

St. Jude's Church Loses Historic Designation

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Last month, the Miami-Dade Circuit Court [stripped St. Jude Melkite Catholic Church](#) of its recently acquired historic designation. This church is located at 1501 Brickell Avenue, in the midst of multiple high rise condominiums and office buildings. It occupies one acre of some of Miami's most valuable property.

The court held that, in making the designation, the City failed to properly consider the church's religious significance. Miami's Historic Preservation Ordinance "expressly excludes properties owned by religious institutions or used for religious purposes unless the religious property derives its primary significance from its architecture, artistic distinction or historical importance rather than its religious purpose. This criterion requires a comparison of the site's religious importance." *Diocese of Newton Melkite Church v. City of Miami*, 2014 WL 4730075 (Fla. Cir. Ct. Sept. 16, 2014), at *3. Writing for the court, Judge Miguel de la O wrote, "[t]he record before us is devoid of any comparative analysis of St. Jude's religious importance versus its historical and architectural importance. . . . This failure is fatal under the [Historic Preservation] Ordinance and compels us to conclude that the City did not follow the essential requirements of the law."

This legal battle ensued in 2013, prompted by rumors that St. Jude's may sell the property to capitalize on its prime real estate. Fearing sale and destruction of the 67-year-old church, concerned congregation members and preservationists banded together to lobby for the designation of the church as a historically and architecturally significant site under the [Miami Historic Preservation Ordinance](#). Such a designation impedes the owner's ability to sell and architecturally modify the property. According to St. Jude's attorney, parishioners opposing the designation worried that historical status would make upkeep more expensive and would limit St. Jude's ability to make certain aesthetic modifications to bring the architecture into [conformity](#) with the Melkite doctrine.

Historical designation is available if a property...

- maintains significance in the historical, cultural, archeological, aesthetic or architectural heritage of the city, state or nation
- possesses integrity of design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling and association

- is associated with important people, events or community developmental patterns or trends
- is representative of distinctive architectural styles, periods, methods of construction, a particular architect or builder's work, or demonstrates significant innovation or adaptation to the South Florida environment, and ability to yield information important in prehistory or history.

In order to procure the designation, proponents pointed to the church's Romanesque architecture, its connection with [Operation Pedro Pan](#) and the fact the church was host to an all-girls academy run by Sisters of Assumption, a Catholic order, for three decades. The diocese, which opposed the designation, argued that the church's religious use far outweighed any purported historical significance. When the designation failed to receive the requisite number of commissioner votes, the City passed a special resolution to designate the church as a "local historic site." The City did not make any findings of its own, but instead relied solely upon the Designation Report created by the Preservation Board.

The recent appellate ruling quashed the designation, creating speculation about whether the church will eventually sell the property or its air rights.

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