

Introduction

More Than Just a Building

As this manuscript neared its completion in 2016, one of the more spirited presidential contests in the nation's history was taking place. While no overt cultural question dominated that race, it easily might have, for the issues that were debated concerning immigration, taxation, the state of the economy, and the proper distribution of government resources are tied directly to the larger implications behind the narrative shaping this book. Scarcely a quarter of a century ago, staunch conservative and influential North Carolina Senator Jesse Helms expended unprecedented political capital in attempts to abolish the National Endowment for the Arts. While the agency managed to survive, Helms's efforts diminished the NEA's budget and its workings significantly and ensured that questions regarding government support for the arts would hover ever after in the country's political consciousness.

The story of the long fight to establish a world-class county-owned performing arts center in Miami is a compelling tale of political intrigue in and of itself, offering insights into the social realities of a place whose largely immigrant makeup has been termed a bellwether for the United States. But at bedrock, the questions at the heart of this story go to the very core of what is deemed the proper role of our government and its responsibility to its citizens. It is not the intent here to provide definitive answers to such questions, but this account will hopefully lay out with clarity the manner in which one often fractious community found its own solutions.

On its most immediate level, the story of the decades-long struggle played out in an emerging city to create a dual-theater performing arts center meant to rival the Kennedy Center and the Lincoln Center in

scope and quality contains all the necessary elements of the mythic story paradigm described by noted anthropologist and social commentator Joseph Campbell. As Campbell explains, in every effective story across all cultures, an individual, motivated by the need to make his community whole in some fashion, is called to a journey toward a goal deemed impossible by many.

This individual—just like Dorothy in Oz—attracts a cadre of like-minded and able helpers to help navigate the journey, solve ensuing problems, and fight a series of battles ever-escalating in their intensity. Though there is a moment when all seems irrevocably lost, the seeker eventually prevails and sets out to return home with the prize. There will be a moment in the final stages of this journey, Campbell says, when the forces arrayed against the mission make a final attempt to crush it. In the balance hangs the answer to the question whether all effort will be for naught or if indeed the struggle will be successful and productive, not only for the seeker but for the seeker's society as a whole.

Such a structure—common to comedy, romance, and tragedy alike—has an appeal unto itself, and the presence of that timeless pattern in this material is what drew this writer to the task. However, the substance behind the structure is what determines whether the story is a mere diversion or has something to offer thoughtful readers beyond its particulars.

One goal here, of course, is to recreate the drama of the long journey toward the creation of a center for the performing arts in Miami, for this is about as unlikely a place imaginable to set about building what would become the most costly and ambitious cultural arts complex since the Kennedy Center. And Miami's performing arts center is certainly one of the most demanding and most significant public building projects ever undertaken in South Florida. In the end, the cost of what we know today as the Adrienne Arsht Center for the Performing Arts of Miami-Dade County was more than ten times that of Henry Flagler's fabled Oversea Railway from Miami to Key West, completed just short of a century earlier.

Furthermore, while Flagler's project took about twenty years to complete, from its original conception to the driving of the final spike, Miami's performing arts center was nearly thirty-five years in the making, spanning the years from the germ of its conception in 1972 to its opening

in 2006. There were a number of times, in fact, when the latter project, its costs soaring to unimaginable heights, seemed doomed. Despite its glamorous image as a tropical tourist destination, Miami, a retiree and snowbird haven for most of its existence when the performing arts center was first imagined, has never enjoyed the benefits of a broad-based economy with a cadre of philanthropically inclined corporate partners ready to be touched for such undertakings.

It also might be supposed that the diversity that has come to characterize modern Miami would have only worked against any accord on the need for such a center. How on earth could there be a “cultural center” for a place that had become so culturally divided? In the 1960s the Cuban revolution unleashed a flood tide of immigration unexperienced in the United States since hordes were overwhelming Ellis Island. And for more than half a century since, millions of immigrants from every country and dependency in the Caribbean and Latin America have poured into Miami in pursuit of the American dream, despite the region’s limited economic base.

Additionally, these new arrivals only compounded the difficulties faced by Miami’s substantial African American population, who formed the traditional backbone of a principally service-based economy. Topping off the fractiousness were the complaints of many longtime white residents who found the Spanish suddenly being spoken on “their” streets distasteful and threatening. One of the bumper stickers favored by disgruntled crackers of the 1980s was, “Will the last American leaving Miami please bring the flag?”

Those who fought for the establishment of the performing arts center were undaunted by such divisiveness, however, believing that the project constituted the very antidote to bigoted thinking and that it was a necessary investment on the part of civic leaders truly interested in the well-being of a citizenry. Such dedication requires the long view, of course, and flies in the face of political expediency.

Given all this backdrop, it should be no surprise that the creation in Miami of a world-class performing arts center should have been so difficult to pull off, nor to hear that even after the roof was on and the doors were opened, the performing arts center teetered precariously on the verge of financial collapse before its eleventh-hour salvation.

Obviously, this story embodies a political and social history of a most unusual place. But just as clearly, there is an even more significant theme, a question at the heart of the quest itself. At a time in our nation when it seems almost impossible to keep roads paved and bridges standing, police and first responders adequately trained and fully equipped, the less fortunate fed and housed, to what extent is government everywhere obligated to attend as well to the cultural needs of its citizens?

God forbid that this question had come up during the presidential debates of 2016, for there was more than enough on the candidates' plates already, but it is nonetheless an issue at the heart of this story, and it is also a question that every governmental body will inevitably debate in the years to come, for there will always be a significant number of citizens who will demand that it be.

Nor can this narrative be discounted as one singular to a strange and distant place, for as any number of commentators including Joan Didion, T. D. Allman, David Reiff, and many more have pointed out, the social and political changes that have taken place in Miami since the initial Cuban diaspora of the early 1960s are but bellwethers for every city of size in the United States. Political rhetoric aside, immigration—and all the change that comes with it—is a fact of American life, and as cities of the future debate the question at the heart of this book, the voices weighing in will be as intense and as disparate as they were during the long path to the establishment of the Arsht Center.

Michael Spring, today director of the Miami-Dade County Department of Cultural Affairs, an agency with a budget of more than \$30 million, is unequivocal in his assertion that government support for parks, libraries, museums, and the arts is essential. “These things make people’s lives better,” he says, flatly. “Donors from the private sector bear a responsibility as well, of course, but it is simply a citizen’s right to have affordable access to libraries, museums, and cultural performances.”

Furthermore, for Spring, it goes beyond rights. “Exposure to the arts can change kids’ lives,” he says. “It can make them aspire to become artists, sure, but it can also simply suggest that there is more to life than simply surviving. A play or a song can make the difference to a young person between giving up and deciding to work hard. Government contribution to the arts is not a gift; it is an investment.”

An allied perspective is evidenced in the work of Judith Rodin, former provost of the University of Pennsylvania and author of *The University and Urban Revival: Out of the Ivory Tower and into the Streets*. During her tenure at Penn (1994–2004), Rodin led what some have termed an “urban revolution,” casting her institution as the leader in revitalizing the severely distressed inner-city neighborhood of West Philadelphia, not so much through educational outreach, but by investment in retail, real estate, and cultural activity, guided by the belief that “town and gown” could develop into a rich and diverse community. Rodin’s efforts helped to redefine the traditional role of a public university and have since been cited by those who would broaden the responsibility of government institutions to include the enhancement of the quality of a citizenry’s lives.

Parker Thomson, Harvard-educated attorney and the individual who is generally credited with leading the long fight to bring a performing arts center into being in Miami, concurs that government bears a responsibility for support of things cultural, though in the case of a massive project such as the Arsht, he says, “There’s a huge responsibility on the private sector as well. In the end, something such as that has to be a full-fledged collaboration between government and the private sector. That was always our vision in Miami.”

Adrienne Arsht, the former banking executive who made the gift that Thomson and Spring call “the tipping point” in the history of Miami’s performing arts center, agrees with Thomson. “Government cannot be put in the role of an enabler of projects that would be doomed without endless bailouts of public money,” she says. But she also points out the practical benefits that government investment in arts centers can bring. “Look at what happened in New York with the Lincoln Center. It was built on land that nobody was interested in at the time. It wouldn’t have been donated otherwise, just like the land in Miami. But—all other benefits aside—take a look at how land values and tax revenues have risen in both cases.”

This book, then, is an attempt to tell a story that is at once arresting, significant, and valuable as an object lesson far beyond Miami and South Florida. There are any number of colorful characters who both collaborated on and opposed the making of the Arsht, but the individual at the center of this narrative is Thomson. In one way or another, he was from

the beginning at the center of nearly every crucial battle fought concerning the project's future, and in his deft and intricate navigation of Miami's halls of powers lies a glimpse of the true nature of a complex city's makeup. Today's readers know that the Arsht has become a glittering reality, but they may not fully appreciate how fraught its road to actuality was, just as they may not realize the significance of its impact on what has become a major American city.

Though no story wants to get too far ahead of itself, it might be noted at the outset that in the opinions of both Thomson and Spring, one thing is inarguable: "Culturally, the Arsht has changed everything here." What follows intends to demonstrate just how.