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Centro Espanol De Ybor City Becomes National Landmark

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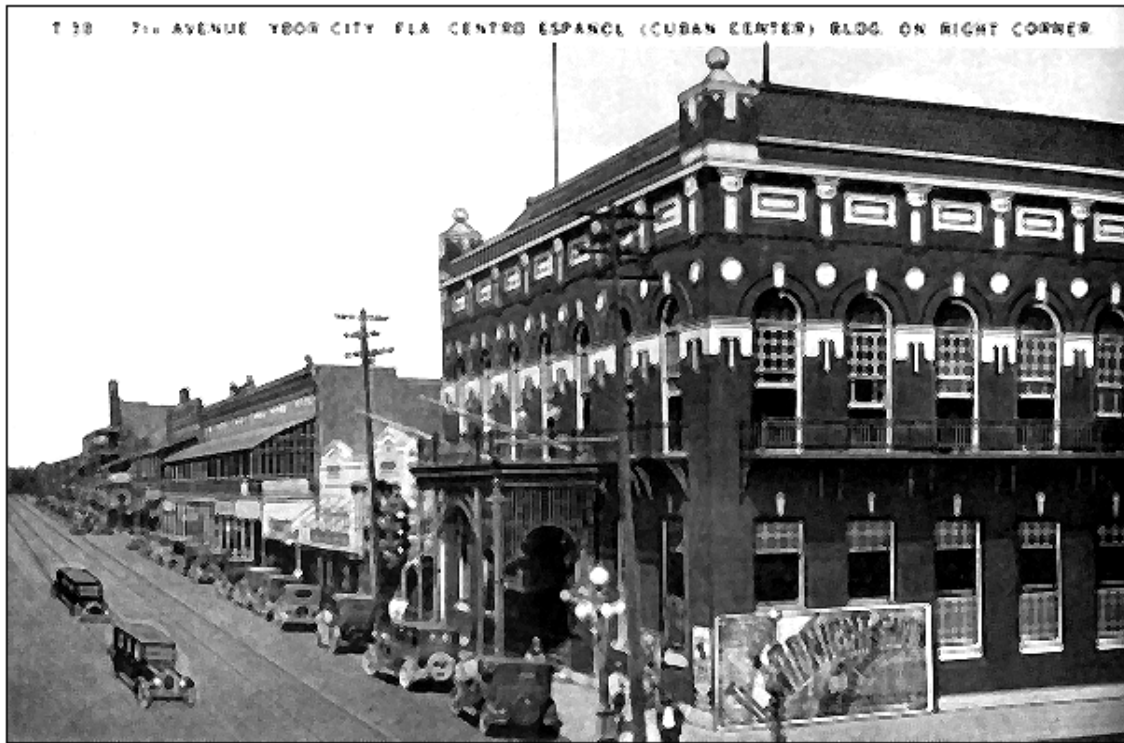
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CENTRO ESPANOL DE YBOR CITY BECOMES NATIONAL LANDMARK



CENTRO ESPANOL DURING THE 1920s
.. 'The Midnight Sun' Playing At Theatre

-Photo from HAMPTON DUNN COLLECTION

The historic Centro Espanol de Ybor City clubhouse has earned one of the nation's first emergency historic landmark designations from the National Parks Service.

"I'm just absolutely elated about it," said Joan Jennewein, a member of the Historic Tampa/Hillsborough County Preservation Board, which pushed for the designation. "I think this is going to be a big help in our efforts to save the building."

Preservationists are trying to secure state funds to purchase the decaying two-story, red brick building built in 1912 at 1536 E.

Seventh Avenue. It is the oldest of the five ethnic clubhouses in the 102-year-old cigar-making district.

The emergency national landmark designation marks the first time in at least 10 years any project has bypassed an advisory board decision process that usually takes months, federal officials said.

Donald P. Hodel, the U.S. Secretary of the Interior, approved the designation in June to help efforts to save it. The entire process took about three weeks, a testimony to the

Spanish-styled building's significance, officials said.

"It's certainly the most significant structure of its type in the Gulf Coast region," said Jim Charleton, a National Parks Service historian in Washington, D.C.

The Centro joins Plant Hall at the University of Tampa as the city's only national historic landmarks. The Centro's owners are eligible to apply for a plaque in honor of the designation but receive no money with the federal recognition.

But being a landmark can help a building qualify for available federal funds and assistance from foundations, officials said.

The building is part of a proposed Ybor City national landmark district. But preservationists stressed the building couldn't wait until an advisory board decided on the district in October of next year.

Once a hot spot where Centro Espanol Club members played cards, dominoes and danced, the structure has been empty since 1983 when the club sold it.

SHOWCASE BUILDING

Its 700-seat theater is collapsing, its boarded windows attract vandals and its private owners have struck out trying to turn it into a modern-day club and restaurant.

"I think this is fabulous," said Carol Vigderman of Tampa, co-owner of the building.

The building dates to the days when Spanish, Cuban and Italian immigrants built

and worked the cigar factories that helped put Tampa on the map.

The showcase building along Ybor City's Seventh Avenue was valued at \$448,450 last year.

NO MONEY AVAILABLE

"We were convinced that the building, given its current state, deserved emergency consideration," said Jim Charleton, a National Parks Service historian.

Charleton said declaring a building a national landmark normally takes months. Centro Espanol completed the process in a few weeks. There is no money for restoration attached to the landmark status, however.

The 76-year-old building, at the corner of Seventh Avenue and 16th Street in the heart of the former cigar district, was one of the first to be designated under a new effort to recognize ethnic history, said Charleton.

He said the federal government is particularly interested in recognizing buildings that reflect more recent immigrant history. He said other landmarks that honor the Spanish presence in this country date to colonial times.

"It basically tells us, the citizens of Tampa and Hillsborough County, how important to our history this building is," said Stephanie Farrell, director of the Historic Tampa/Hillsborough Preservation Board.