
Dade-Commonwealth Building

139 NE 1st Street

Designation Report



Historic and Environmental Preservation Board

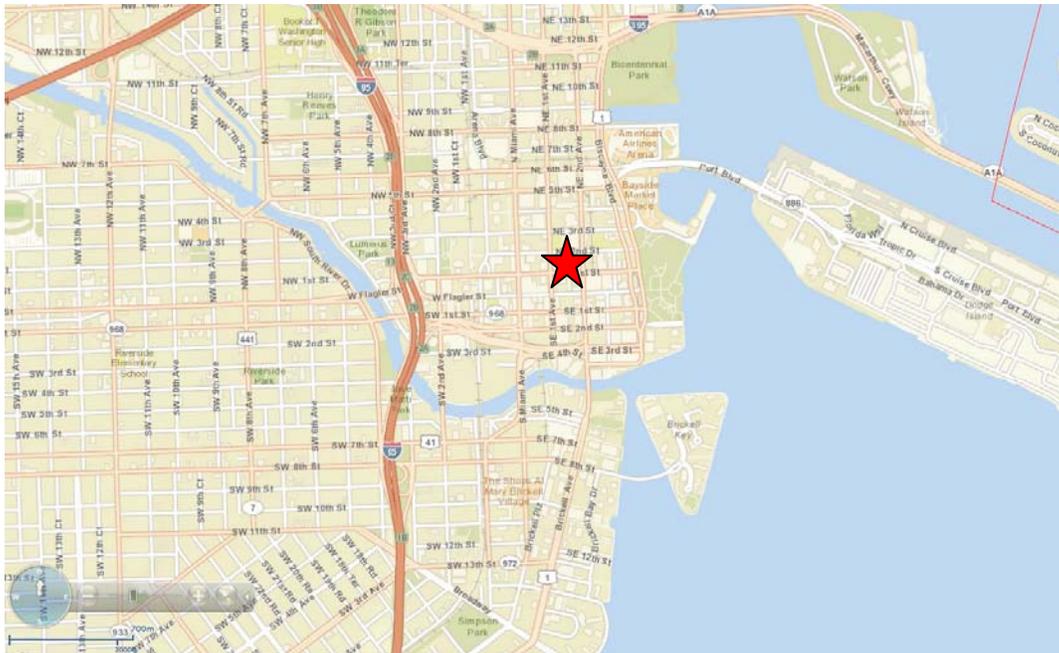


City of Miami

REPORT OF THE CITY OF MIAMI
PRESERVATION OFFICER
TO THE HISTORIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL PRESERVATION BOARD
ON THE DESIGNATION OF THE
DADE-COMMONWEALTH BUILDING
AS A HISTORIC RESOURCE

Written by Marina Novaes
July 2013

Location and site maps



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I- General Information

Historic Name: Meyer-Kiser Building

Current Name: Dade-Commonwealth Building

Date of Construction: 1925

Architect: Unknown

Builder: Unknown

Location: 139 NE 1st Street (within Downtown Miami Historic District)

Present Owner: Titan Development Partners LLC

Present use: Office Building

Zoning: T6- 80- O

Folio No.: 01-0110-040-1100

Boundary (Legal Description): MIAMI NORTH PB B-41 E1/2 OF LOT 15 & W1/2 OF LOT 16 BLK
104 LOT SIZE 50.000 X 150 OR 21131-3691 0303 1 OR 21131-
3691 0303 00

Setting: The Dade-Commonwealth Building is located in the Downtown Miami Historic District. The building sits on NE 1st Street in the middle of the block between NE 1st and 2nd Avenues, on the north side of the street. The building is across the street from Shoreland Arcade building which is also listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

Integrity: The Dade-Commonwealth Building possesses integrity of setting, feeling, design, association, craftsmanship, materials, and location.

II- Statement of Significance

The years of 1924, 1925, and 1926 were phenomenal for the City of Miami. The most spectacular real estate boom of modern times transformed Miami from a sleepy little town on the edge of Biscayne Bay into the "Magic City" of skyscrapers and legendary real estate profits.¹

Miami's real estate boom reached its climax in the summer of 1925 but, as early as spring 1923, the city started to experience a steady increase in the volume of building permits that reached an astonishing amount of one million dollars a month achieving the mark of four million in one single month in August 1923.²

Before long, downtown was one large construction site. In 1925, as the ten-story height restriction was removed from the city's building code, several high-rise started to go up, the seventeen-story Meyer-Kiser, today's Dade-Commonwealth Building among them. The steel frame was the newest technology adopted after the Chicago Fire, this technology made possible higher buildings with non-load-bearing walls - "skyscrapers."³

The "Commercial Style" was the preferred style for the new skyscrapers. Developed by the Chicago School, the style consisted of a base, main body, and projecting cornice. Miami buildings, although not true representatives of the Chicago School, did use the steel frame structural system and the three-part classical composition.⁴

The Miamian of November 1925 stated:

Twelve office buildings, averaging fifteen stories in height, are under construction in the business section of Miami, while plans for two others larger than any now under construction have been announced, according to a survey recently completed. Workmen are busy night, and day rushing the construction to completion in order to provide adequate office space for the city's ever increasing business population. Practically all of the buildings are of steel construction.⁵

The Congress, Olympia, Dade County Courthouse, Bank of Bay Biscayne (Biscayne Building), Huntington, Miami Bank (City National Bank), First Trust and Savings, First National Bank, Seybold, and Meyer-Kiser buildings were completed or in the path of completion by the end of 1925. The Shoreland [Arcade] completed its first phase of two stories high building base, and it was planned to have twenty stories added in a second phase which never happened. The Baptist Church was also planned to have twenty three stories and be a combination of church and office building when completed becoming the tallest building in Florida, but the second phase never took place as well.⁶

¹ Ballingn, Kenneth. "Miami Millions – The Story of the 1925 Florida Land Boom and How it Turned into a Boomerang". 1936.

² Ibid.

³ Rodriguez, Ivan A. "From Wilderness to Metropolis – The History and Architecture of Dade-County (1825-1940)." Franklin Press, Inc. 1982.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Anonymous. "Twelve Skyscrapers Being Built Here" The Miamian, Vol. VI, no. 6. November 1925.

⁶ Ibid.

In downtown Miami, there were new banks, new offices, government buildings, retail business, hotels and apartments. Flagler Street became the main street and soon was blooming with new businesses such as the new Burdine and Quarterman's store. The demand for public services grew as well; the City Commission approved an expenditure budgeted in the amount of \$1,574,354.62 for 1924. In the list of improvements promised were: secure pure water with municipal ownership of the plant; provide for sewage disposal and necessary sewer extension; deepen the ship canal; build a railroad to the West Coast; complete the Tamiami Trail; and completion and beautification of the Bayfront property [park].⁷ In 1925, the City of Miami decided to spend about \$6,000,000 in public works approving an incinerator, a public market, street widening, sewers, docks, parks, and a hospital.⁸

Miami's population more than doubled in a five year span from 1920 to 1925, and the prices of plots of land could double or triple in a day during the height of the boom.⁹ Suddenly, Miami was on the front page of the leading newspapers nationwide.

Amongst the new businesses attracted to the region was the Meyer-Kiser Bank of Indiana that financed the seventeen-story building on Northeast First Street, which was named Meyer-Kiser Building after the financial institution that also became its principal tenant. The Corporation included besides the services usually ascribed to banks; a bond department; a real estate mortgage department; a department engaged in the financing, supervision of the erecting and final management of buildings; an engineering department and an insurance department; one of the most complete financial institutions of the time, according to Sol Meyer, its president.¹⁰

Sol Meyer was born in Fort Recovery, Ohio on October 22, 1866. At age 14, he became a telegraph operator for the Lake Erie & Western Railroad, eventually working in the same capacity for the Western Union Telegraph Company in Portland and Richmond, IN and the Pennsylvania Railroad in Richmond, IN. He arrived in Indianapolis in 1888, as an accountant for the Pennsylvania Railroad working there until 1893, when he retired to start a career in banking. In 1896, he and a cousin Sol S. Kiser established the Meyer-Kiser Corporation, which handled real estate, insurance, loan and investments. Ultimately, the Indianapolis based Meyer-Kiser Bank was formed in 1906, with Sol Meyer as President.¹¹

Sol Meyer was considered a financial genius; he was brought to Miami by Frank Shutts who was also from Indiana and editor of the Miami Herald. Meyer agreed to finance the seventeen-story skyscraper and establish the Meyer-Kiser bank in the new building. Meyer, who never made a mortgage unless he backed it with full protection against

⁷ Sessa, Frank B. "Miami on the Eve of the Boom: 1923" Tequesta series.

⁸ Ballingn, Kenneth. "Miami Millions – The Story of the 1925 Florida Land Boom and How it Turned into a Boomerang". 1936.

⁹ Rodriguez, Ivan A. "From Wilderness to Metropolis – The History and Architecture of Dade-County (1825-1940)." Franklin Press, Inc. 1982.

¹⁰ Anonymous. "Meyer-Kiser Opens Doors of New Home." Miami Daily News, March 3, 1926.

¹¹ Berkson, Tiffany B. "A House History: 4122 North Meridian Street." Meridian Street Foundation newsletter, winter 2010.

natural disasters due to his experience with tornadoes in Indiana, insisted his mortgage be protected by wind insurance which proved his genius later on.¹²

The Meyer-Kiser bank was also a pioneer in attracting business of employed or self-employed women under the rubric of "businesswomen." The bank launched a campaign which consisted mostly of streetcar cards featuring longtime bank employee Blessing Fisher; the card would have the following text next to her image: "I am a woman banker. It is my business to help you women who are wage-earners." Fisher had been with the bank since its opening, as assistant to the president, and this gave her wide experience in banking matters, especially legal affairs. The bank took advantage of her expertise and gender putting her in charge of the women clientele.¹³ Many other banks followed Meyer-Kiser's lead.

The Meyer-Kiser building was owned by Jerry Galatis and Locke Highleyman, who was the "good-luck charm" in the partnership. Highleyman was essentially a real estate investor; he established the Palm Island Club, an elegant gambling house off MacArthur Causeway which made him well known and wealthy. It was Highleyman who persuaded Galatis to build a skyscraper in downtown, they planned the seventeen-story building faced with white marble, Roman columns, and as the final touch, four "ugly" eagles along the second-story ledge supposedly meant to look protective but threatening all who entered the imposing portals instead, said The Miami News' article. The partners also ordered the architect to place a shapely figure of justice above the door to attract law firms as new tenants for the upper floors.¹⁴

At the time of its construction, the Meyer-Kiser Building was thought to be one of the sturdiest and most imposing structures in downtown Miami at a height of seventeen stories. The building was said to be "another imposing monument to Miami's progress and permanency." It was one of the first steel frame buildings to contain an elevator.¹⁵

On March 3, 1926, The Meyer-Kiser Building opened its doors at 139 NE First Street. The Miami Daily News covered the bank's opening event:

The entire motif of the architecture of the bank faithfully follows out the Spanish atmosphere and design, even the grating of the tellers' windows and the wrought iron fence dividing the main banking room from the safe deposit vaults, being done in a dull copper finish, giving them an old, corroded appearance.

Henry Behrens of Indianapolis, who executed the mural decorations, and Martin Hampton of Martin L. Hampton associates, who originated the architectural motif, have carried their work through to the last detail, giving to Miami one of the most beautiful and finished banking quarters in the south, in the belief of the bank's officials.

¹² Ash, Agnes. "17 Stories, and 10 of Them are Fiction" History Section. The Miami News, August 8, 1965.

¹³ Germain, Richard. "Dollars Through the Doors: A Pre-1930 History of Bank Marketing in America." Greenwood Publishing Group, 1996.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Eaton, Sarah and Welcher, Vicky L. "Meyer-Kiser Building". National Register Nomination Report. October, 1988. (NRHP)

On either side of the main banking room which is 125 by 50 feet, are the tellers' cages, officers' departments and quarters for the bond and security departments. These are divided from the center corridor by a series of nine arches on either side, finished with a special rough plaster, with ornate designs.

Above and accessible from the main banking room, is the mezzanine floor, where will be located offices of four other departments. Over these two, floors will be centered the banking and other activities.¹⁶

Nonetheless, the euphoria of the boom was about to be shaken. On September 18, 1926, a massive hurricane hit Miami. At least 114 died and thousands were left homeless. The city, especially along the waterfront, was flattened by the winds of 132 miles an hour and tidal surge. The monster storm passed west through Miami and out into the Gulf of Mexico, later striking Pensacola, the area north of New Orleans and on into Texas.¹⁷

Miami was never the same. The Meyer-Kiser building was one of the most damaged buildings in downtown, "it was in shambles – the most visible victim of a killer hurricane that shattered boom time Miami."¹⁸ According to The Miami News, "The twisted steel superstructure was one of the most appalling sights in a graveyard of ruined architectural masterpieces. Miami's citizens could no longer boast of a skyline that resembled Manhattan. They could, however, compare it to San Francisco after the quake."¹⁹

Fortunately for Galatis and Highleyman (and thanks to Sol Meyer), the building carried wind insurance and the owners received the largest damage payment in Florida history at that time, a check in the amount of \$675,000.²⁰

With a damaged building and the certainty that it would be a long time before Miami real estate values would recover, Galatis and Highleyman decided not to repair the top ten floors of the building even though the structure was sound. They knew that after the storm, tenants would be scarce for a long time to come and so, it made no sense to put a large amount of money into the building. They removed the upper ten stories, added a fancy cupola to the top of the seventh floor and washed the gritty plaster of the face of justice and the beaks of the eagles.²¹

The Meyer-Kiser Corporation found quarters somewhere else but for a short period of time; the bank failed in the stock market crash of 1929. Several other companies became the prime tenant of the Meyer-Kiser building, among them the Kennedy and Ely Insurance, the American National Bank in 1936, and in 1944, the Dade-Commonwealth Title and Abstract Co., which had been occupying space on the fifth and sixth floors and moved to the street level to replace American Bank, which had

¹⁶ Anonymous. "Meyer-Kiser Opens Doors of New Home." Miami Daily News, March 3, 1926.

¹⁷ Kleinberg, Howard. "Miami - The way we were." Miami Daily News Inc. 1985.

¹⁸ Kleinberg, Howard. "The Building that went Topless." Miami Daily News, July 11, 1987

¹⁹ Ash, Agnes. "17 Stories, and 10 of Them are Fiction" History Section. The Miami News, August 8, 1965.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

been absorbed by First National Bank.²² The building still carries the Corporation's name even though the Company has been long gone.

Today, the seven-story building is in the slow process of rehabilitation since most of its interior features are gone. The new owner Jay V. Suarez, a partner with Titan Developers, had invested \$1million, a lot of time and dedication into the building's renovation. "The renovation process", he said, "involved bringing back sixty years of total neglect."²³

The developers adapted the bank area into a lounge in 2011, "The Bank Gallery & Lounge." The Bank Miami's venue featured four different event spaces, Gallery 139, The Vault Room, Lotus Garden, and The Capone Room.²⁴ The vault room featured the original old Meyer-Kiser vault which door weights thirty two tons, is sixteen inches thick, and has a layer of Don Steel, which is impervious to high pressure fire torches.²⁵ The lounge is no longer operating.

Gems like the vault, the salvaged and reused marble that once covered the bank's walls, the recently recovered vaulted coffered ceiling in the lobby area (totally restored), the original wrought iron gate that once divided the bank area and the vault room, and etc., are the things that get Suarez excited about the building, there is a link to the building's history in every corner.

Titan Developers has renovated more than sixty buildings in Florida, but this is the company's first historic office building; "I choose it because it was a gorgeous building. When you visualize something like this, it is very gratifying to see it come to fruition," said Suarez.²⁶

²² Kleinberg, Howard. "The Building that went Topless." Miami Daily News, July 11, 1987

²³ <http://www.bizjournals.com/southflorida/stories/2004/07/19/focus1.html?page=all>

²⁴ <http://www.meetup.com/20-and-30-somethings-in-MIAMI-Awesomeness/events/40516272/>

²⁵ Anonymous. "Meyer-Kiser Opens Doors of New Home." Miami Daily News, March 3, 1926.

²⁶ <http://www.miamitodaynews.com/news/040729/story4.shtml>

III- Description

The Dade-Commonwealth Building was originally a seventeen-story steel frame skyscraper constructed in the Commercial Style of architecture embellished with Neo Classical features. The building's structure is comprised of a steel frame sitting atop a concrete foundation. The building was ready for occupancy in December 1925, at a cost of \$ 1.2 million; not long after, a hurricane hit Miami on September 18, 1926. Consequently, the upper ten stories were removed and the building is only seven stories in height ever since. The exterior of the present building carries forth the same design of the original elevation; however, the building shaft has been reduced.²⁷

The principal elevation fronts south and is three bays wide. The side elevations contain fifteen bays across their lengths, each bay containing paired windows. The lower three floors of the main façade are characterized by four Neo Classical columns dividing the elevation into three bays. The entrance to the building was composed of an arch raising two stories in height, capped by the justice figure in a cartouche with masonry molding; today the arch and architectural features of the main entrance have been enclosed by a projecting structure covered in marble that extends from above the entrance double doors to below the third floor window.²⁸

Flanking the entrance are two storefront windows set within the end bays; the first floor portion of the composite columns were confined inside a concrete square base to anchor the storefront frames and security shutters as well as light fixtures. The four columns support an entablature located between the third and fourth floors. The entablature features golden stylized anthemion motifs at its ends, and golden letters spelling the building's name stretched in between. There are four large golden eagle sculptures atop the entablature on the same vertical axis as the columns.

Stylized spandrel panels with golden anthemion motifs separate the second and third floors' windows, and much simple spandrels are in between the windows of the upper levels. Piers extend from the entablature to the parapet which is topped with an open loggia that spans the whole extension of the building's façade and wraps the corner two bays back along the sides. The loggia is delineated by a pierced parapet wall, which once contained a decorative balustrade. A dentil band finishes the loggia top and golden urns reliefs are found atop the piers' Corinthian capital relief.

The building has been adapted and altered to accommodate different uses throughout the years so that no significant interior spaces remain. The offices are laid about a central corridor that extends from the elevators lobby in the front of the building to the rear wall.

The renovations altered significantly the building's interior which is not being considered in this designation. Only the exterior of the building will be subject to review.

²⁷ Eaton, Sarah and Welcher, Vicky L. "Meyer-Kiser Building". National Register Nomination Report. October, 1988. (NRHP)

²⁸ Ibid.

IV- Application of Criteria for Designation

The Dade-Commonwealth Building has significance as it relates to the historic heritage of Miami and possesses integrity of setting, feeling, design, association, material, craftsmanship, and location. The property is eligible for designation as a historic site under the criteria (3) and (5) as numbered in Sec. 23-4 (a), of Chapter 23 of the City Code.

(3) Exemplify the historical, cultural, political, economical, or social trends of the community;

The Dade-Commonwealth Building is historically significant for its associations with Miami's boom years and with the devastating impact of the hurricane of 1926 on the city's development.

(5) Embody those distinguishing characteristics of an architectural style, or period, or method of construction;

The Dade-Commonwealth Building is architecturally significant because it represents a fine example of the Commercial Style in downtown Miami. The building is noteworthy for its use of stylistic features unique in the city and its classically-inspired details. The building was one of the first skyscrapers to be constructed in steel frame and to have an elevator.

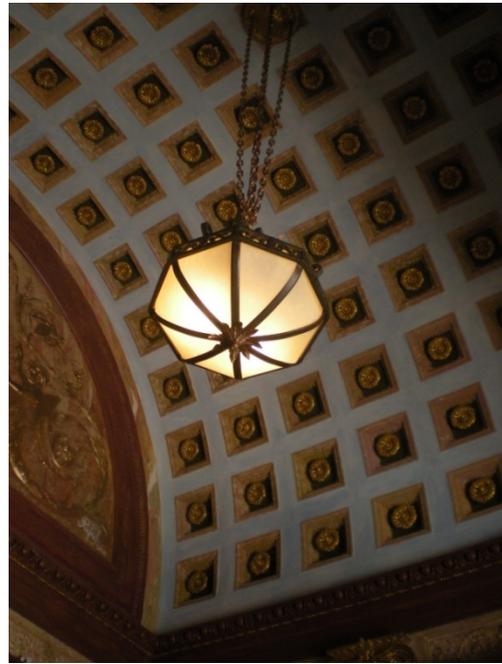
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VI- Photographs











THE BANK
VAULT LOUNGE & GALLERY
FRIDAYS
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