

Saving the Harriet Himmel for the Next Generation

The Harriet Himmel building is the centerpiece and crown jewel of West Palm Beach. Its architecture is iconic and its courtyard is the epicenter of public activity in downtown, drawing nearly 4 million visitors per year.

What we today know as the Harriet was built 98 years ago in 1926 as the First Methodist Episcopal Church, which occupied the building for nearly 70 years. By the early 1990's, the area surrounding the church was in bad shape, plagued by neglected vacant buildings and high crime. The church sold the building and moved away. A developer acquired much of the neighborhood and proposed a development called Downtown/Uptown, which went bankrupt and left the City holding the bag. In 1996, the City selected Related Companies through an RFP to transform this neglected part of the City. Related and a generous lady named Harriet Himmel made it a priority to rehabilitate the church building in accordance with the U.S. Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties ("Standards"), which is the national gold standard for rehabilitation of historic structures. Related has maintained the building in accordance with these same Standards for the last 25 years.

Today, the Harriet building needs additional work, a new roof, and window replacements. The Harriet also needs to be reimagined. Despite Related's best efforts and over two decades of operating losses, few groups utilize the building because the venue is small, dark on the inside, and does not have the cooking and catering facilities desired by users. Related is now proposing to spend over \$20 million of its own money to rehabilitate the building once again, fully in conformance with the Standards and to modern building codes.

Most historic structures in the county are not widely available to the public, are funded by taxpayers, or charge admission to enter. The rehabilitated Harriet will be the most publicly utilized historic building in the County, at no cost to the taxpayers and no admission charge.

So what is the controversy? There are many well-intended people who care deeply about preserving our unique history. I am one of them. However, not all of the well-intended people agree on how best to keep this building alive and relevant into its second century nor do they know the historical facts about this building, which are vital, even if we ultimately disagree about how best to keep this beautiful building economically viable and available to the public.

Here are the facts. The original church building was significantly modified in 1999, with full City consent and approval. The southern 25% of the building was completely removed and a 2-story building was converted into a 3-story building by changing the grading to expose a lower level floor. The north steps were removed and replaced. The Il Bellagio addition was added to the south side of the building where the Sunday School portion of the church building was demolished. In other words, the Harriet building that you see today is very different from the original historic church building.

These types of changes are permitted by the Standards so long as the "character-defining spaces, materials, features, and finishes" "do not radically change". All of the significant changes in 1999 were deemed to comply with the Standards. Similarly, all of the currently proposed

changes by Related are in compliance with the Standards, none alter the “character-defining” elements of the original building, and today’s proposed changes are not even remotely close in scale and significance to the modifications already visited upon this building 25 years ago with full public support. In fact, the proposed changes are de minimis compared to prior modifications and de minimis compared to modifications made to most adaptively re-used historic buildings.

The proposed changes (shown here) are: (1) removing a portion of the non-original stairs on the north elevation to create an ADA compliant door to allow the public into the front of the building on the ground level; (2) converting two of the double-arched 2nd floor (originally the 1st floor) openings on each side of the building to a single arch opening to allow more light into the building. That is all. No building demolition. No removal of original “character-defining” elements, and only the minimum amount of alterations necessary to allow the building to be used for an economically viable use (which, incidentally, is a published goal of both the Standards and the City’s Historic Code).

All of the characteristics of the original windows, tower elements, bell tower, stucco siding, cornices, barrel tile roof, roof lines, and decorative elements that define the original building are not only being left in situ but will be rehabilitated to current building code standards in full compliance with both the Standards and the City Historic Preservation Code.

All of this is being paid for solely by Related so that the general public can have much greater access to and enjoy this building in the next generation. Any statements to the contrary are simply false or poorly informed. I encourage everyone to take the time to learn the facts.

Harvey Oyer is an attorney who represents The Related Companies. He is also a historian and author a children’s book series that is used throughout the state to teach Florida history in the 4th grade. He served 7 times as Chairman of the Historical Society of Palm Beach County and was responsible for saving, designating, or restoring many historic buildings in Florida, most notably the 1916 Palm Beach County Courthouse, which is now the Johnson History Museum. The Florida Trust for Historic Preservation honored him with its Individual Distinguished Service Award.