

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

For NPS use only

National Register of Historic Places
Inventory—Nomination Form

received

date entered

See instructions in *How to Complete National Register Forms*
Type all entries—complete applicable sections

1. Name

historic El Centro Español de Tampa

and or common

2. Location

street & number 1526-1536 E. 7th Avenue not for publication

city, town Tampa vicinity of

state Florida code FL county Hillsborough code 057

3. Classification

Category	Ownership	Status	Present Use
<input type="checkbox"/> district	<input type="checkbox"/> public	<input type="checkbox"/> occupied	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> building(s)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> private	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> unoccupied	<input type="checkbox"/> commercial
<input type="checkbox"/> structure	<input type="checkbox"/> both	<input type="checkbox"/> work in progress	<input type="checkbox"/> educational
<input type="checkbox"/> site	Public Acquisition	Accessible	<input type="checkbox"/> entertainment
<input type="checkbox"/> object	<input type="checkbox"/> in process	<input type="checkbox"/> yes: restricted	<input type="checkbox"/> government
	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> being considered	<input type="checkbox"/> yes: unrestricted	<input type="checkbox"/> industrial
		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> no	<input type="checkbox"/> military
			<input type="checkbox"/> museum
			<input type="checkbox"/> park
			<input type="checkbox"/> private residence
			<input type="checkbox"/> religious
			<input type="checkbox"/> scientific
			<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> other: vacant

4. Owner of Property

name Ms. Carol Vigderman and Mr. Lee Scarfone

street & number 5207 Bayshore Blvd., #20

city, town Tampa vicinity of state Florida 33611

5. Location of Legal Description

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. Register of Deeds, Hillsborough County Courthouse

street & number 500 Pierce Street

city, town Tampa state Florida

6. Representation in Existing Surveys

title Florida Master State File has this property been determined eligible? yes no

date federal state county local

depository for survey records Historic Tampa/Hillsborough County Preservation Board

city, town Tampa state Florida

7. Description

Condition

excellent
 good
 fair

deteriorated
 ruins
 unexposed

Check one

unaltered
 altered

Check one

original site
 moved date _____

Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance

Summary¹

El Centro Español is a long rectangular-shaped building with a 2-1/2-story main block and a 3-1/2-story rectangular wing attached to its rear (north) facade. It replaced El Centro Español's first clubhouse, on the same site, in 1912. It is architecturally striking, compatible with the surrounding historic structures in such features as its wrought-iron balconies, which are characteristic of Ybor City buildings, and occupies a key location on Ybor City's main street. It also possesses important and impressive interior spaces.

Main Block

Architecturally, the 38'-high dark red brick edifice shows the influence of French Renaissance Revival as well as Moorish and Spanish modes. The main block consists of a 1-story base with rectangular-shaped window and door openings, and features, and on its main (south) facade, a projecting highly decorative Moorish entrance arch with cast-iron trim. The long palazzo-like east facade and horizontal divisions of fenestration are typical of the Renaissance Revival style frequently used in commercial architecture late in the 19th century.

The second-story body features arched window and door openings with white stone keystones, labels, and decorated slipsills, and is highlighted further by projecting cast-iron balconies with a Spanish motif on the front (south) facade. The balconies are among the finest in Ybor City, where such features were an important -- and now relatively rare -- element in the historic construction of many buildings.

The upper half story features eyebrow windows with white stone trim and inlaid decorative stone work. This portion of the edifice is capped with a red tile-covered hipped roof.

Rear Wing

The attached rear wing is less ornate and consists of a 2-story base with brick wall pilasters and wood sash windows set in rectangular surrounds; a 1-story body featuring moveable double-hung sash windows set in arched surrounds and decorated with white stone labels, keystones, and plain slipsills; and a crown made up of the upper half story with eyebrow windows similar to those of the main block and a roof parapet decorated with recessed brick panels. This portion of the edifice has a flat roof.

Interiors

The cantina is richly embellished with pressed metal ceilings, hexagonal tile floors, and glazed tile wainscoting. Tuscan colonnades divide the 5,000-square foot-room into three sections. The same flooring and wainscoting appears in the lobby between the theater and cantina and lines the marble staircase leading up to the second-floor ballroom. The theater (75' x 69'), although less elaborately finished in wood paneling, has boxes with scalloped wood frames and fluted columns. In the ballroom (81' x 71'), the original oak parquet floor and elevated musicians' gallery survive.

8. Significance

Period	Areas of Significance—Check and justify below			
<input type="checkbox"/> prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> community planning	<input type="checkbox"/> landscape architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> religion
<input type="checkbox"/> 1400-1499	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-historic	<input type="checkbox"/> conservation	<input type="checkbox"/> law	<input type="checkbox"/> science
<input type="checkbox"/> 1500-1599	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture	<input type="checkbox"/> economics	<input type="checkbox"/> literature	<input type="checkbox"/> sculpture
<input type="checkbox"/> 1600-1699	<input type="checkbox"/> architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> education	<input type="checkbox"/> military	<input type="checkbox"/> social/
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799	<input type="checkbox"/> art	<input type="checkbox"/> engineering	<input type="checkbox"/> music	<input type="checkbox"/> humanitarian
<input type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input type="checkbox"/> commerce	<input type="checkbox"/> exploration/settlement	<input type="checkbox"/> philosophy	<input type="checkbox"/> theater
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1900-	<input type="checkbox"/> communications	<input type="checkbox"/> industry	<input type="checkbox"/> politics/government	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> transportation
		<input type="checkbox"/> invention		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> other (specify) ethnic history (Spanish)

Specific dates 1912-1938

Builder/Architect Kennard, Francis J.

Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)

Summary

El Centro Español de Tampa is the best surviving Spanish ethnic and cultural club building in the Gulf Coast States that were the main focus of immigration from Spain in the last decades of the 19th century and the first years of the 20th. It is among a handful of similar structures representing that phase of the immigration of the nationality that survive nationwide. El Centro Español is also the brightest jewel among the extraordinary ethnic social and mutual aid clubs of Tampa.

El Centro Español illustrates as does no other single structure the key aspects of Spanish immigrant life in the city that was the primary focus of that immigration, for no other institutions were more central to immigrant identity and acculturation than the associations they organized and built themselves. This was particularly true in Tampa, where, compared to other communities, religious institutions played a relatively modest role and where, in a new city essentially built from wilderness -- in sharp contrast to the urban centers of the North -- there were no existing philanthropic or charitable institutions to serve the new arrivals.¹

El Centro Español, chartered in 1891, was the first ethnic club established in Ybor City, Tampa's "Latin Quarter," and reflected the trend-setting influence of the Spanish-born elite who founded Ybor City, and long dominated its commercial, social, and intellectual life, even though they were less numerous than other immigrant groups. Other nationalities in Ybor City eventually followed suit, following the "organizational model and economic blueprint" set by El Centro Español,² and erected a grouping of club buildings that have no parallel elsewhere in the region. By comparison, in New Orleans, the other principal city in the region with a pronounced ethnic flavor, only the German club survives.³

El Centro Español and Centro Asturiano, a later club, were also the first institutions in Tampa to organize and built major cooperative medical facilities for their memberships, an achievement that presaged modern-day health maintenance organizations. Centro Español's Sanatorio, completed in 1906, was probably the most modern and complete hospital in the State at that time. These efforts have been characterized as a response "to the problems of medical care with a dignity and dedication unequalled in urban America."⁴ Even examined in the context of immigrant mutual aid efforts nationwide, these efforts appear to be exceptional in their size and the scope of their efforts and more akin to those in South America and Europe than their less prosperous and smaller counterparts in the northern cities of the United States.⁵

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Present Condition²

With the exception of reroofing in 1953 and minor changes to the southeast portion of the first floor during the time it was used by the Don Quixote Restaurant, El Centro Español has undergone few changes. Some windows and the French doors opening onto the balconies have been replaced or partially blocked.

Now vacant except for storage, however, the building is deteriorating rapidly, threatened by termite infestation and a weakened roof. Although the cantina and ballroom are in fair condition with floors, wainscots, and ceilings intact, the theater has obviously suffered from moisture and termite damage. One major roof truss has failed, but has been temporarily braced. Water damage is continuing along both the east and west walls, and is incipient in the ballroom.

As an unoccupied building, El Centro is also potentially vulnerable to vandals, vagrants, and fire.

In view of these conditions and the apparent inability of the owners to undertake the stabilization, maintenance, or rehabilitation of the building, it must be viewed as imminently threatened.

Footnotes

¹ The physical description of El Centro Español appearing here was compiled from the Florida Master Site File Site Inventory form for the building prepared by Deborah Heath and Julie Kaekel for the Historic Tampa/Hillsborough County Preservation Board; a description appearing in M.C. Leonard, "Historic Overview of Greater Ybor City, Historic Structures;" and an information sheet, "Centro Español," prepared by the Historic Tampa/Hillsborough County Preservation Board.

²The current threats to the building were viewed during an on-site inspection by the author of this form in February 1988. They are stated and commented on in a letter from Stephanie E. Ferrell, A.I.A., Director, Historic Tampa/Hillsborough County Preservation Board, to Jerry Rogers, Associate Director, Cultural Resources, National Park Service, April 20, 1988. The text of that letter is included with this study.

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History

Late 19th- and early 20th-century immigration to the United States from Spain and from Spain via Cuba, still Spanish territory until 1898, was not massive, but was impressive for the entrepreneurial skills and artistic talents it brought into the country. Aside from New York City, this immigration was localized in the Southeastern United States, especially in Florida, the part of the mainland closest to Cuba. First, Key West was the center of this immigration, which was bound up in major part with the cigar industry; that isolated island yielded to Tampa after Vincente Ybor founded Ybor City in 1886.

El Centro Español was founded as a mutual aid organization and social center for the Spanish elite who dominated Ybor City, but was receptive to those of Cuban birth who embraced the mores and politics of the home country. This group felt a need to distinguish itself from those of Cuban birth who favored revolution in Cuba. A small group met in the spring of 1891 to discuss the "anti-social atmosphere prevailing against the Spanish."⁶ Ignacio Haya of the Sanchez-Haya cigar company donated funds for the first building and became the president; Enrique Pendas, one of the owner's of the city's third cigar factory, assumed the vice-presidency.

The first clubhouse, at 16th Street and 7th Avenue in Ybor City, was an ornate wooden building that contained a theater, dance hall, cantina, and classrooms.⁷ From the very beginning, the Centro was a success, finding generous financial and moral support. Its membership expanded rapidly to 926 by 1901, and 2,687 in 1908.

The original Centro's facilities were inadequate for this greatly expanded membership. A decision was made to build two new social halls, each with its own theater, cantina, and ballroom. One, El Centro Español de Tampa, replaced the original structure in Ybor City; the other was to serve the Spanish community in West Tampa. Both were completed in 1912.

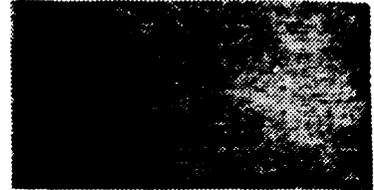
El Centro Español thrived in the years between World War I and the Great Depression, as its young immigrant membership entered prosperous middle age and a second generation grew up. Its recreational facilities and ballroom were active. Its theater hosted an array of performances by the international stars of the Spanish-speaking world. And its medical service provided some of the best care to be had in the South.

During and after World II, however, El Centro Español and the other ethnic clubs of Tampa lost much of their vigor. One important factor was the extent to which their social welfare aspects were more and more embraced by government and private insurance schemes, such as Social Security. The social and cultural changes brought about by immigration restrictions, Prohibition, the Great Depression, and World War II also weakened the clubs.

The immigration "reform" of the 1920s virtually stopped the flow of new, young immigrants from Spain, Italy, and the West Indies, which had sustained the clubs. From then on, the overall average age of the membership increased quickly. The native-born children of the immigrants were less likely to join.

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Prohibition also dampened Latin club life. Social drinking had been an accepted custom in the Spanish culture. During Prohibition, however, businessmen tended to find someplace more private than the cantina to transact their business.

The Depression hit the community hard. Because cigars were a luxury item, many cigarworkers lost their jobs and stopped paying their club dues. Others moved out of the community to look for different work.

World War II took the children of the Latin community and mixed them with the rest of the population in the Armed Forces. Physically and socially, the Latin community, particularly of the second and third generations, mixed more freely with the general Tampa population in the suburbs after the war. In the 1960s, redevelopment in Ybor City further weakened the residential membership base of the clubs.

Beset by these factors, El Centro Español finally determined, early in the 1980s, that it needed to give priority to the maintenance of its clinic, and in 1983 sold its long-time club building. Since 1983, in private hands, the building has remained vacant. The new owners' plans to reuse it adaptively have, to date, been unsuccessful.

Footnotes

¹This insightful observation was made by Gary R. Mormino and George E. Pozzetta, The Immigrant World of Ybor City, Italians and Their Latin Neighbors in Tampa, 1885-1985 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), p. 176.

²Ibid., p. 178.

³A March 31, 1988, memorandum by Donna Hole, Historic Preservationist, Historic Tampa/ Hillsborough County Preservation Board, "Centro Espanol, Ybor City, in the Gulf Coast Immigration Context," provides documentation for the rarity of the El Centro Espanol as a surviving ethnic club and for its preeminence among Spanish clubs. The memorandum is appended to this study.

⁴Mormino and Pozzetta, op. cit., p. 205.

⁵Ibid., pp. 203-204.

⁶Ibid., p. 177.

⁷The remainder of this brief history of El Centro de Espanol is adapted from the Florida Master Site File Site Inventory Form for prepared by Deborah Heath and Julie Kaekel for the Historic Tampa/Hillsborough County Preservation Board.

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