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Park and Politics

A new documentary portrays a little-told —and very local — history

By Emily Witt

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There are two protagonists in Rolando Llanes' soon-to-be released documentary, *White Elephant*: There's the man, Jose Aleman Jr., and his venue, Miami Stadium. Both spent 51 years on this Earth. Both were once handsome displays of wealth. Both are associated with some of the biggest players of the Twentieth Century. Both suffered unseemly declines.



Both are now gone.

Many Miamians can picture the Miami Stadium —rechristened Bobby Maduro Stadium in 1987 —as a decrepit hulk on NW

Tenth Street and 23rd Avenue in Allapattah. Completed in 1949, it was home of Baltimore Orioles spring training for 31 years. Its dilapidated remains spent the first year-and-a-half of the 21st Century condemned behind a chainlink fence that did little to keep out the homeless and

drug-addicted who were its final occupants. In 2001 it was demolished.

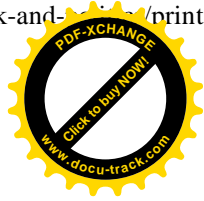
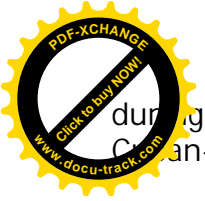
Jose Aleman Jr. was seventeen years old in 1949 when he received Miami Stadium as a gift from his dying father. Most Miamians won't remember his life at all, though they might recall his death. On July 31, 1983, Aleman found a Brown 9mm semiautomatic handgun in the Coral Springs apartment he shared with his mother. After threatening her with the weapon, he shot and injured three relatives. He killed his 69-year-old aunt, whom he told Miami-Dade SWAT teams he was holding hostage. He then shot himself.

Rolando Llanes was fascinated by these parallel endings. A native of Havana, a successful architect turned documentarian, and a lover of baseball, Llanes is also a rare Miami preservationist. He spent his childhood in New York City surrounded by historic structures. When he moved to Miami in 1973, at the age of twelve, he encountered an ephemeral landscape, where big and important buildings are often knocked down and forgotten with little ceremony, sometimes erasing the memory of those who inhabited them.

Llanes certainly knew none of Miami Stadium's history in the mid-Nineties, when the then-University of Miami architecture professor first visited the site. He was merely interested in seeing its cantilevered roof.

Fond of the facility's swooping aesthetic beauty, and with its doom impending, he organized a workshop for his students to devise ways to reposition the Miami Stadium as a community center or a mixed-use development. That's when he started investigating its history. Soon a passing interest in the locale —and the decline of its owner —became a passion.





during segregation. The story of the Miami stadium, they realized, went far beyond the Cuban-American experience.

"It's a complete Miami story," Llanes said. "You rarely get that."

Thus encouraged, he bankrolled the documentary through donations from friends and family. *White Elephant* will premiere at Little Havana's Tower Theater on May 12. He hopes the movie will be viewed as more than mere historic documentation. There are plenty of structures around Miami facing the same fate as the Bobby Maduro Stadium.

Some, like the Hialeah Racetrack, are privately owned. Others, like Miami Marine Stadium and the Orange Bowl, are in the hands of the City of Miami and are slowly falling apart. In one hopeful case, megadeveloper Pedro Martin recently donated the Freedom Tower — former home of the *Miami News* and the emotional equivalent of Ellis Island for many Cuban-Americans who were processed there — to Miami Dade College. The college has pledged to rehabilitate it into a museum with classroom space.

But for Llanes a question remains: "What happens to these places that are wonderful, beautiful places that have no relevance?" For him, structures are inextricably linked to the stories of those who inhabited them. When you lose one, you often lose the other.

For more on the history of Bobby Maduro Stadium, see "Rough Diamond," by Robert Andrew Powell on [Miaminewtimes.com](http://www.miaminewtimes.com).