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Members,  
City of Miami Historic and Environmental Preservation Board

**Subject: Letter of Intent for the Coconut Grove Playhouse**

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Miami-Dade County and Florida International University, in partnership with GableStage, followed three central goals for developing a masterplan for the Coconut Grove Playhouse:

1. To respect the historic status of the property and the legacy of architecture and the arts associated with the site;
2. To return great regional theater to the Playhouse by creating a state-of-the-art complex to be operated by GableStage, focusing on cultivating the talent of Miami artists and theater professionals and providing enriching educational and outreach programs; and
3. To adhere to the budgeted and secured funds, currently totaling \$20 million of County-issued bond revenues for the capital project.

The Coconut Grove Playhouse has been closed since 2006 when the accumulation of operating debt by the non-profit organization responsible for its management resulted in its decision to cease operations. Due to the resulting lack of theater activity, property ownership reverted to the State of Florida (State) in 2012. In response to the property's being offered through the State's surplus property process, Miami-Dade County (County) partnered with Florida International University (FIU) to create a plan for the development and reactivation of the Playhouse. The County and FIU, as co-lessees, executed a long-term lease agreement with the State, which became effective on January 15, 2014, after the County successfully cleared the encumbrances on the property title. The lease agreement contains a Land Use Plan (i.e., a Business Plan) that outlines the requirements for the project. Highlights of this Business Plan include the following key elements:

- The commitment to establishing a plan that recognizes the historic status of the property;
- The development of a state-of-the-art, 300-seat theater that can serve as the nucleus for producing and presenting great theater, cultural activities and educational and community programs and activities;
- The County's commitment to utilize the \$20 million in secured funds for the capital project;
- The designation of GableStage, Inc. (GableStage), a premier, non-profit local theater company, to manage and program the Playhouse as a regional theater, and to collaborate with FIU in developing educational and outreach opportunities; and
- The identification of the Miami-Dade County Department of Cultural Affairs for direct management of the design and construction process, given its successful track record in cultural facilities development.

In mid-2015, the County hired a team of architects, engineers, and specialty consultants under the leadership of internationally-renowned firm Arquitectonica International Inc. The team includes architect and Professor Jorge L. Hernandez and the structural engineering firm of Douglas Wood Associates, Inc., both of which have extensive experience with historic properties. The County has also sought the specialized services of RLA Conservation to conduct exposures, sampling, and paint analysis of key areas of the building. Structural, materials and historical analysis of the property were carefully conducted and coordinated by the design team in developing this masterplan for the Playhouse. This work was

guided by the goals of developing a thoughtful and respectful strategy for the historic fabric of the building while also addressing the needs of creating a twenty-first century regional theater, all within the funds available for the project.

### Historic Property Timeline including Date(s) and Description of Major Alterations

A comprehensive report was produced by historic preservation architect Jorge L. Hernandez and this work provided the guiding facts and recommendations that led the direction for the masterplan. Mr. Hernandez presented his findings at the February 7, 2017 HEPB meeting, a copy of which is attached to this submission. The key “chapters” for the evolution of the Coconut Grove Playhouse property were thoroughly documented by Mr. Hernandez and are as follows:

1927 – designed by noted architectural firm Kiehnel & Elliott as a silent screen movie house;

1955 - adapted by Alfred Browning Parker to be a commercial playhouse for live theater with interior changes including the expansion of the lobby (at a loss of a portion of the audience chamber), the addition of a mezzanine level, and a change in the slope of the audience chamber floor; exterior changes including the loss of the ornamental parapet at the center of the entry façade and enclosure of the storefront side bays on Main Highway and Charles Avenue; and

1970s – further adapted by subsequent architects on behalf of the non-profit theater operator, eliminating the Alfred Browning Parker adaptations and making more interior and exterior changes as stop-gap measures to keep the physical plant operational.

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The Coconut Grove Playhouse, located at 3500 Main Highway, is a three-story Mediterranean Revival style building designed with distinctive exterior features of cornices, parapets, and twisted columns. Designed by noted architects Richard Kiehnel and J.B. Elliott, it was considered one of the most distinctive movie theaters in the United States when completed in 1927.

The mass of the building is arranged as two wings that hug the sidewalk, bridged by the highly ornamental entrance bay, which is canted at the junction of Main Highway and Charles Avenue. The main entrance originally had an exterior stone water fountain in front of the wrought iron gates that led to the main lobby; storefronts were housed on the ground floor, offices on the second level and apartments on the third. The comparatively unadorned auditorium chamber of the theater lies beyond the elaborate entrance building and a parking lot is located on the north end of the irregularly-shaped lot.

Significant alterations, designed by architect Alfred Browning Parker in 1955, focused on a reduction of the size of the audience chamber to create a larger lobby/dining space, changes in the raking of the lobby and auditorium floors and the addition of a mezzanine level to the theater, all significantly eliminating/affecting original Kiehnel & Elliott interior features. Other major exterior changes included the loss of the ornamental parapet in the center of the entrance façade and the enclosure of side bays of the historic front building, eliminating the storefronts, which were closed off to create internal spaces for the theater’s new use in presenting a combination live theater and dining/entertainment experiences. Additional alterations, carried out in the 1970s, eliminated the Alfred Browning Parker features and comprised expedient repairs and building adaptations necessary to keep the building operational for the non-profit, live theater being presented.

## Masterplan Concept

The masterplan, developed by the design team, followed the recommendations of Jorge L. Hernandez who applied the standards of National Register Bulletins to the documented circumstances affecting the original Kiehnel & Elliott architecture. The following summarizes these recommendations:

- Restore the entire front historic building to the original 1927 Kiehnel & Elliott design and re-introduce the original uses of these spaces conducive to an active pedestrian environment (e.g., ground floor cafes and retail, and offices and residential for the upper levels);
- Re-establish the footprint of the original crescent-shaped lobby of the movie house as a lush, tropical courtyard, where the memory, history and interpretation of this site will be displayed;
- Survey, document and incorporate the remaining, historic interior architectural elements (e.g., the proscenium arch, Solomonian columns and other features that will be investigated in the subsequent design phases being undertaken) into the design of a new state-of-the-art theater and orient the theater on axis with the original theater and its corner entrance through the historic front building.

It should be noted that the building will require asbestos abatement. A survey and related testing of the existing facility has confirmed asbestos-containing materials to be present in materials such as flooring, insulation, HVAC piping, etc. The asbestos abatement process will include systematic removal of these construction elements by a specially trained crew and will need to take place before any other construction activities start. A vital component of the development will be structural reinforcement of components of the historic front building and incorporation of life safety and ADA requirements, all designed to meet current building code requirements. The overall masterplan and design are being coordinated with the current Miami 21 building code and will respond to zoning requirements such as addressing the adjacent zoning classifications, which range from single family homes to the west to medium and high commercial density to the south and north, respectively.

During the design and construction process, the Department of Cultural Affairs will be maintaining updates on the progress of the project on its website at: <http://www.miamidadearts.org/coconut-grove-playhouse-updates>. This centralized location of information will serve to keep key stakeholders and the public aware of the ongoing work and progress on the key goals for the Coconut Grove Playhouse: a thoughtful and respectful treatment of its historic status, a return of great regional theater in the context of a state-of-the-art 300-seat theater managed by GableStage, and an adherence to budgeted funds for the project, all designed to ensure the success of the Coconut Grove Playhouse now and into the future.

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