

The Tower of Babel

Written by Erik Bojnansky, BT Senior Writer
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The battle for the Babylon is over, but the zoning war continues



fifteen months ago the Miami City Commission shot down a recommendation to make the Babylon, the first multifamily building designed by renowned Miami firm Arquitectonica (and its second project ever), a historically protected building.

As a result, the 37-year-old Babylon, which was once owned by a banker who was sent to prison on racketeering charges, will be demolished sometime before July.

And very soon, that same city commission will decide if the narrow, 15,000-square-foot property at 240 SE 14th St., near Brickell Bay Drive, should receive a massive up-zoning that would allow construction of a 24-story tower -- where only a maximum of 12 stories is now permitted.

In spite of protests from dozens of Brickell residents, and even murmurs of concern from City of Miami planners, the Planning Zoning and Appeals Board (PZAB) supported the up-zoning by a vote of 6-3 at its May 1 meeting. The city commission could vote on Babylon's future zoning as early as June 13.

A 24-story building would be shorter than some of the towers now located, or slated to be built,

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in the Brickell neighborhood, including the 70-story, 785-foot-tall Four Seasons tower; the recently completed 82-story, 862-foot Panorama; and the proposed 81 story, 1049-foot skyscraper project known as The Towers by Foster. It would certainly be taller than the faded, six-story Babylon, built in the ziggurat style of a stepped pyramid that, as of deadline, still stands between the 15-story Commodore Bay condo and the 26-story Emerald at Brickell condo.

PZAB member Andres Althabe voted with the majority to recommend the zoning increase. Althabe, who is also president of the Edgewater area's Biscayne Neighborhood Association, sees the up-zoning as a compromise. The Babylon's current owner, Francisco Martinez-Celeiro, originally sought zoning that would enable the construction of a tower that's between 48 and 80 stories, Althabe points out. The PZAB recommendation caps future development rights on the Babylon site at 24 floors.

"Forty-eight floors would have been disproportionate for the area," Althabe says. "I thought that 24 floors was an adequate transition because there are buildings that are lower [than 24 stories] in that area, and there are some that are much, much higher."



But nearby Brickell residents feel the PZAB's decision is trampling on their rights for a walkable neighborhood that will be further burdened with additional traffic generated by the future tower.

That feeling is particularly strong in Point View, a subdivision of condos and co-ops between Brickell Bay Drive, SE 14th Street, SE 15th Road, and Brickell Avenue where the Babylon is

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located.

“It’s unsustainable to have that type of development when you look at it from a global perspective,” says Eddy Leal, president of Bayshore Place and vice president of the Point View Association. Leal views the PZAB decision as “disappointing.”

Julie Santos, president of the neighboring condo association Emerald at Brickell, says that besides the traffic, she isn’t looking forward to a massive high-rise being built right up against her building. “You have a small parcel, and on this parcel [Martinez-Celeiro] wants to create what cannot be created here. That’s the problem,” she says.

But it isn’t just Brickell residents or Point View homeowners who are uneasy. Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, an architect and urban planner who helped the city create the Miami 21 zoning code, is worried that the Babylon up-zoning will set a new standard and enable property owners to seek greater building rights than what is currently allowed.

“Potentially, it creates a bad precedent,” says Plater-Zyberk, a co-founder of Arquitectonica when the firm designed Babylon 40 years ago.

Andy Parrish, a Coconut Grove developer who was one of the three dissenting votes on the PZAB, says if the city commission backs the up-zoning recommendation, there’s nothing to stop other property owners from asking for similar zoning increases.

“I don’t think it’s the right thing to do because it does mean that once you do it for one, other people are going to ask for the same thing,” Parrish says. “It’s a slippery slope.”

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