

## River

### Renaissance

*After decades of neglect, the industrial Miami River is now an urban redevelopment hotspot. Lofts, new restaurants and high rises are transforming its banks. Can a balance be struck between the historic waterway and the invasion of urban chic? By Johanna Marmon*

On a blustery morning at the beginning of August, a group of about 40 children – all wearing their summer camp’s same brightly colored t-shirts – line up for roll call at Bayside Marketplace’s marina. After sounding off to their names, the kids board a double-level tour boat for a meandering ride along the Miami River, the 5.5-mile long waterway that runs literally through the heart of Miami. The tour, arranged by the Miami River Commission – a 16-member group formed in 1998 by the state legislature to serve as the river’s watchdog – is meant to instill in these children the importance of the waterway and its role in Miami’s history.

As the boat churns out of Bayside’s harbor and toward the mouth of the river – where the ruddy water spills into turquoise Biscayne Bay – it’s hard not to feel that this should be a required activity for any resident of Miami, not just schoolchildren. It’s like seeing the city from an entirely new perspective, even as the lumbering vessel slides past familiar landmarks. First there is Brickell Key, with its cluster of condos and offices. Then comes the Miami Circle, the ancient native burial ground that was saved from development a couple of years ago and is now set (pending a bill in the legislature) to become a part of Biscayne National Park. The jaws of the Brickell Avenue bridge open to allow the vessel through, the financial district’s glass towers glittering on the left, downtown’s central business district looming on the right.

Then comes the disconnect: Wherever you look, there are overgrown empty lots that dot the south and north banks of the narrow channel. You cannot help but wonder: how have developers ignored such opportunities?

The reality is that, regardless of past apathy, developers are no longer ignoring the river. They have been snapping up parcels of land that are among the last remaining pieces of waterfront real estate in South Florida. From One Miami – the Related Group’s massive undertaking at the mouth of the river – to the new One River View Square office building next to the Miami Avenue bridge, the waterway is undergoing a dramatic transformation that has been decades in the making. A virtual flurry of condominium and office projects are either underway or in planning stages, with a crop of new restaurants sprouting up on the river’s edge. Tying everything together will be a \$24 million public “riverwalk,” planned to run the entire length of the waterway, paid for in part by developers and in part by public and donated funds.

At the forefront of the river’s rejuvenation is Lissette Calderon, a young developer who’s building two residential projects on the south bank of the river. Calderon saw opportunity in the river long before the current spate of interest took hold. Her flagship project, the 199-unit Neo Lofts, has just topped off at its river site west of I-95 after more than two years in the pipeline; four blocks closer to Biscayne Bay, the 443-unit Neo Vertika is set to rise on a 2.2-acre waterfront site next door to Big Fish restaurant in the Brickell Village area. In a nod to the new interest in the river, Calderon says Neo Lofts is just about sold out, “save for a few remaining developer units.” Neo Vertika, which launched its sales effort about three months ago, is already more than 85 percent pre-sold. Together, her developments represent an investment of more than \$100 million into the riverfront.

“We felt this was one of the last frontiers of waterfront development and we really wanted to capitalize on that,” says Calderon, who cut her teeth working for Related’s Jorge Perez before branching out on her own to build Neo Lofts. “When you look at other cosmopolitan cities like Chicago, for example, that really take advantage of their river, and then you see Miami, which underutilizes it, you

think to yourself, 'Wow, we really need to start doing something here.'”

Neo Vertika will also do its part to help create a neighborhood urban fabric, with 24,000 square feet of retail space in the development’s ground floor. While none of the space has yet been leased, Calderon says there’s been significant interest from potential tenants, ranging from restaurants to retail stores to coffee houses. “We’re going to make sure that when we put retail out there, it will make people who don’t necessarily live there want to come and hang out,” Calderon says. “We not only build for our residents but also for the residents in the neighborhood.” Because Calderon got in on the wave of development early, she was able to offer units in her projects at affordable rates; prices at both Neo Lofts and Neo Vertika start below \$200,000. She says the pricing has attracted true urbanites to the area, young trendsetters who see value in the still-underdeveloped riverfront. “In our two projects I really don’t see any examples of gentrification,” Calderon says. “What we’d like to do is just bring new life to the area, and in the case of Neo Lofts we actually cleaned up an entire city block that was just a bunch of old warehouses when we bought the site.” What she has also done, incidentally, is help drive up property values in the area; she says the Neo Vertika site cost her more than four times than the \$1.66 million she paid for the land where Neo Lofts sits.

While Calderon broke the first riverfront ground, she is hardly alone. Near to Neo Vertika, also on the south side of the river, is the site for Michael Bedzow’s Brickell on the River, a two-tower development totaling more than 700 units. With prices ranging from \$180,000 to \$600,000, Bedzow’s attracting the same type of buyer as Calderon: young couples, and people who work in the central business district but are sick of the commute from places like Kendall.

“People love the fact that we’re so close to Brickell Avenue,” Bedzow says, noting that the project’s 5th Street location is about 500 feet away from Brickell Avenue, which is undergoing its own transformation. “We’re trying to make the development very value conscious for those who work downtown.” Bedzow also

says the river itself has been a big selling point for the development. “People love the fact that they’re on the water. It creates spectacular views.”

Mike Gentry, director of marketing for The Related Group of Florida, says the same about the two-tower One Miami, set to rise dramatically on the north bank of the river. “The river has definitely been a selling point for us on One Miami,” Gentry says. “We really feel like it’s such a prime piece of property because it’s at the mouth of the river where it meets the bay. The views are as good as what you get on South Beach, but in the opposite direction.” Gentry also says the riverwalk will be a critical part of One Miami; Related plans to incorporate several million dollars worth of sculpture and mosaics along its stretch of the promenade. Other planned projects include redevelopment of the Dupont Plaza (next door to One Miami on the north side of the river), the aging ’50s hotel on the site where Henry Flagler built his first luxury hotel in Miami. Well-known developer Ugo Colombo has joined forces with Lionstone Hotels and Resorts on that particular project; Colombo reports that it will be at least 18 months before any forward movement is made on the development, however. “I don’t know if we’re going to do office, a condo, a condo-hotel,” he says. “It’s just too early to tell.”

Further up along the north bank of the river is a project being planned by developer Epoch Corp., which is tentatively called Miami River Village. On the site of a proposed (but never built) Florida Marlins stadium, the village could incorporate up to 3,000 units. Nearby is a site earmarked for the River House Lofts, a four-phase development on North River Drive between SW 2nd and West Flagler streets that will incorporate residential, retail and office space. It’s being planned by Peter Swartz, the owner of the now-defunct East Coast Fisheries restaurant, which stands boarded up next to the site.

New restaurants, too, are on tap for the area. Tony and Virginia Kay – former owners of the Cleveland Hotel and current owners of Finnegan’s and Finnegan’s II on South Beach – are planning five new restaurants on separate parcels along the waterway. The first, Finnegan’s River, is slated to

accommodate 500 people at their 401 SW Third Ave. site. The new eateries will fill the gap between long-time institutions such as Garcia's and Joe's Seafood – up the river in the industrial marine section – and the off-Brickell Big Fish, which has already transformed itself from a river-front dive to an upscale urban hangout (see pg. 78).

Not all of the new development has been met with open arms by residents who currently live in the historic neighborhoods – like Spring Garden, Durham Park and others – nestled along the river. Case in point: Terrazas de Miami River. The proposed 34-story project is slated to rise on the site of the former Dodge Hospital mental institution next door to Sewell Park, a Miami-Dade parks system gem on the river's southwest bank. Ernie Martin, a Spring Garden resident and former director of community and economic development for Miami-Dade County, says the project has angered residents of Durham Park. "It will cast Sewell Park into shadow for most of the day, and we feel like the project isn't compatible with the site," says Martin, who also sits on the Miami River Commission. "But it's within the zoning regulations and the project is going forward."

Similar issues have arisen with Hurricane Cove, a 1,100-unit project planned at 1884 NW North River Dr. Under scrutiny by local residents are plans to eliminate a do-it-yourself boatyard on the site; Greenberg Traurig land use attorney Lucia Dougherty, who represents the project's developer, Tony Acosta, says the boatyard doesn't fit in with the residential use for the site. As it stands now, the River Commission has recommended that the developers and residents meet to try to hammer out a compromise.

And at the old Miami News building adjacent to historic Spring Garden, a 700-unit project is proposed by Royal Atlantic Development that would bring two 25-story buildings to the area. "They're proposing two tall towers, but they're working with us to get it so the buildings make a minimum impact on the view," Martin

says.

In the long run, however, the biggest opposition to development marching up the river may come not from long-time resident but from its entrenched marine industry.

The Miami River Urban Infill Plan, a comprehensive document developed by planners Kimley-Horn Associates for the Miami River Commission and approved in September 2002, divides the river into three distinct sections. The lower river, which runs from its mouth to the 5th Street bridge, is zoned residential. The middle river, from the 5th Street bridge to 27th Street, is zoned for mixed-use development. The largest stretch – from 27th Street to the Salinity dam, where the navigable river ends near Miami International Airport – is zoned industrial. For anyone who ventures to the end of the river, it's bone-fishing clear that the Miami River is first and foremost a working river.

The Miami River is, in fact, the fifth largest port in Florida, following the Port of Miami, Port Everglades, Tampa and Jacksonville. About \$5 billion in trade annually takes place with other shallow-draft ports, primarily in the Caribbean, according to the Miami River Marine Group, a private cooperative of cargo carriers. The river is also home to nine major shipyards and more than a half-dozen smaller yards; the river's Merrill-Stevens boatyard is the oldest continually operating corporation in the state. It moved from Jacksonville – where it was formed in the late 1800s – to its place on the Miami River in 1923, says Phil Everingham, the company's vice president who's been working at Merrill since he was 16. Its facilities at 11th Street and S. North River Drive can accommodate up to 50 boats ranging in size from 30 feet to megayachts of more than 150 feet; Malcolm Forbes Sr. used to have his yacht serviced there.

Everingham says the river will always have a place for the marine industry, but is worried that new residential development could squeeze out some of the smaller yards – such as the one at Hurricane Cove. That would further damage an

industry that Fort Lauderdale has plundered for the past 25 years, he says. "It had been a gradual movement northward," Everingham says, "Then Andrew hit." There's still big boating business on the river, however; Merrill Stevens employs about 150 people with a payroll of more than \$3 million. And a positive step for the industry was recently announced with the purchase of the Jones Boatyard at 3399 NW South River Dr., east of the airport, by Jose Bared and his uncle, Victor Bared. The partners, who also purchased two adjacent acres for expansion, hope to lure some of the big-boat business back from Fort Lauderdale. It's a lucrative catch: according to the Marine Industries Association of South Florida, nearly 800 megayachts visit this area annually, spending an average of \$236,000 each at local boatyards.

Leading the community effort to make the Miami River a priority – both as an economic and environmental asset – is the Miami River Commission. Formed in 1998 by the state legislature, the 16-member commission includes Gov. Jeb Bush, Miami Mayor Manny Diaz and Miami-Dade County Mayor Alex Penelas, along with a slate of citizen appointees. Chaired by attorney Robert Parks, the commission has successfully navigated the "often times historically opposing viewpoints" to form a consensus on community river policy, Parks says. A major achievement of the commission has been its campaign to raise money for dredging the river's channel, something that hasn't been done in 70 years. The lack of dredging has resulted in a buildup of toxic substances and a shallow river bed that limits heavy ships to high tide – leading to inopportune, traffic-jamming openings of the Brickell Avenue bridge.

"There have been many efforts in the past 20 years to get the river dredged," Parks says, who notes that the \$66 million program to restore the river to its natural depth of 15 feet has already been sent out for a bid by the Army Corps of Engineers. "They have all failed because we keep getting back to the same issue. There was a lack of political will to do it. That's all changed now."

The project, which is expected to get underway in the beginning part of 2004, will

be funded 80 percent by the federal government, 10 percent by state government, 2.5 percent by the city and 2.5 percent by the county. As for what's going to be done with the 800,000 tons of sediment that's expected to be removed from the river, "that's also a bid item," Parks says. "When you get that out, you'll have a river then that will be able to service deeper draft vessels without the threat of their propeller wash spewing all that stuff out into the bay." As for future contaminants, Parks notes, it's not the river's cargo freighters that cause the bulk of the waterway's pollutions – it's storm water runoff. "It used to be sewage, and shippers and shipyards because maintenance could be done there, and oil was being dumped and paint being dropped overboard," says Parks, who has been involved with the Miami River for more than two decades. "The real single point source of pollution is you, driving your car down by the river and leaving oil on the road, which translates into runoff during a rainstorm." Parks says the storm water issue is the next big thing the commission will address once dredging gets underway.

Even if all of the river commission's wish list were fulfilled, however, it's unlikely – if not impossible – for the Miami River ever to return to its pristine past. This was the river that the Tequesta Indians still called "sweet water" – the English translation of "miami" – when Mary Brickell's family came and settled on its banks in the late 1800s.

But the sense of life and community which the river once represented for Miami can certainly be brought back, and that is a vision shared by both river preservationists and developers. "We're just big believers in the river and everything it means for Miami in terms of commerce, life and energy," says Lissette Calderon. It's a sentiment echoed by everyone with a stake in the river's future.

## Living History

At Marjorie Stoneman Douglas' 101st birthday party in 1990, the menu was all white foods: turkey, mashed potatoes and vanilla ice cream, her favorites. Sallye Jude hosted the party for Douglas (the environmentalist/author best known for her work in preserving the Everglades) at the Miami River Inn, a collection of four historic homes nestled along the south bank of the Miami River. It's fitting that the birthday party was held at the Inn, for Jude herself is a champion of historic preservation. Along with a group of partners, she purchased the buildings in 1985 and saved them from destruction.

Visiting the inn is like stepping back in time. The wooden structures date from 1906, and are full of period antique furniture that Jude accumulated. In the Tuttle House – named after Miami pioneer Julia Tuttle – an ancient organ sits in one corner of the front room, while claw-foot tubs adorn the bathrooms (which were themselves installed, in a nod to progress, as a part of the buildings' \$5 million restoration). “Henry Flagler used to take guests up the river in canoes, all dressed up in their Sunday best,” Jude says. “We're now finally getting to the point where the river can kind of play that role again.”

While Jude does not oppose the development of highrises, like the Neo Lofts project that looms large in the distance, she is a staunch supporter of helping preserve what's left of Miami's past. “You have to have the infill, but I would like it to be sensitive to the area that it's happening in,” she says. “I think of this neighborhood [east Little Havana] to be the history of architecture of Miami. There are buildings from every period here.” – JM