

*"We need to redefine the stale definitions of our engines of economic growth and forge a better balance in facing our social and economic problems - including the value of our neighborhoods, our parks and public places as places of pride. Looking around so many of our civic places are unattractive and ignored by public officials"*

"Helping Economic Growth by Building Civic Places that Last" -- Gregory Bush  
The Urban Forum, May 2001



Above: Ponce Plaza  
Below: Desoto Fountain



When George Merrick fashioned the vision of Coral Gables in the 1920's, he did so mainly in the elegant architectural language of the great cities of Europe. Fountains, grand civic buildings, entrances, towers, and themed villages were the cornerstones of his creation. Now, over 75 years later, these structures remain both as a testament to this poet-dreamer and as a challenge to its elected representatives to maintain that which is so deeply rooted in this city's sense of place.

Coral Gables in 2003 struggles with challenging economic times, working hard to enhance its emergency services, post 9/11, and also to allocate financial resources for critical deferred maintenance to its public structures; victims of budgetary neglect for the majority of the 1990s. As a result of this inattention, the beautifully decorated City Hall cupola was peeling from a roof leak, and the famed Desoto Fountain no longer worked because of severe basin cracks. Smaller plazas and entrances were enveloped in plant overgrowth and suffered structural problems. And Coral Gables House, the original homestead of the Merrick family, desperately needed a new floor.

In 2002, as part of its strategic goals and objectives, the City Commission decided to dedicate resources to the rebirth of these classically Coral Gables places. Today there is opti-

mism that with consistent budgeting and planning, residents and visitors will once again enjoy the beauty of these restored treasures. Local preservation groups can also take pride in their efforts to raise public consciousness.

Since 2001, steady progress has been made. This fall, the City Hall cupola will be restored by professional artisans. In the 2003-04 municipal budget, a line item of \$100,000 is set aside for Phase 1 of the repair of entrances and plazas, as well as some matching monies to take advantage of grant opportunities that are being pursued. A study of the Desoto Fountain is being prepared that will detail the cost and action plan needed to bring back this elegant structure. Coral Gables House will soon reopen with a grand celebration, and in a unique public-private venture, privately endowed monies and city resources are restoring the Ponce de Leon Plaza at Granada and Coral Way. The "Parknership" program spearheaded by Commissioner William Kerdyk, Jr. has stayed true to its original mission over the years in its efforts to channel private dollars for parks and other public realm projects.

This is exciting news for now, but a few questions beg to be asked and answered. How does a city maintain the momentum and discipline to allocate the time, talent and resources so its treasures are properly maintained? How can we ensure these efforts will not fall prey to the whims of economic and political forces? And to whom do these oversight responsibilities fall?

Visionary leadership lies not with one group, but is a combined effort of a civically engaged community and by professional city staff. It is also balanced by elected officials who have the commitment and a clear understanding of the long range economic and transcendent value of public stewardship.

In the movie, Field of Dreams, there is a phrase that has become synonymous for bold endeavors. "Build it and they will come" was true for George Merrick and his talented cast of architects and artists in the 1920's. Today, the challenge is a dual one; keeping and maintaining the historical elements that make Coral Gables, the City Beautiful.

*Maria Anderson is a UEL member and a community activist-turned City Commissioner who loves to chronicle the challenges of public life. She can be reached via email at [maria@trapezoid.com](mailto:maria@trapezoid.com). Her other writings can be found at [www.coralgables.com](http://www.coralgables.com) [Link: City Commission, Maria Anderson, Press].*

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