

Miami's Future Archipelago of Floating Houses

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A team of Dutch developers would like to bring a little bit of Atlantis to Miami. Earlier this month, **Dutch Docklands** submitted a letter of intent and request for zoning variance to the City of North Miami Beach in order to erect **29 multi-million dollar floating homes** and an “amenity island” in Maule Lake. Connected via the Intracoastal Waterway to Biscayne Bay in the south, Maule Lake began its life as a limestone rock quarry. Now, like Cinderella’s fairy Godmother (mixed with a touch of Ursula, the sea witch), Dutch Docklands seeks to transform the once humble aquatic rock pit into an archipelago of luxury homes.

The project, deemed ***Amillarah Private Islands***, would be the first of its kind in the Western hemisphere, but floating homes have long proliferated in the Netherlands. Collectively, Dutch Docklands and its architectural partner on the project, Koen Olthius, have constructed more than 800 floating houses in Holland, in addition to floating hotels, mosques, a resort and even a prison in other parts of Europe and the Middle East.

The architects pitch Amillarah Private Islands as an environmentally sound answer to rising sea levels in Miami. Others are not so convinced. Environmentalists and local residents worry about the manatees and other marine life that pass through the lake and connected water bodies. Project construction could have a deleterious effect on the water quality—not only in the lake, but also in the adjoining Biscayne Bay Aquatic Preserve and the nearby Oleta River. The City’s civil engineer also worries about long-term pollution from stormwater run-off from the properties.

In addition to the potential environmental ramifications, there are legal issues to be addressed. In the 2013 case of ***Lozman v. Riviera Beach***, the Supreme Court held that floating houses are to be treated as homes and not vessels under the laws of the United States. This allows owners to receive mortgages, purchase insurance and declare homestead exemptions, among other things, for such floating properties.

Nevertheless, administrative challenges remain—for example, parking requirements and police patrol access. Further, as Bilzin Sumberg Environmental Practice Group Chair, **Howard Nelson**, **pointed out to the *Miami Herald***, variances to ordinances regulating waterways are rarely granted.

With all the environmental and legal impediments to development, the tenability of Amillarah Private Islands is anything but certain, but the plans offer a fascinating glimpse into the potential future of coastal housing.

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