

FLORIDA BUILDINGS I LOVE: No. 82: Freedom Tower, 1925, Miami

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Miami is a city of architecturally exciting towers, and perhaps the most distinctive, and historic, is one of its oldest.

Freedom Tower was built in 1925 as the Miami News and Metropolis Building at the height of the Florida Land Boom. This was a time when the Sunday editions of Miami's newspapers had upwards of 500 pages, most of them chock-full with real estate advertisements. The News' printing press, located in the building along with the newsroom and advertising departments, was basically printing money.

Flush with cash, the News hired one of America's legendary architecture firms to design its new building. Schultze & Weaver designed, at the peak of the boom, the Biltmore Hotel in Coral Gables and The Breakers in Palm Beach. Based in New York, S&W also designed the famous Waldorf Astoria. George A. Fuller was the firm's lead designer on the Miami project.

As at the Biltmore, Fuller was inspired by the Giralda Cathedral Bell Tower in Seville, Spain. Mediterranean Revival detailing adorns the tower, which is 255 feet tall.

The News stayed in the building until 1957, when it moved into a new building on the Miami River. But, in an early example of adaptive reuse, the tower was used by the federal government from 1962 to 1974 as a reception center for Cuban refugees. Such was its status as an icon for freedom-loving Cubans that it became known as the 'Ellis Island of the South.'

In 1997, the building was purchased by businessman Jorge Mas Canosa, who restored it as a monument to Cuban refugees. Developer Pedro Martin of Terra Group bought it in 2004, but his plan to build a high-rise condo on the site, while preserving the tower, was opposed by preservationists. Eventually, Martin donated the property to Miami Dade College, which uses the structure as an art museum and cultural center on its Wolfson Campus.

How does a building survive a century in downtown Miami's supercharged real estate market, where distinctive new towers pop up like mushrooms on cool, wet mornings? Look no further than Vitruvius' definition of good architecture as having commodity, firmness and delight.

The useful, strong and beautiful Freedom Tower has all three in full measure.

'Florida Buildings I Love' is Harold Bubil's homage to the Sunshine State's built environment. This article originally ran on July 7, 2018.

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Freedom Tower, now a museum at Miami-Dade College, was built in 1925 as the

Freedom Tower, now a museum at Miami-Dade College, was built in 1925 as the headquarters of The Miami News. Harold Bubil/sarasota herald-tribune

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