

# New McDonald's fulfills Ybor City's special order

■ The historic district and the chain found a happy medium. Why don't others? Most communities don't ask.

By BILL VARIAN  
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**YBOR CITY** — With its red-brick facade, tin roof overhangs and center rising like a lecturer's perch, the building harkens to the old cigar warehouses nearby.

Wood paneling and trim ring the inside. Large murals and photographs stare down on diners. Faux antique lanterns hang from the exposed warehouse-style ceiling.

Just the latest addition to Ybor's many stylish bistros.

"When they were building it, I was like: You sure they're going to make a McDonald's here?" said Ybor resident Marisol Morales, who lives a few blocks away on 11th Street.

No, this is no ordinary McDonald's with its golden

arches, red shingles, easy-to-degrease tile and fixed pedestal swivel chairs.

"It's fancier," said Morales' son, Arami Martinez, 13. The menu is the same. There's no McCuban for sale. But the store's slick design has wowed new patrons who, to coin a McDonald's jingle, are lovin' it.

It's rare that a chain restaurant or store wins raves with its look. More often, large chains move into town with ready-made, easily recognizable designs. Their arrival typically signals the conversion of distinct places into Anywhere, U.S.A.

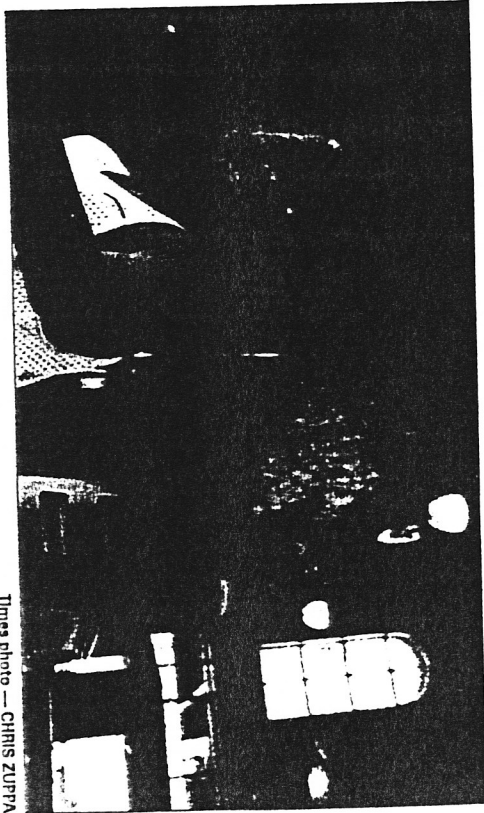
Think Dale Mabry or State Road 60 with their cacophony of stuccos, grant signs and message boards and unending expanses of asphalt.

The creation of this swanky new McDonald's raises the question: Why doesn't this happen more often?

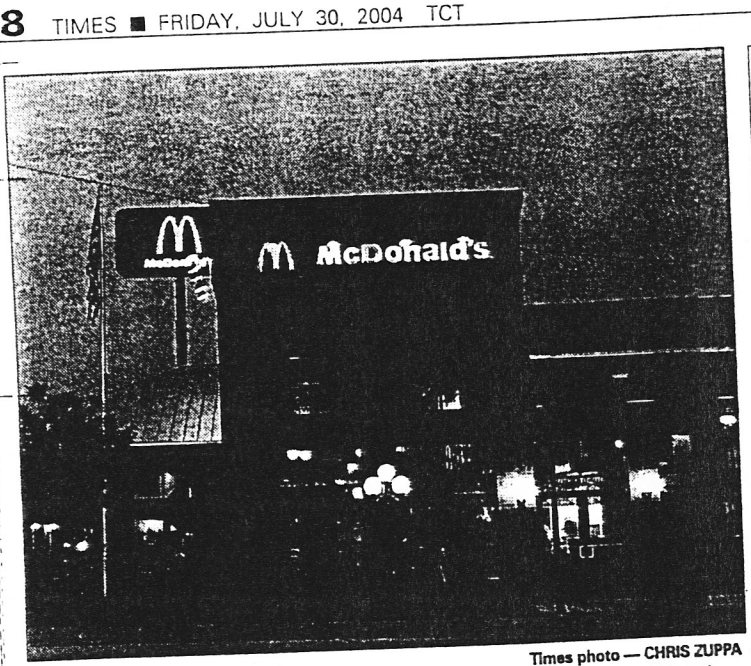
To Del Acosta, the city of Tampa's manager of historic preservation, the answer is simple.

"Because nobody asks them," he said. "So many communities — how do I put this accurately — are too lazy to ask."

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Times photo — CHRIS ZUPPA  
Roberto Whittaker Jr., 6, waits for his father to order food for him and his two brothers last Friday at the new McDonald's in Ybor City.



Times photo — CHRIS ZUPPA

Cheeseburger in paradise? Maybe. The new McDonald's has the same menu but tried to fit in with brickly Ybor.

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Ybor City asks through the Barrio Latino Commission, an appointed body that reviews architectural designs and site plans for new development in the nationally recognized historic district. The Barrio is backed by a set of development codes meant to preserve the feel of Ybor's deep Latin roots, symbolized by the brick cigar factories.

The codes have evolved over 30 years or so, and the district has expanded. It includes the McDonald's at 2101 E 13th Ave., at the main Interstate 4 ramp into Ybor.

McDonald's took over the site of a former Hardee's, which had the look of any other Hardee's. Across the street is a typical Burger King, with its sandwich motif sign and encircling drive-through.

From the start, when U.S. Restaurant Properties Operating LP proposed the McDonald's, it sought to set itself apart with a distinct design.

"They wanted very much to have a building that kept the integrity of the area," said Blake Waddell, marketing supervisor in Florida for McOpCo, the operating company for McDonald's corporate-owned restaurants.

The proposal came on the heels of the Barrio's lengthy fight with a developer proposing to build one of Ybor's largest new entertainment complexes. Penet Land Corp. wanted to turn the site of the former Blue Ribbon grocery store on Seventh Avenue into a 170,000-square-foot, \$20-million center

them." McDonald's eventually redesigned the drive-through entry and windows so that they are confined to the east side of the building. The side facing N 21st Street has an outdoor porch with seating.

Todd Pressman, a consultant hired by the developers to help them navigate the political process of winning approval, says it worked out for both sides.

But he said such heavy scrutiny and subjectivity carries risks. Aesthetic rules are hard to quantify and can be abused by governmental bodies.

"It's a hell of a lot more hoops," he said. "That's the danger of having a hard-riding architectural board. Some people are going to give up and not meet those standards and not develop."

Garcia, who designed the Spain restaurant downtown and the transit stations in Ybor City and the Channel District, said the market plays a bigger force in whether a developer will stick it out.

"It's really about how badly you want to be there," he said. "If you want to be there, then you adjust to the regulation."

Of course, not everyone lives in a historic district with regulations governing appearance. Tampa has historic districts in Ybor, Old Hyde Park, Tampa Heights and Seminole Heights, each with design restrictions.

But Acosta, the city's historic preservation manager, says he gets about 500 requests a year to develop within a district and that most make it