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Villa Paula and the Ghosts of Little Haiti

A classic old mansion, which may be haunted, awaits a new life — once the lawsuits are settled

By Terence Cantarella
Special to BT

When Cliff Ensor bought Villa Paula in 1974, the house was in a grave state of disrepair. Vandals had shot out the beautiful stained-glass windows, graffiti was scrawled across the stucco walls outside, and the county was ready to order its demolition. Not to mention, the ghost of a one-legged Cuban woman frequented its hallways.

The exquisitely designed house at 5811 N. Miami Ave. in

Little Haiti catches your eye as you drive past. It sits among ramshackle homes and overcrowded two-story apartment blocks like a misplaced masterpiece. By the time you turn your head to get a good look, though, it's too late. The adrenaline-charged traffic spurs you past it and you barely manage a glimpse of the whitewashed, neoclassical gem.

When the home was built in 1926 to house the Cuban consulate to Miami, things were a little different. The neighborhood was still mostly agricultural and the home's first occupants likely sipped

coffee on the white-columned front porch in rural tranquility.

All the building materials for the mansion, and the workers who built it, were imported from Cuba. Ten rooms, two baths, 18-foot-high ceilings, elegantly hand-painted floor tiles, and Tuscan columns are just some of the features Havana architect C. Freira

included in the home. Almost six decades later, in 1983, the City of Miami officially designated the structure historic. A second designation, in 1987, amended the original to include

the interior and an adjacent lot.

But what really draws attention to Villa Paula is its reputation as Miami's most haunted home.

A few years after Cuban consul Domingo Milord moved into the newly constructed home, his wife Paula died in one of the bedrooms from complications related to a leg amputation. The circumstances of the amputation and of her premature death are unclear. We know, however, that despite the effort put into construction, Villa Paula ceased to serve

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A few years after Cuban consul Domingo Milord moved into the newly constructed home, his wife Paula died from a leg amputation.

Guerrilla Gardeners

Late-night offensives, seed bombs, dig-and-run tactics — Miami's underground green thumbs fight blight

BT photo by Tiffany Rainey



By Tiffany Rainey
BT Staff Writer

The parking lot behind a secondhand clothing store just north of the Design District buzzes with a group of twentysomethings, mostly clad in T-shirts, jeans, and sneakers. On this recent Friday evening, they are not drinking and carousing but busily loading shovels, bags of fertilizer, jugs of water, and an array of plants into the back of a few parked cars. Some stand nearby chatting, waiting for the caravan to roll. When

the last of the stragglers arrives, the group sets off for its clandestine destination in the Wynwood warehouse district.

The coast is clear when the cars pull up just after dark to a vacant corner lot ripe with weeds and garbage. After unloading their gear on the sidewalk, the approximately 15 individuals linger for a few minutes, strategizing about how they're going to transform this orphaned space into an urban garden oasis. A few break away, heading to an overgrown corner with shovels and a small live oak. Others

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The *Alice in Wonderland* you've never seen.

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Villa Paula

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in an official capacity for the Cuban government sometime after Paula's death. Ensor ascribes the consulate's closing to "the troubles in Cuba," and indeed there was trouble.

President Gerardo Machado, faced in the early 1930s with growing opposition, including a burgeoning Communist movement, morphed from democratic reformer to repressive despot. Following a series of violent clashes with opponents, he resigned. Then, in quick succession, three different national leaders came and went, ending with the ascension of military strongman Fulgencio Batista.

Back in Miami, Villa Paula was shuttered and sold to one Muriel Reardon, who lived there for around 30 years until her death in 1960.

Villa Paula continued to change hands during the next 14 years, even serving as a senior citizens' home for a period of time. By the 1970s, abandoned and derelict, Villa Paula was near literal collapse, and fortuitously ended up in the hands of Ensor. He says he and a few friends immediately set to work on the place — cleaning, painting, removing graffiti, landscaping, fixing broken windows, restoring the interior, eventually returning Villa Paula to a condition close to its former glory.



Miami news photographer Bill Reinke took this portrait of Villa Paula in March 1976.

However, it is also with Ensor that the strange tales began.

He began relating stories of a black-haired woman who would float down the hallways in a long gown, with only one visible leg. He claimed he would often smell coffee brewing and the scent of roses when there were none. He said he heard piano music, and high heels on the back porch. His dishes and silverware, he claimed, were thrown to the floor one day and a chandelier inexplicably fell from the ceiling. A back gate would slam shut on windless days and kill Ensor's cats — three of them in total.

Ensor invited mystics and held séances in the house. Rev. Emma Tandarich, a visiting psychic, claimed five separate spirits haunted the house, including a young woman searching for the grave of her illegitimate baby — perhaps a servant who had lived in the house.

The unsettling tales, plus the publicity Villa Paula received during the 1980s (notably a cover story in the *Miami Herald's Tropic* magazine), spooked local Haitians. Many would bless themselves and cross the street to avoid walking in front of the house. Ensor spent years trying to sell the place, asking \$185,000. He eventually resorted to auctioning it in 1985 for \$110,000. Postal worker Larry Cozart, who won the auction, immediately

backed out of the deal when he learned of the haunting.

Ensor managed to sell the house two years later to Lucien Albert, a Haitian pediatrician skeptical of the supernatural claims. When contacted by telephone in March of this year, Dr. Albert, who sold Villa Paula in 2003 and now lives in Kendall, had no opinion to share on the matter. He suggested *BT* call the current owners. "They can tell you what you need to know," he said.

"A professor brought a self-proclaimed Satanist to the house and pushed her into that room. She began to choke as if she were being strangled."

Public records list the current owner as the Villa Paula Restoration Group, LLC. A few clicks of the mouse reveals this entity has a human face — that of Marc Swedroe, a real estate investor and son of renowned Miami Beach architect Robert Swedroe. Marc hasn't spent much time in the house since buying it in 2003 (sale price: \$275,000) and says he hasn't experienced anything unusual. "The house is just very peaceful," he offers. The "restoration" in the company name is something Swedroe and his family are serious about pursuing, but legal entanglements concerning the property have delayed improvements. (See sidebar "Villa Paula Meets Martin Siskind.")

Cuban fashion designer Fernando Garcia, who rented the house for a brief period until six months ago, had a different tale to tell: "I don't believe in ghosts, but strange things happen in that house."

One day, when Garcia was sitting at his desk, a windowpane fell out of its frame behind him. When he got up to investigate, a 40-pound chunk of plaster fell from the ceiling onto the spot where he had been sitting moments before. "If I hadn't moved when I did," he says, "I would be dead." The fortunately timed coincidence led him to believe if there were ghosts in the house, "they must have liked me."

Garcia would often hear thumping on the wooden ramp that leads up to the back door, as if someone were walking on it. The day after he brought his cat to the house, she disappeared. "I didn't find it dead. I just never found her at all," he recounts. A friend of Garcia, apparently sensitive to the spirit world, began to cry after entering the former maid's quarter. "They used to beat the maid," the friend told him.

Now 81 years old and living in North Carolina, Cliff Ensor, whose experiences were the first to be publicized, remains resolute to this day. "The house is definitely haunted," he says by phone. "Emma, the medium, used to hold séances in there every two weeks. This woman couldn't play the piano at all, but one day she channeled a spirit and began to play like a pro." Ensor, and others, recorded the feat on three separate tape recorders. When they played back the tapes later, all three were blank. During another séance, she channeled a stern spirit that admonished, "I don't like cats in my house!"

The daughters of previous owner Reardon, who lived in the house prior to Ensor, sent him a letter from Alaska when they learned of his experiences. "When we were little," they wrote, "there was one

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BT photo by Terence Cantarella

A hallway with columned grand arch and chandeliers.

Villa Paula

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room that we were never allowed into.” Their mother, it turns out, was terrified of that room.

“A University of Miami professor brought a self-proclaimed Satanist to the house once and pushed her into that room,” Ensor recalls keenly during the call. “She immediately began to choke as if she were being strangled.”

Today a lone groundskeeper who prefers to remain nameless occupies Villa Paula. “Stuff’s always moving around in here,” he says. “I’ll put something in one spot and find it in another later.” Three bulbs in a bathroom light fixture began to flicker on and off in random order one night. That is, until the fearless custodian told “Paula” to cool it — and she did. “I’m good with spirits,” he adds nonchalantly. “I got no problem with ‘em.”

He’s not scared. Even though he senses a presence, Paula has yet to actually make an appearance for him. “But I’ve only been in here since December,” he notes. “Maybe she just needs to get used to me.”

Feedback: letters@biscaynetimes.com

Villa Paula Meets Martin Siskind — in Court

By Tristram Korten

Special to *BT*

Villa Paula sprawls across more than a third of an acre, a porticoed monument to early twentieth-century grandeur. But this is the 21st Century, and the former Cuban consulate is showing signs of age, like a fading belle in a tattered dress. While its owners have grand visions for the mansion, the recent downturn in the economy and a protracted lawsuit mean changes are not likely anytime soon.

The Villa Paula Restoration Group LLC, whose principal is Marc Swedroe, has owned the home since 2003. “We’ve been maintaining the property and fixing aspects to maintain its integrity,” says Swedroe. “I personally have put new roofs on some of the structures there.”

The house has a caretaker who helps monitor needed repairs, Swedroe says. “Structurally it’s intact,” he adds. “The Cubans knew how to build for this climate.” But more extensive work is on hold, partially because the home’s future is uncertain.

“I envision Villa Paula as being a community center, or a historical center, something that could be important to Little Haiti and the Cuban community here,” Swedroe says. To that end he says he’s tried to attract interest from the University of Miami’s School of Architecture to see if it could become a student project. He says he is also interested in seeking out grants for restoring historic buildings. Alternately, he hopes it might appeal to the private sector. Swedroe says he’d like to find a “restaurateur or entrepreneur who wants to invest in it and create a restaurant or Cuban jazz bar.” He adds wistfully: “I envision a staff in Panama hats and guayaberas.”

Right now, no plans have been finalized. “Money’s hard to come by,” Swedroe says. “The area is being gentrified slowly. It’s spreading north along Biscayne. But it’s still maybe five years off.”

Further complicating matters is a four-year-old lawsuit filed by Swedroe’s former business associate Martin Siskind, a controversial figure involved in many lawsuits. Siskind was a partner in an earlier company with the Swedroe family

(father Robert has his own architecture firm, where another son, Joseph, and daughter Laurie work). But the partnership disbanded when the Swedroe’s attorney (and brother-in-law), Howard Weinberg, researched Siskind’s past and discovered previous arrests in Miami (no convictions) and news reports of a conviction in England for “obtaining property by deception.” (Siskind was the subject of a recent *BT* cover story, “Artistic Genius Meets Artful Dodger,” March 2008, that detailed his relationship with famed outsider artist Purvis Young, a relationship that ended in court and resulted in Young losing many of his paintings to Siskind.)

Siskind alleges that the partnership with Marc Swedroe and his family was improperly dissolved. “I didn’t want money,” he says. “I wanted to remain in the partnership.” The four-year-old court case has legally encumbered title to the property and thus has slowed progress on Villa Paula’s restoration. “The house is in limbo until we settle this matter,” Swedroe says. “I’m hopeful that an amicable resolution between all parties will be reached shortly.”

Feedback: letters@biscaynetimes.com

Attention Homeowners:

Whitefly Infestation Warning

The underside of a ficus leaf infested with the whitefly.









To see if your ficus is infested, look on the underside of the leaves. The adult whitefly is small and flies when your plant is touched. They look like tiny, white moths. Monitor your ficus plants for the early signs of an infestation since it will be easier to manage the pest at this stage and call us for a free evaluation.

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