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MIAMI 21

Can Miami 21 plan replicate Biscayne Boulevard's revival?

A once-seedy area of Biscayne Boulevard has been brought to life. Could the Miami 21 rezoning plan do the same for the rest of the city?

Urban rebirth on Biscayne Boulevard

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There is nothing accidental about the urban rebirth now convincingly altering a formerly desolate 12-block stretch of Biscayne Boulevard north of the Omni.

In a city designed for cars, not people, what you see today on the Boulevard is something completely different: a walkable, workaday neighborhood of shops and apartments, the result of good old-fashioned urban planning by, yes, the city of Miami.

Could the city's ambitious and controversial Miami 21 rezoning plan -- to be considered by the City Commission Thursday after years of delay -- replicate the Boulevard's revival across the city?

That question is central to the debate over the sweeping plan, which would toss out the city's unwieldy, auto-oriented zoning code for a new, and ostensibly simpler, set of rules first tested along this length of the Boulevard.

There is little magical or glamorous along the 12 blocks, from Northeast 18th to 30th streets. It's no South Beach. But the success of city planners' efforts, using principles that underpin Miami 21, seem undeniable: They have fostered commerce and pedestrian traffic by mixing retail and residential uses, while retooling how new buildings meet the street to make them sidewalk-friendly.

Along sidewalks where prostitutes once owned the night, there are people pushing baby strollers -- with babies in them. There are people riding bicycles, jogging, shopping, walking dogs, grabbing lunch or coffee with a friend -- even *walking* to work.

Never mind Starbucks (although there is a new one anchoring the north end of the reviving stretch, at 30th Street). If dog groomers are any measure, the Boulevard along the old Edgewater neighborhood has truly arrived. It has two.

"You know what's attractive? There are dry cleaners and restaurants and all the little conveniences you need, and there didn't used to be," said David Carolan, director of sales for the new City 24 residential and commercial project on 24th Street, whose ground floor is home to a personal training gym, wellness center and the New York Bagels shop.

“There is a new shop every month, and we're in the worst economic downturn in 75 years,” he said.
“That's pretty powerful.”

LIVING AND WORKING

Across the Boulevard, Joe Jacobs moved his medical-billing business into an office in a condo and commercial building at 25th Street that houses the popular Mario the Baker restaurant.

On a side street, Jacobs' office door opens directly to the sidewalk. Next door, a doctor is moving in. Above them is a recording studio. The offices conceal the side of the building's massive garage and have windows looking onto the street.

Jacobs lives upstairs in the condo tower.

“It's very safe,” he said, stepping outside his office for a smoke on a recent afternoon. “You see people out walking dogs at 1 a.m. I'm impressed with what they've done in this area.”

Still, Miami 21, a cornerstone of Miami Mayor Manny Diaz's administration, has proven a contentious approach. Neighborhood activists complain it does too little to tame development, even as architects and developers' lawyers contend it's too restrictive, making commissioners wary of tackling the plan amid election-year politics.

Obscured in the debate over building heights and property rights has been one overarching goal of the plan: reshaping development to help resuscitate aging, depressed districts like the Boulevard.

The key to revival on Biscayne Boulevard has been an influx of residents drawn by reasonable prices and rents at several new buildings lined at street level with commercial space.

New businesses, including a rock memorabilia store and a bicycle shop, have also moved into historic 1920s buildings protected by the city in recent years.

It's not happenstance, city officials say, but a strategy embraced by city planning Director Ana Gelabert-Sanchez and her staff under the tenets of New Urbanism.

The movement has reshaped development around the world, reviving dormant traditions of urban design that put pedestrians first -- mixing retail with residential, lining sidewalks with storefronts to encourage foot traffic, concealing garages and, in some cases, shading sidewalks with arcades.

“It makes a real city, which everyone has been clamoring for,” Gelabert-Sanchez said.

Those principles, which underpin Miami 21, stand in contrast to the car-is-king, suburban template of parking lots, blank walls, exposed garages, obtrusive driveways and set-back, isolated buildings that under the current code had long dominated -- and deadened -- city streets.

The present code has produced places like the Doubletree Grand condo-hotel in the Omni district, and the residential towers along Brickell: self-contained buildings designed to be entered by car, with expansive driveways and yawning garages that make little accommodation for pedestrians.

“Obviously, there's a return to urban living, and what's succeeding are places with good, 24-hour urban character,” said land-use lawyer and Miami 21 supporter Neisen Kasdin, a former Miami Beach mayor and vice chairman of Miami's downtown Development Authority, pointing to the success of new pedestrian-friendly districts like Mary Brickell Village.

But the Boulevard's transformation has come only through lengthy negotiation and arm-twisting with developers, and on larger projects only -- the result of expanded review powers for city planners approved by the commission several years ago.

Miami 21 would make pedestrian-friendly urban designs the law, and extend those rules to buildings that now escape review because they are too small.

The new code would also bar the type of buildings that went up during the recent boom on the side streets of Edgewater leading to Biscayne Bay: overscaled towers with stark garages and walls fronting sidewalks in a formerly low-scale neighborhood, the result of generous zoning allowances 20 years ago. Miami 21 would still allow the larger buildings, but require better design.

THE CHANGES

The Miami 21 changes, city planners say, would apply principally to new construction or extensive renovations along commercial corridors. Most properties, including those in residential neighborhoods, would be largely unaffected.

But some architects and lawyers contend Miami 21, which was meant to simplify the convoluted layers of the current code, is even more complex and extensive, making it harder to figure out how much a developer or homeowner can build on a particular property.

“We want pedestrian cities, we want parks and green space. No one disagrees with that,” said architect Bernard Zyscovich, a New Urbanism critic. “But it’s a wholesale change for the city, like a heart transplant, and the consequences haven’t been thought through.”

Zyscovich says Miami 21 unduly restricts building design to the point that the city -- especially in high-density areas like downtown -- would become a monotonous landscape of big, square buildings. Land-use lawyer Carter McDowell, a leading critic of Miami 21, says other changes, including new fees for building super-tall, amount to an illegal restriction of property rights.

Zyscovich says the city can get the urban-friendly design it wants without Miami 21 by requiring that garages be screened or concealed with retail and residential units at ground level.

“If you simply do that, you don’t have to change the whole code, and you leave the architect freedom to do a better building,” he said.

Paradoxically, neighborhood activists say Miami 21 doesn’t go far enough, failing to accomplish the goal that gave rise to the effort: limiting the size of tall buildings abutting low-scale residential areas.

In some places, including Southwest 27th Avenue, Miami 21 would allow overscaled buildings next to single-family and duplex neighborhoods, they complain. And although the tall structures would have to step back from their smaller neighbors in a stair shape to lessen their intrusiveness, critics say that doesn’t solve the problem.

“There are a whole lot of issues they have not resolved, or they say they resolved and when you read it, they didn’t really resolve,” said Hadley Williams, a leader with Miami Neighborhoods United, a group that opposes Miami 21.

But city planners and their consultants at the Miami firm of Duany Plater-Zyberk insist the new code is far clearer than the old, closing loopholes and substituting diagrams for pages of legal verbiage.

They say they sought to balance property rights with neighborhood protection -- though not always to everyone’s satisfaction.

“The negative voices are the loudest,” said the city’s lead consultant, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk. “Everyone is pointing to the agenda they didn’t get, but they’re not seeing the bigger picture.”

Plater-Zyberk and city planning chief Gelabert-Sanchez say architects will have almost complete freedom. The main restriction: tall buildings would have to step back after eight stories to allow light to reach streets.

“Once you learn it, we think it is much simpler,” Gelabert-Sanchez said. “And if you want to do something spectacular, a bold statement, or dedicate a space in front to a civic plaza, you can do it.”

The city began imposing its sidewalk-friendly principles on the Boulevard just before the real-estate boom hit full tilt. Building Zero was Cite, a mixed-use project occupying a full block on 19th Street.

Though some later buildings on Biscayne Boulevard would be larger, the template was set at Cite: The garage sits in the interior of the block, surrounded almost entirely by living and retail space, and no driveways interrupt the arcaded Boulevard sidewalk.

On side streets, townhomes hug the sidewalks. One row consists of “live-work” units, with office space downstairs and living quarters upstairs, occupied by, among others, a psychologist, interior designer and real-estate broker.

The complex is home to the Boulevard revival's earliest success, The Daily Creative Food Co., 2001 Biscayne Blvd., a deli packed at lunchtime since opening three years ago. Former New Yorker Adam Meltzer, the owner, saw the potential and liked how the building allows streetside dining.

“People told me I was crazy. But on day one we had a line of people out the door,” he said.

Meltzer plans to expand into a space next door and begin opening for dinner. The best proof of success, he notes, is his new competition -- the salad and smoothie chains that moved in two doors down.

“The more, the merrier. It makes the whole area look better,” he said. “Look, this is not Lincoln Road. We're not trendy. We're here for the long haul.”

Leonardo Rodriguez witnessed the transformation first hand. He moved into Edgewater off the Boulevard when he first arrived from Cuba 15 years ago. “It was really bad. You couldn't walk on the street. I was robbed twice,” he recalled.

Eventually he moved to Miami Beach. But then he saw what was happening on the Boulevard, and chose a generous, affordable space on the ground floor of a new building on 18th Street to open his pet-grooming and boarding business, Pet Place.

“It's like New York, you see the same people all the time. They shop in the neighborhood, they walk their dogs,” he said. “It looks like a brand new city.”