

A maverick's vision under the overpass

BY ELIZABETH HANLY

Special to The Herald

The homeless folks that live close by call it the haunted house.

Miami businessman Marty Margulies, who has pieced together one of the nation's more formidable private art collections, calls it beautiful.

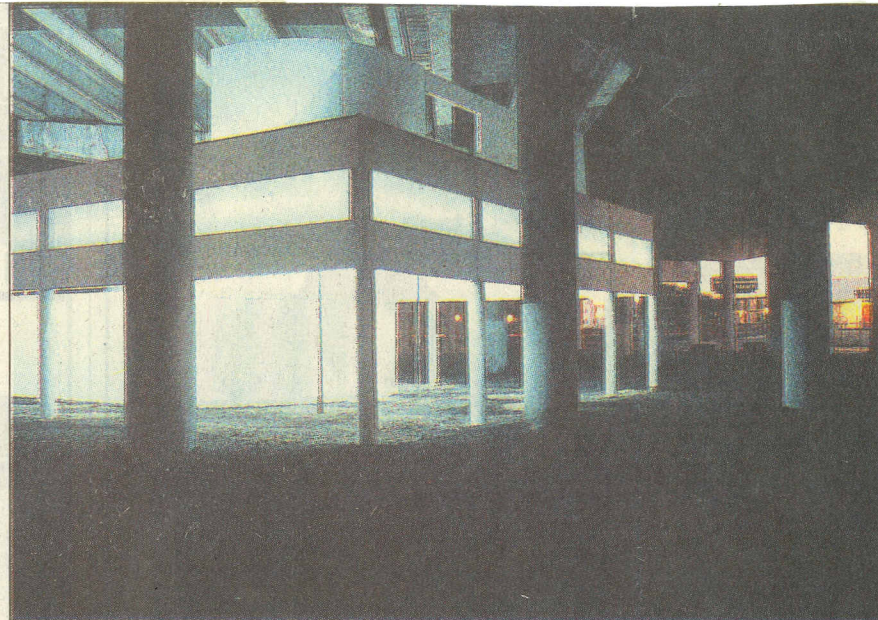
Lorie Mertes, the associate curator at the Miami Art Museum, calls it poignant.

What they're talking about is the house that artist George Sánchez Calderon built under a highway in Overtown. A most particular house, as it's a copy of architect

Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye, which was built in the French countryside and, perhaps more than any other structure, became synonymous with the Modernist movement of the early 20th Century.

Corbusier was asked to design whole cities, and he had much to do with our understanding of the structure and the look of highways. In 1969, Miami — in the rush to become one of those great cities Corbusier and the other Modernists had let us imagine — built a series of highways (specifically Interstate 395) that

► PLEASE SEE SANCHEZ, 8M



Strange light illuminates the house that artist George Sánchez Calderon built under Interstate 395.

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Artist's vision of light and Modernism graces an overpass

▷ SANCHEZ, FROM 3M

managed to destroy thriving minority communities such as Overtown by literally casting huge shadows over them and breaking them apart as well.

Drive past the Sánchez installation in the 1200 block of Northwest Miami Court (between Northwest 12th and 13th streets) during the day and you'll see the house blurring into the field of huge highway supports Corbusier made popular.

The house has the same lines and rhythms as those pillars, and sometimes, when the sun hits a series of those lines, the result is an almost musical pleasure.

Drive by at night and the house takes on the specter of a vision, strange light and structure appearing out of nowhere. Which is precisely how Sánchez likes to work, according to Mertes.

MAVERICK ARTIST

She describes Sánchez as a maverick, a solitary figure with prodigious talent who stands apart from the dozen or so established Miami artists.

"He seems to be working at the periphery of things ... almost anonymously, then suddenly he'll bring forth a project on a monumental scale, a project which one way or another always succeeds in engaging a community," Mertes says. "Installation art is art that we live with, art that has to do with a specific place and time. It is not art that can be purchased or celebrated at Sotheby's or Christie's."

Sánchez may be best remembered in Miami for his 1999 Bay of Pigs installation at the old Pan-Am Clipper hangar in Coconut Grove. It was a show that received the support of Bay of Pigs veterans but left the larger Cuban community so uneasy it was vandalized and Sánchez, a Cuban American himself, received a series of threats.

Three years earlier, Sánchez, then a recent Rhode Island School of Design graduate, had a critically acclaimed homage to *balseros* on display at New York's prestigious



REESE ALLEN

Sánchez's La Villa Savoye looks shockingly out of place and yet blends with the huge pillars of the overpass off Biscayne Boulevard.

Franklin Furnace.

THEMES OF EXILE

"A great many people in the local arts community thought that George Sánchez was yet another artist wrestling only with the themes of exile," Mertes says.

But Sánchez is far from predictable and he had been thinking about Overtown long before his La Villa Savoye. For the past six years, he has been pelting various city of Miami offices with ideas for the area's recovery, using the arts as the

development anchor. He has developed very specific plans for the transformation of an abandoned firehouse into an art museum; for turning warehouse space into art studios; for finding ways to sell some of the property back to the folks who live in the area; and for having artists document the transition of the area. In the process, he hoped to create more jobs.

Margulies describes Sánchez as "out there tilting at windmills."

A child of Cuban exiles,

Sánchez prefers to see himself as a good capitalist. Years ago, he bought a small building in the Overtown area and says however idealistic his plans may seem, they all make good business sense. A quiet man, he is nonetheless capable of speaking at length about the responsibility of artists and the state to work together to promote real grassroots change in the dead zones of Miami.

As the artist tells it, the idea for his Villa Savoye came to him while he was sitting on the roof of his one-story building

staring straight into the 395 overpass. All around was the destruction that previous development strategies had brought to the area. In talking with a number of homeless folks who live under 395, another home, Corbusier's Villa Savoye, came to mind.

"I wanted to juxtapose all the promise of Corbusier's Modernism with what that dream had cost some in Miami," he says.

ART BASEL

For months afterward, Sánchez petitioned the Community Redevelopment Agency, among other institutions, for money to build the structure. But it was the preparation for Art Basel, the prestigious art fair expected in Miami Beach last December, that finally opened the door. City agencies were looking for ways to spotlight their efforts for the crowd Art Basel was expected to draw and Arthur Teele, a Miami commissioner and chairman of the Community Redevelopment Agency, gave Sánchez a grant.

Although Art Basel eventually postponed its U.S. debut a year in the wake of the terrorist attacks on America, Sánchez's installation went up anyway. The artist loves to talk about the December night he inaugurated his Villa Savoye. There was a party at the Ice Palace, Eugene Rodriguez's movie studios and site of many of this city's hippest downtown gatherings.

Overtown became a sea of Mercedes and BMWs while Sánchez drove a golf cart for tours of his creation. But Sánchez cuts the reminiscing short. He has just received a call from the sister of a man called Link and he's worried.

Link is a neighborhood man Sánchez employed for a couple for months as a security guard for Villa Savoye. Apparently Link disappeared a few nights back after somebody threatened him. Sánchez and the young woman talk for 40 minutes or so, trying to figure out what to do.

The artist and the homeless man first met because Link was living precisely where

Sánchez hoped to build his installation.

"I don't know how to tell you this, dude," Sánchez says he told Link. And then he caught himself. He was the one always talking about grassroots roots development, right? The two men chatted. They seemed to understand each other. So Sánchez offered him the job (Link eventually turned up safe.)

After hanging up the phone Sánchez continues talking about the December party.

"It was Disney World, the night of the party," Sánchez says. Overtown as Disney World? Is that a solution? I that a good thing?

"In terms of drawing attention to the area, absolutely," Sánchez says. "It all just depends how that attention gets played out."

And people are paying attention. Last Monday, there was a gathering of real estate developers and Miami commissioners at the Ice Palace Max Anderson, director of New York's Whitney Museum was also there.

And though a chartered bus took interested parties through the development area, no stops were made at Sánchez's La Villa Savoye. The installation is, after all, plenty ironic.

But if a stop had been made what a cautionary tale it might have told.

So even if some see the neighborhood as moving on Sánchez isn't ready to take down the installation just yet. In fact, he's not sure when it will be dismantled. It'll be there through the end of March, he promises. And after that? He shrugs.

But when it does come down, he'd like to have the sounds of opera mixed in with those of the bulldozers. In the meantime, Sánchez chooses to keep remembering the name he gave his installation: La Bendición, the blessing. Because in the midst of all the renewed interest in Overtown all the real possibilities, all the concomitant dangers, this is what the artist is asking for the community.

"I could use one myself," he adds.