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The Abreu Legacy

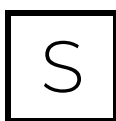
March 1, 2017 Dori Zinn





Photo courtesy of Casablanca Café

Architect Francis Abreu was only in Fort Lauderdale for a short time in the 1920s, but he created some of the city’s greatest buildings. Now some of his work is being preserved and introduced to new generations – including members of his own family.



teve Halmos has always had a soft spot for architecture. He planned on becoming an architect after graduating from Georgia Tech in the '70s, but switched to engineering instead. But that doesn't mean he gave up his love for buildings when he moved.

In 1975, he and his new wife were looking to buy a house in Fort Lauderdale, preferably on the beach. A real estate agent was showing them a few properties, but nothing stood out to them. Then a beachside property became available and Halmos stopped by. He had no idea that he was about to walk into a piece of Fort Lauderdale history.

The property on Fort Lauderdale beach is now known as the Casablanca Café. Long before it was a restaurant, Halmos had strolled into what he describes as a religious commune. “The front door was open with mattresses all over the floor,” he says. “There were biblical quotes and passages sprayed all over the walls and there were a bunch of people living there.” He bought it immediately, but not to live in.

“We were also looking for a place to put my business,” he says. “It wasn't zoned for it but we did it anyway.”

He ran his business out of there for a few years before making it a residence for employees. After that, Halmos admits it went into disrepair before it was leased to Casablanca Café, now longtime tenants of the building. When he agreed to turn it

into a restaurant, Halmos made sure that the integrity of the structure by architect Francis Abreu didn't go anywhere.

"When we made a restaurant out of it, I insisted that the historic character of it be retained," Halmos says. "I kind of knew the history of Francis Abreu and who he was and that he had done a bunch of buildings in Broward. That appealed to me. I liked the historic nature of it."

Abreu was the second registered architect in Fort Lauderdale when he arrived in 1924. The Casablanca Café that Halmos bought in 1975 was designed by Abreu as a holiday home for his grandparents.

Todd Bothel, the deputy director and supervising curator at the Fort Lauderdale Historical Society, says Abreu made a bunch of structures, but there's no real count of how much work he did since many of his creations have been torn down.

"There's not a whole lot that are left," he says. "Thirty or so are on a documented list that are still around."

On that list is the Casablanca Café that Halmos still owns today, but also The Riverside Hotel, part of St. Anthony's School in Victoria Park and what is now the Fire and Safety Museum in Sailboat Bend.

"St. Anthony's is probably the closest [structure] to the original," Bothel says. But the museum has the wood beam ceiling and inlaid tile — Abreu's touch is within the walls throughout the museum.

Abreu was only here for a short time, from 1924 to 1928, and his projects were pricey. Bothel estimates they were worth \$3 million and he did half the construction in Fort Lauderdale. Maybe you've spotted his work around town. He built some Rio Vista homes. Look out for Mediterranean Revival, a Spanish-style of architecture.

"His father was Spanish," Bothel says. "But with alterations, it's hard to tell what work is his."

In addition to homes, he built apartment buildings, churches and commercial

structures, too. In 1928, he moved to Sea Island, Georgia, just outside of Atlanta, to start a family and never came back down to Fort Lauderdale. He has buildings there, too, like The Cloister on Sea Island and homes along the southern coast of Georgia. He died in 1969.

After Francis' wife, May, died in the '70s, the Abreu family followed the request of her will and started a trust in Francis' name. May was popular in her own right in Atlanta, being the first "Woman of the Year" in 1943. The Abreu family added May to the trust's name in 2002 and now honors both. Mike Abreu, the grandson of Francis and May, is now the executive director of the May P. and Francis L. Abreu Charitable Trust, but admits he doesn't know much about his grandfather. In fact, he didn't even know about his South Florida ties until last year.

"The [Fort Lauderdale] Historical Society emailed my sister for more information," he says. "When we got the call, we were shocked at how much work he had done in Fort Lauderdale."

In October, the historical society honored Francis, and that's when Mike and his sister, Claire, took a trip down south to see the work of their grandfather. They toured St. Anthony's and the fire museum. They stayed at the Riverside Hotel. They had lunch at the Casablanca Café. "I knew he was an architect and I knew he practiced, but my knowledge was limited," Mike says. "I didn't realize the scope of work he did there."

Through the trust, Mike and his siblings hand out funding every year for programs in the arts, education, health and youth services. Prior to learning about his grandfather's Fort Lauderdale ties, the trust provided grants to the Atlanta metro area only. Now they plan on expanding.

"We're looking to branch out, including in the Fort Lauderdale area," Mike says. "We're not only giving to Atlanta."

Meanwhile in Fort Lauderdale, some unique parts of the Abreu legacy live on. Steve Halmos has bought and preserved a number of historical properties in the decades following his purchase of the Casablanca Café. But it's something about being the first one that means something.

"Every once and awhile I'll get someone who wants me to sell it but I would never sell it," he says. "I love that old building and it has sentimental value to me since I've owned it for so many years. For the amount of money I would sell it for, I don't need it."
