The Maitland Art Center, with its quirky Mayan Revival architecture and its resident ghost, is now a National Historic Landmark, joining such iconic places as the Empire State Building, the Gateway Arch, the White House, Hoover Dam and Walden Pond.

Located on West Packwood Avenue near Lake Sybelia, the center is the crown jewel of an ensemble of facilities known collectively as the Art & History Museums—Maitland.

The sprawling complex of galleries, studios and gardens was already listed on the National Register of Historic Places, which encompasses about 80,000 sites. An honor, to be sure, but not an exceedingly exclusive one.

By contrast, there are only 2,532 designated National Historic Landmarks. The program, administered by the National Parks Service, recognizes sites, structures, objects or districts “that exceptionally illustrate or interpret the heritage of the United States.”

The center has become the first National Historic Landmark in the four-county area — Orange, Osceola, Lake and Seminole — and just the 44th in the state.

In greater Central Florida, there are four other National Historic Landmarks: the Windover Archaeological Site and the Cape Canaveral Air Force Station, both in Brevard County; and the Bok Tower Gardens and the Florida Southern College Architectural District, both in Polk County.

“Our community truly has a hidden gem in the Maitland Art Center,” says Maitland Mayor Howard Schieferdecker. A gem indeed. But certainly no longer a hidden one.

In 1937, artist and architect Jules André Smith built the Maitland Art Center, then called the Research Studio, to foster artistic experimentation and to provide artists with an inspirational environment in which to work.

While the center is billed as one of the few surviving examples of Mayan Revival architecture in the Southeast, its imagery is drawn from many sources. European, Chinese, Christian, African, Persian and, of course, Mayan signs and symbols mix and mingle in an otherworldly way.

Over the next two decades, until his death in 1959, Smith lived and worked at the facility, as did many other artists. He hand-carved most of the center’s signature sculptural reliefs using a special pivot table that could turn upward. A replica of the table, which Smith invented, is on display in one of the studios.

Some say Smith’s spirit still roams the grounds, checking on unsuspecting artists and making certain that the dozen or so whimsically adorned buildings and colorfully landscaped courtyards are being properly maintained.

“ “The campus is an exceptionally important example of rare

The courtyard showcases ornate architectural design in a natural setting.
Mayan Revival architecture from the Art Deco period,” says Andrea Bailey Cox, executive director of the Art & History Museums-Maitland. Other facilities under the same umbrella organization include the Maitland Historical Museum, the Telephone Museum, the Waterhouse Residence Museum and the Carpentry Shop Museum.

“What makes the center especially significant is the fact that it was truly a masterpiece, created over 22 years with one singular artistic vision.”

Mayan Revival architecture, considered to be an iteration of Art Deco, was used primarily for commercial buildings in the 1920s and 1930s.

Some residential architects, most notably Frank Lloyd Wright, were also intrigued. Wright’s Ennis House, for example, was built in 1923 using pre-Columbian motifs and interlocking pre-cast concrete blocks. The house, located in Los Angeles, is replete with bas-relief ornamentation.

“There was a lot of archeological discovery going on in the 1930s, which fueled the American imagination and interest in the Mayan culture,” explains Bailey Cox, who adds that the style never achieved wide popularity and fell out of vogue after a decade or so.

Publicity surrounding the center’s designation has already attracted new categories of visitors, notes Bailey Cox. Among them are curious architects, artists and historians from around the country.

University of Virginia architectural historian Richard Guy Wilson recently toured the center and pronounced it “one of the most inspiring creations in the United States, in which you’re transported to another realm — almost a dream — which is the purpose of great works of art.”

As a practical matter, the designation makes the center more competitive when seeking grant money, always a crucial consideration for organizations tasked with maintaining aging buildings. And National Park Service staffers are available to offer guidance on preservation issues.

“As awareness and support increases, we can accomplish our vision of engaging artists and building our public programming,” says Bailey Cox. She also aims to leverage the center’s heightened national profile with a lineup of innovative outreach programs and an ambitious roster of restoration and improvement projects.

On Jan. 8, the center will celebrate the designation with a public ceremony. Guests will include a former resident, Peter Banca, son of the original gallery director, who’ll speak about his experience growing up in an artist colony.

In the meantime, Smith’s specter must surely be pleased about what’s happening — and what’s about to happen — at the funky five-acre enclave, tucked just minutes from Maitland’s busy commercial corridor along U.S. 17-92.

“One of our goals is to return the campus and the studios back to their original states, and to
have artists living and working in them,” says Bailey Cox.

In Smith’s original studio, a north-facing window that had been boarded up for two decades, now opens onto a garden and provides workspace for emerging artists.

The Bok studio, once home to patron Mary Curtis Bok during her visits, now hosts the center’s Artists-in-Action program, which provides non-residential studio space for emerging or established artists.

And work is underway to reclaim painted-over murals on the interior walls. “It’s going to require a lot of delicate hand work to separate out the white paint from the murals underneath,” says Bailey Cox.

A suite of offices will soon be transformed into an artist residence with adjoining workspaces and more classrooms. And the courtyard across the street, which was built as an outdoor chapel and remains a popular venue for weddings, will be restored and some sculptures now in storage will be reinstalled.
A master gardener is sprucing up the landscaping around the recently restored lily pond, once chlorinated and now stocked with Koi fish.

Next door, the Germaine Marvel building, originally an artist residence and now a special-events space, has been expanded and renovated. Track lighting and gallery hardware equip the interior for small exhibitions, while a majestic oak tree stands watch over a new sculpture garden.

Future plans call for transforming the shuffleboard courts into a multipurpose outdoor plaza. That project will be funded by the Maitland Rotary Club.

Some aspects of the center, though, will be left alone. Originally, the majority of the exterior bas-reliefs were hand painted in vivid colors. But decades of sun, wind and rain erosion took their toll.

“We didn’t restore the colors because there’s so much debate [among preservationists] over whether one can reproduce the master’s hand,” says Bailey Cox. “We’ve left the exterior reliefs in their present condition, and now use them as educational tools to talk about the importance of preservation.”

Bailey Cox had been executive director of the Maitland Historical Society when it merged with the Maitland Art Association in 2010. The combined organization then embarked on a campaign to brand and promote the city’s cultural attractions under the Art & History Museums-Maitland umbrella.

Since taking the helm, Bailey Cox has pursued a vision that fosters the erstwhile colony’s core ideals of collaboration and experimentation.

She’s particularly proud of the Artist-in-Residence Program, which started in 2013 and provides three-, six- or nine-week residencies that include studio space and housing. The nationally competitive program has hosted four artists so far.

Her development efforts have resulted in a 116 percent increase in annual giving over the past three years. An array of new community outreach programs have been launched. And, of course, there’s the National Historic Landmark designation, which was the culmination of a team effort that also involved architectural historian Christine Madrid French, who completed the voluminous nomination forms and gathered supporting documentation.
As a result of her accomplishments, Bailey Cox, who has a B.A. in art history from New College in Sarasota, recently earned a Martin Bell Scholarship for the Rollins College Executive MBA program. One such scholarship is awarded annually to a senior not-for-profit professional who demonstrates outstanding leadership.

Oh, about that ghost. Bailey Cox won’t come right out and say she believes the stories that have been reported by past staffers and several visitors over the years.

But, when politely pressed during an interview last year, she told Winter Park Magazine about an ethereal encounter that occurred shortly after she became executive director:

“I saw a gentleman with gray hair, with his back turned to me. To this day, everyone swears that nobody was on campus that early, and that I saw André working in the studio.”

If she happens upon Smith again, he ought to glance up from his carving table and give her a big thumbs up.

Karen LeBlanc is a Design TV host, writer and blogger. Her show, The Design Tourist, airs on thedesignnetwork.com and offers a global dose of design inspiration. Subscribe to her blog, insidedesign.tv, for news on the latest trends and tastemakers in art, architecture, home fashion and design plus more videos.

More than 200 reliefs, sculptures and murals can be found throughout the campus. The words inscribed here are from a poem popularly known as “The Gate of the Year,” written in 1908 by British sociologist Minnie Louise Haskins.

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