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News: Cover

St. Pete's most endangered buildings?

These nine need protection most, say historic preservationists.

By Alex Pickett

Editor's Pick

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Published 05.21.08

From the road, the Garden Cafeteria and Piano Exchange building looks fairly unassuming. Weeds and trees cover much of the building's Spanish mission-style facade. There is no longer a marquee. Some of the jalousie windows are smashed.

But if you peek inside the glass front doors, the building's significance becomes clearer: Colorful murals of pink flamingos, blooming flowers and a massive banyan tree adorn the walls. These murals were painted in the 1940s by George Snow Hill, a Works Progress Administration artist known for his murals that hang in the Delta terminal of the Tampa International Airport. (Hill also created a painting of black entertainers that hung in St. Pete's City Hall until a young Joe Waller, now Omali Yeshitela, destroyed it.)

But the Garden Cafeteria sits on primo land, right across the street from Baywalk. Developers plan to demolish the building, along with some of the murals, to build condos on the site.

It's a story often repeated in St. Pete's history. As the city modernizes its downtown, it struggles to hold onto its past -- because with every building boom comes the threat of demolition.

"I always thought that old houses and buildings are wonderful parts of your community," says St. Petersburg Preservation Inc. member Peter Belmont, standing in front of the Garden Cafeteria with fellow member Kai Warren. "But lots of people don't have sensitivity to the history."

Belmont and Warren have worked on preservation issues since the early-'80s, when another housing boom spawned development across the city. For years, city leaders tried to distance themselves from St. Pete's "God's Waiting Room" moniker. They removed downtown's green benches. They tore down the old Mediterranean Revival-style pier to create a more modern version. In the '80s, city government OK'd the leveling of whole downtown blocks, partly to make way for the embattled Bay Plaza project. Among the casualties was the Soreno Hotel, a 1920s Mediterranean Revival hotel similar to the Vinoy.

"They had the idea that they'd remake downtown by just demolishing downtown and starting over again," Belmont says. "It's crazy to level whole blocks of your downtown and not have the pride in your city to save important buildings."

In the last few years, as several downtown buildings have fallen to make room for condo developments, preservationists worry some of St. Pete's remaining historical structures might not survive.

The Garden Cafeteria and nine other historically significant structures are in danger of demolition. All of the buildings -- which range from one of the city's first churches to one of baseball's first spring training stadiums -- lie in the downtown region, which, ironically, is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

National designation is little more than ceremonial.

"For all intents and purposes, everything downtown is threatened," says Belmont, who along with Warren, gives historic walking tours several times a year.

Receiving local landmark status is more binding, preservationists say. Property owners of structures with local landmark designation must jump through more hoops to demolish a building.

"How can we as a community ensure that important buildings are preserved?" Belmont says. "It's by designating them as local landmarks."

City officials say preservation is one of their priorities. After all, Mayor Rick Baker wrote a book on St. Petersburg's history. Two years ago, he sponsored a Historical Preservation Summit. And in the latest land-use regulations, there are a host of incentives for property owners and developers to keep historical structures intact.

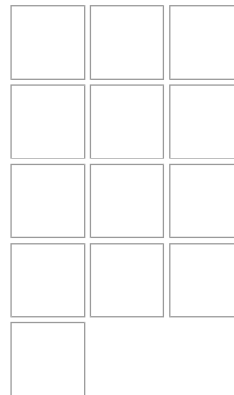
"A big part of why people love St. Pete is the quality of life of our city and our history adds to that quality of life," says Mayor Baker. "One of the big defining aspects of St. Pete's character is our historical structures."

Preservationists are not sure about the city's sincerity



Alex Pickett

HISTORY BUFFS: St. Petersburg Preservation Inc. members Kai Warren, left, and Peter Belmont, right, fear the city is losing important historical structures to development.



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