

MIAMI TODAY

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We deface our skyline and label it aesthetic 'enhancement'

Miami's iconic Gusman building, named this month one of Florida's top 100 buildings, faces in inglorious advertising cover-up by the very nonprofit foundation just formed to preserve it.

Other Miami public buildings are threatened with the same burial under advertising billboards, euphemistically termed wall murals.

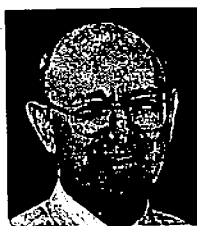
And the area downtown where the wall murals are allowed to encroach has just been give a county okay to expand, bringing still more structures into the zone permitting the massive advertising incursions.

This growing advertising blight might be okay in Times Square in New York, which lives by neon.

But in Miami, whose image is palms rather than a gritty urban core, the expansion of multi-story advertising harms not only the environment in which we all choose to live but the cityscape we present to visitors from around the globe.

Bluntly, nobody visits Miami to see how much we are like the cities they're vacationing from. Nobody buys a condo here to be in Cleveland or Pittsburgh. And nobody invests in a business here to have it surrounded by urban advertising blight.

So as government opens its doors wider and wider to multi-story wall commercials, it closes them a bit to visitors, investment and jobs.



Michael Lewis

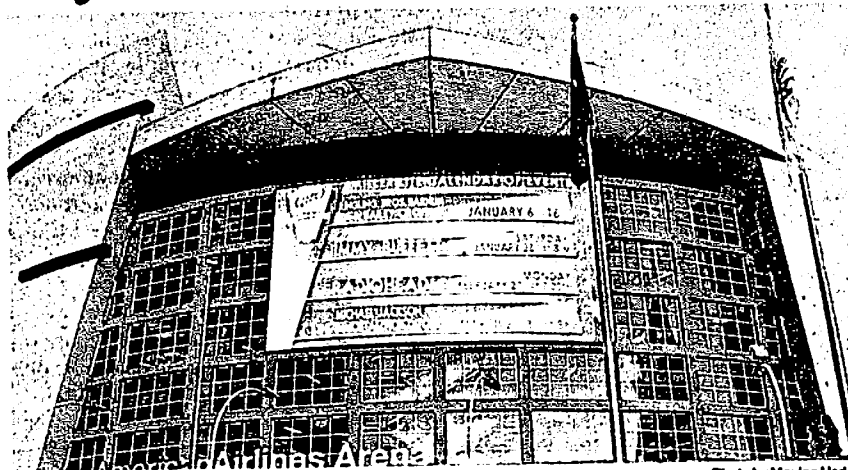


Photo by Maximo Usdan

Will historic Gusman follow American Airlines Arena's lead and cover façade with a sign?

The pittance that Miami's city government gets from wall billboard licensing can't begin to make up for our long-run losses in image and positioning around the world.

Back to the Gusman: The Florida Chapter of the American Institute of Architects just named Flagler Street's Olympia Theatre at the Gusman Center for the Performing Arts to its list of Florida's 100 best buildings. It's in the running to be chosen first in balloting now ongoing.

Meanwhile, a trust created last year and given control of the Gusman on Oct. 1 wants to finance preservation of the building by, incredibly, wrapping it in an illuminated wall advertising billboard multiple stories tall. That's how we preserve one of the state's top buildings – hide and distort its façade.

That comes just as county Mayor Carlos Gimenez is helping to lead a charge to preserve and upgrade the look of Flagler Street downtown to make it the city's prime business hub. We're working at cross-purposes.

More of the same could be on the way. The cash-strapped city is proposing wrapping all its properties that can hold 1,000 people for events in wall signs as well to raise money to keep the venues running.

It's analogous to a doctor cutting out a patient's heart to keep him going. It can't work.

Fortunately, that proposal was deferred in January and hasn't yet been put back on a commission agenda. But it's lurking out there, like an enemy in the dark waiting to attack when our

defenses are lowest.

The county this month made that attack easier. It expanded the urban zone in which the city can have the massive billboards, with sponsor Bruno Barreiro saying the city would be "aesthetically enhanced by the addition of mural sign locations."

While the legislation held the number of wall billboard signs downtown at 45, it made it easier to shift some to now-virgin locations that can be raped in the name of aesthetic enhancement.

That will be useful for the sign interests as the Miami Herald building is razed next year at the hands of new owner Genting, which plans a casino resort where it now stands. The building that will fall has two massive murals – the maximum allowed on a structure – that soon can deface two new locations.

Naturally, opening more sites to the massive billboards is good for the owners of buildings who will turn their walls into advertising media. It will be good for the sign companies. It will be good for the elected friends of both.

But it will further disfigure our skyline – the storefront of Miami as a marketplace bringing in global residents to our new housing, visitors to our hotels and job-creating investment to our economy.

By accepting a few dollars from billboards, we're slowly crowding out the reasons people visit, live and invest here.

The billboards might show massive images but they're extremely short-sighted.