state that "To now say that these homes are characteristic of Coral Gables and should be protected is absurd." First, the debate is about one unique home not a cluster of homes. Second, as explained in an earlier paragraph, the 1937 home in question is historically significant not for its style, but for its lack of "characteristic" or style at the time that it was designed. The Pancoast home was built pre-war and bucked the trend of the times. Third, to equate the issue that "protect[ion] is absurd" is to deny the city's decades-long Historic Preservation Ordinance.

Additionally, the author goes on to add: "This debate is not simply about one home and, in reality, [it] presents a...risk [in] the future of real estate values... thus directly impacting...Real estate [crashes]..." This debate is "simply about one home" and its unique distinctive architecture designed by a prominent architect. Each structure that is designated (or not designated) is assessed individually and no order has been given to designate all or no buildings of any one particular style. In Coral Gables, residents enjoy landmark structures built in a variety of recognized architectural styles.

Another misconception is that historic properties contribute to real estate "crashes." According to the National Trust for Historic Preservation, historic properties appreciate at rates greater than the local market overall as well as faster than similar, non-designated properties.

Again, this is not "The first ever historic designation of a ranch style home" and it is false to claim that "homes [that] turn 50 in Coral Gables and will be eligible for historic designation based on that factor alone." As explained above, at least two other ranch structures have been designated as historic in Coral Gables: 915 Bayamo Ave. and 625 Candia Ave., and properties that are 50 years and older do not automatically qualify for historic landmark status. See Coral Gables Historic Preservation Ordinance.

The statement, "This is an illogical and unjustified overreach by the Historic Preservation department ..." must be put in context. The Preservation Department exists to uphold the city's Historic Preservation Ordinance first established in 1973. Preservation is not a zero sum game and it should not be weighed against how many buildings are saved versus how many are sacrificed. The key word is preservation and yes every opportunity that presents itself to preserve a community's historic nature [whether private or public] should trigger the same reaction: protect the historic integrity of the resource rather than destroy it.

Another statement: "The Commission should also evaluate the utter lack of fairness with the existing process residents are subject to when staff seeks a historic designation... [it is]

patently unfair because city staff has no limitations in their pursuits," is made by someone who is not familiar with the designation process.

Residents living in a historic city usually choose it because of the fact that it is historic. Staff is not running amok seeking historic designation. It is the norm not the exception in a city with a historic character. For example, Coral Gables states that its zoning code is the main document that "preserves the distinctive historic and architectural character of the municipality" and the nine-member quasi-judicial Historic Preservation Board has a directive to "preserve and protect historic or architecturally worthy buildings, structures, sites, quaint neighborhoods and artifacts which impart a distinct historical heritage of the city." This process is not "an utter lack of fairness" nor "patently unfair" as the author suggests. Living in Coral Gables includes living with "historical heritage."

In addition, the statement, "There should also be a mechanism for a property buyer to know upfront if the city is contemplating historic designation before they make a financial investment" must be weighed against the information the buyer had before the purchase of the Pancoast property: No. 1: The real estate listing disclosed that the home had the potential for historical designation; No. 2: The listing was managed by a licensed Realtor whose fiduciary duty is transparency on all the issues associated with the listed property including age and potential historical significance; No. 3: It is also the responsibility of any buyer to be as informed as possible before closing on any financial transaction as in "Buyer Beware."

The statement the author repeatedly makes about "the static 50-year-old criterion that by itself qualifies for historic preservation" is a misconception no matter how many times it is uttered. The City of Coral Gables' Historic Preservation Ordinance *does not* designate solely on a property's age. The property must meet one of several criteria to qualify for historic designation including historical, cultural, aesthetic or architectural significance. Properties 50 years and older *do not* automatically qualify for historic landmark status.

In order for a property 50 years or older to qualify as historically significant, it must first go through rigorous research by city staff. Their findings may or may not qualify a property as historic. If staff finds the property to meet at least one of the criteria for designation, staff presents the research to the Historic Preservation Board. This nine-member board has quasi-judicial powers to accept or deny designation. Only an appeal to the commission can overturn a decision by this board. Staff does not have limitless power. They have no power at all when it comes to officially designating a property historic. Staff presents their findings. The board seals the deal.

Finally, one statement made by Mr. Balsera we can all agree on is that, "Everyone is in favor of protecting our architectural treasures." The Pancoast home is certainly one of those architectural treasures that need protection.

Signed:

The Board of Directors, Historic Preservation Association of Coral Gables