

# Miami: Gateway to Latin America and the Caribbean but Gated for the Newly Arrived

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In 1994 Miami officially proclaimed itself the Gateway to Latin America during the Summit of the Americas.<sup>1</sup>

Even without that proclamation Miami has long been a gateway, the city site originating at the confluence of the Miami River and Biscayne Bay. First home to the Tequesta Indians, then as a gateway for numerous European explorers, intrepid settlers and adventurers, and most enduringly, its developers.

The region of South Florida, in which Miami is situated, is still a place of intense development. Currently housing <sup>4</sup>.1 million people, two million more are expected to move here by 2015.<sup>2</sup> Most outlying greenfield areas are close to being built out. A growth boundary (imposed only after water shortages became an issue) separates what is left of the Everglades from a sea of single family subdivision-type developments.

Left behind is the typical inner city common to much of North America and as such, Miami suffers from those all too visible problems of downtown disinvestment, inadequate lower income housing opportunities, crime-ridden areas, lack of public amenities, poor public transit networks, vacant lots, derelict buildings, and brownfields, while the surrounding areas cater to sprawling communities, and increased vehicular infrastructure.

Because of these problems, Miami, like many American cities, is indeed the focus of renewed interest, fueled in part by communities caught in the economic downward spiral, by those communities trying to inure themselves from the surrounding problems, and by governments trying to reverse, stem and find alternatives to these trends. Given this scenario Schools of Architecture and Design, are in a position to provide urban studio opportunities where students can interact with local communities and assimilate real-life problems involving economics, politics, social issues, and environment into the design decision-making process.

This paper discusses the complexities of the changing urban palette through the kind of interaction opportunity mentioned above. A study was undertaken of Biscayne Boulevard and its adjacent neighborhoods by the Graduate Urban Design Studio in the Landscape Architecture Program at Florida International University in the winter term of 1997. The paper outlines the objectives of the Urban Design Studio, followed by a review and analysis illustrating the findings, and concludes with some lessons learned.

## Urban Studio Objectives

Many students attending graduate school in Miami grew up in the security of American suburbs or privileged neighborhoods of other countries. Many have never set foot in a downtown unless it was deemed safe. Downtown Miami is not perceived as such. And so part of the pedagogical exercise revolves around reducing, at least in part, the students prejudices about the urban place that is Miami, and introducing them to an authentic urban environment, with all its problems and treasures.

The students initial efforts in studio therefore involve familiarizing themselves with that which is urban. Other American cities are used as investigative models, in tandem, with studies of the neighborhoods of the City of Miami. The students are asked to gather information about the urban problems, conditions and events that have led to the current conditions and what steps are being taken to remedy the situations, what organizations are being formed, who is leading the way in identifying problems, what government agencies if any, are responding to the issues at hand and how. Basically the students perform case studies of both, Miami neighborhoods and of the revitalization efforts in other American cities. The findings are presented in seminar format in class. The results combine to form a panoply of national efforts that help inform the students as to the methods and means potentially available to them. Students must also define whether the results are successful, and if so how are these results measured. In this manner the students are made familiar not only with existing organizations but with how, and why they were formed and with what resources these entities affect change. Students also become familiar with various forms of government, specifically how municipal and regional governments affect the outcomes of revitalization efforts, including, but not limited to, the placement of infrastructure, joint ventures, and strong visions. The students discover not only incentive and grass roots programs, but how they are implemented, by whom, how they work, and the results.

In the course of discovery, layer by layer, the students uncover national trends of economic disinvestment mirrored here in Miami. But the process also brings them face to face with the urban communities which make up Miami. The students uncover local problems, and the efforts being made, or not, as the case may be, in addressing these problems. The students are then expected to pick an area for further study.

## The Circumstances of Biscayne Boulevard

The study area settled upon through this process proved to be an area reflective of a number of urban issues:

- commercial disinvestment for much of the length of Biscayne Boulevard including its immediate downtown portion in spite of numerous reports and plans commissioned and prepared by the municipality, dating back to at least 1979.
- crime, aided by the nature of commerce that is present- cheap motels.
- a viable residential community in close proximity to an ailing downtown in need of residents yet lacking in the most basic local commercial amenities such as grocery stores and banks.
- Biscayne Boulevard, no longer the “gateway to Miami” it once was, now is as featureless as a suburban strip, full of vacant lots, and empty buildings, serving as a speedy vehicular thoroughfare.

- while residential neighborhoods are healthily populated on both sides of the boulevard there is a visible and invisible ‘walling off’ taking place. The east side which is in process of gentrification is effecting road closures and creating gated communities further reducing access for the public to shared recreational amenities.
- pedestrian amenities are poor or lacking, especially with respect to public transport, upon which 20% of the area population relies, especially for getting to and from necessary facilities such as employment and grocery stores which lie outside the study area.
- the most important regional feature, Biscayne Bay is virtually invisible and inaccessible even though at some points it is barely two hundred feet from Biscayne Boulevard.
- lack of low income housing opportunities

The site for the studio was established, precisely because of these circumstances.

The area included Biscayne Boulevard from the downtown core, NE 12 Street up to NE 82nd Street, and the adjacent residential communities lying between the FEC railroad tracks and Biscayne Bay. A corridor of four and half miles, which was divided up into two areas of study, north and south of Interstate 95. The area to be discussed here lies to the north of Interstate 95.

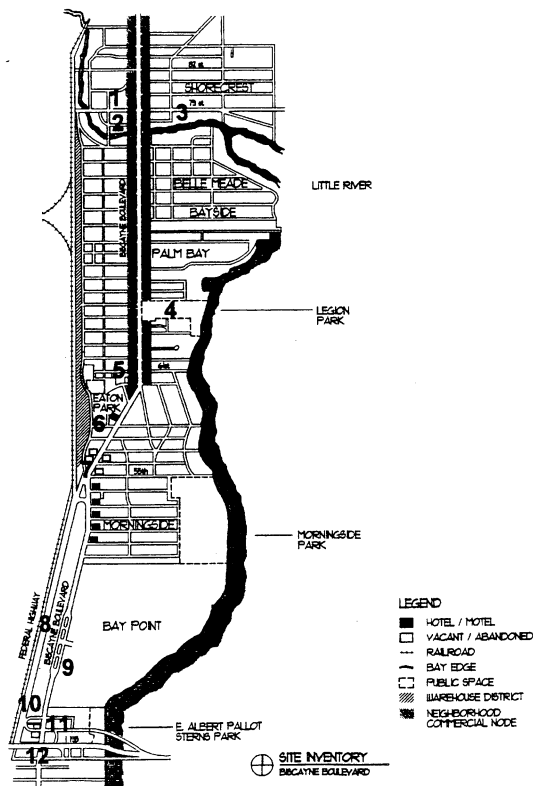


Fig.1 Map of the study area- Biscayne Boulevard neighborhoods from 1195-NE 82nd Street. Biscayne Bay borders the east side of the study area, the FEC Railroad borders the west.

## Site Background

In 1896 the Florida East Coast (FEC) railroad line was built connecting Miami to the rest of the East coast. At that time the only settlement within the study site north of downtown Miami was Lemon City. Accessible by water only, the town dock was located near 70th Street. Subsequent developments included Magnolia Park (1914); Morningside (1925); and Shorecrest (1925). Biscayne Boulevard was conceived as a “Fifth Avenue of the South” during the Florida Building Boom. The last major development of the boom, Biscayne Boulevard opened for through traffic in March 1927.<sup>3</sup> The boulevard right of way cut a swath through the existing residential neighborhoods, and connected the burgeoning downtown Miami to the US Federal Highway at 55th Street, and points north.

Today Biscayne Boulevard is a major vehicular artery in Miami, lined with cheap motels, and used as an alternative to Interstate 95. Commercially zoned, there is nothing remotely reminiscent of Fifth Avenue on the Boulevard. It becomes a vice-ridden highway at night, known for prostitution and drug dealing. What retail there is, is mixed at best, catering to passing car traffic more than local needs, and otherwise interspersed with vacant lots and empty buildings. At its worst it is a sleazy strip dividing two worlds: one, housing newly arrived immigrants, the other, increasingly gated communities across the road bordering the Bay of Biscayne.

Biscayne Boulevard passes through the recently dubbed area of the Upper East Side. Now viewed as a single entity by the residents and the municipality, the Upper East Side is comprised of residential neighborhoods built as planned developments by developers beginning in 1909. In contiguous order from north to south they are:

Shorecrest (1925); Belle Meade (1930-40) located on the site of an earlier, water access only settlement, Lemon City; Palm Bay Club (a condominium development, 1970's); Morningside (1925); Baypoint, (1960's) and Magnolia Park (1914).

All of these developments border the Bay of Biscayne on the east and Biscayne Boulevard on the west. Of the five, Palm Bay Club and Baypoint were built as private developments, with guard houses and 'invitation-only access'. The rest were never gated initially, and in the case of Belle Meade and Morningside spanned both sides of Biscayne Boulevard.

Land use to either side of the boulevard was planned and built as residential with primarily single family homes, with some duplex and multi-family housing on the east side of the boulevard, and more duplex and medium density housing in the area to the west of the boulevard. The architectural palette is of the same vintage and style on both sides of the road. Architecturally eclectic, the styles range from Frame Vernacular (before developers) to Mediterranean (1920's), Art Deco, (30's-40's), Moderne (50's) and so on. The area to the west of the boulevard has the majority of deteriorated structures.

As the communities on the Bay unified in their upscaling, the community to the west of the Boulevard became unified in accommodating the spillover population from neighboring Little Haiti.<sup>4</sup> Home ownership on the west side of the Boulevard is low, as are the public amenities. It is also home to the highest level of unemployment, and the greatest number of low income households, measuring considerably below the median income level of the City of Miami.

The demographics of the area population are mixed but reflect which side of the Boulevard they reside. West of the Boulevard, Haitian and Caribbean natives with a few Hispanic whites, while east of the Boulevard, the population is comprised of mostly Non-Hispanic and Hispanic whites, with a few African American and Caribbean natives.

Ironically while both sides of the boulevard are well-established residential areas, the greatest area of underutilized land is on Biscayne Boulevard itself. A run down strip, it divides the neighborhoods, rather than serves them. And as such it has become the catalyst for the ensuing studies conducted in the past few years.

The Studies reviewed in the studio were as follows:

The Chesapeake Group. *Comprehensive Economic & Marketing Strategic Plan for the Upper Eastside in Miami Florida*, Baltimore: August 1997

The Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT), District VI. *Biscayne Boulevard Enhancement Study*. WPI Number 6114310. July 1997.

Kimley-Horn and Associates. *Biscayne Boulevard Transportation Enhancement Study*. August 1994

City of Miami Department of Planning and Development. *Upper East Side Master Plan*. (UEMP) First Draft May 1997  
Department of Planning, Development and Regulation, Metropolitan Dade County. *Adopted Components Comprehensive Development Masterplan for Miami Dade* Interim Edition, May, 1997.

## Report Synthesis

What surfaced was the fact that none of the report findings had been consolidated, and no final plan had come to synthesize the reports. Of particular concern was the fact that the findings, goals, and objectives seemed to be in direct conflict. While the FDOT was, and is working on traffic improvements such as widening and standardizing the roadway from the 'Broward County line to the Downtown core', the City of Miami is addressing community concerns for economic reinvestment in the boulevard. The former effort is about moving traffic through efficiently with turn lanes, wider streets, and more traffic lanes. The latter is about garnering traffic to support business outlets in the area, by "...turning the street into a more pedestrian-friendly environment [and reducing] volumes and/or speeds of vehicular traffic on Biscayne Boulevard."<sup>5</sup>

Most importantly, the UEMP, appeared to be just that, a plan for the east side of the boulevard. The result of a May 1997 planning charrette, the UEMP addressed a number of issues, some of which figure above. The number one goal of the UEMP was to reduce the level of crime, drug activity and prostitution in the area, which occurs primarily on Biscayne Boulevard. And while the charrette and the subsequent UEMP called to "correct security difficulties and resolve related image issues"<sup>6</sup> through zoning changes and enforcement, the reality turned out to be the blocking off of the remaining non-gated streets to Biscayne Boulevard. This even while stating in the UEMP that "designing the anticipated development along Biscayne Boulevard...to serve as the needed shared corridor to link neighborhoods to the east and the west. And eliminate[e] physical barriers to pedestrian circulation, facilitating traffic flow."<sup>7</sup> was an intended goal. It should be mentioned here that most public amenities for the communities reside on the east side of the boulevard, and they are without exception, fenced off, and closed nightly.

Any references in the UEMP about the west side of the road occur with respect to "tidying" it up. According to the UEMP Executive Summary Goal No. 3, the charrette findings noted to: "review public policies, zoning ordinances, historic preservation regulations, and develop guidelines for housing, especially with regard to the areas west of Biscayne Boulevard."<sup>8</sup> If, as

stated, this side of the boulevard had the low home ownership, low income levels, and high unemployment levels, how was a directive such as this going to be embraced by those living on the west side of the boulevard? Surely there were issues of higher priority than historic preservation on the minds of the residents west of Biscayne Boulevard, given the demographics.<sup>9</sup>

### Lessons Learned

The most successful part of the studio was the exposure of the students to the machinations of government, government programs and the juxtaposition of design and community wants and desires. By performing a synthesis of the previous reports the students glimpsed government and community in action. The studio also brought to light national trends via local issues. What became clear to the students through the process however, were issues of cohabitation and resistance, the problems of synthesizing opposite sides of the issue, both sides of the boulevard, the gated and the excluded. The students acknowledged this dilemma and looked for positive ways to strategize against the status quo, attempting to celebrate the urban multi-cultural fabric and opening doors for communication, as well as for the desperately needed commercial opportunities in order to resurrect Biscayne Boulevard and its treasures.

The students wrote in their report:

...historically, Biscayne Boulevard has been perceived as the Gateway to Miami, an area that strove to be of regional consequence, designed as a grand statement ... Yet closer inspection reveals that while this may have been the Boulevard's ... intent its reality has been far different. Review of something as simple as commercial lot depth fronting the corridor tells a truer tale of the Boulevard's character. These measures are not those of regional scale but rather of community scale. This is a corridor, that while lined for a relatively brief period with successful commercial activity of regional bearing, specifically [small family motels serving transient "snow birds" arriving by automobile, the boulevard] was actually always rooted in its service to the neighborhoods that lie adjacent to its edges. Review of historical materials support the notion that this was an area ... that came together at the corridor edge.

..While the Boulevard now struggles to dialogue with its neighborhood's public spaces that spill north and south along its route, the potential to reinstate such connection is evident. Of equal importance is the Boulevard's ability to link itself to the area's most vital feature – Biscayne Bay. It is therefore the goal of The Design Team to support mechanisms that will allow the Boulevard to be true to itself: to serve as a conduit for community interaction, support commerce that is responsive to the needs of its neighborhood constituency, and allow for it to reconnect to its most precious and beautiful resource of Biscayne Bay.<sup>10</sup>

The latter point is especially significant as Biscayne Bay is

an unrealized potential that lies either dormant, or at the feet of a very few privileged individuals. It continues to elude the City of Miami and the ensuing planning decisions as a resource of great local, regional and national significance, potentially more effective in the long term than any commercial endeavor they may seek to implement. The Bay is never mentioned, either for recreational access, or for simple visual access, yet both are stated as goals in the recreation section of the Comprehensive Master Plan 1997.

There were also stumbling blocks, and historical designation was one. While the past was being preserved against, and in face of the present, the issue of democracy, and democratic use of space was being neglected, in fact being appropriated by those who could do so. The subject of continued debate within the studio was whether historic designation, as proposed in the UEMP was a viable and correct option for the west side of the boulevard given the potential hardship, displacement and gentrification that would most likely ensue. The students had lengthy conversations with the National Trust for Preservation looking for guarantees that the above stated would not occur, and ultimately opted to adopt the directive thinking it would complete the district currently severed by the Boulevard. Not necessarily the view of minority leaders polled afterwards. Historical designation would potentially impose a hurdle that would make residing west of the boulevard difficult for low income individuals and pave the way for further gentrification. At the very least historical designation might be perceived as an invisible barrier to living in the area.

On the topic of barriers, while the students and the municipality, the latter speaking off the record, did not condone or support road closures, and in spite of goals set to the contrary in the UEMP, the fact is that the last open neighborhood has built guardhouses and closed off its streets in December 1999.

Commerce has changed little in the two years since the project was undertaken. The new shops that have opened and those that have remained in business, reflect which side of the boulevard they cater to: west side: Haitian and Caribbean restaurants, fast food and Caribbean food market, second hand furniture stores; east side: upscale furniture stores, framing gallery and an upscale vegetarian bistro.

### What can be transferred from how we learn to how we practice?

In the advent of the renewed interest in studying urban centers and issues, a studio such as this immerses future design practitioners in community and government affairs and while change may not necessarily be effected, or imminent, the awareness of citizens circumstances is heightened.

Further, recognizing all potentials of place and not just of commerce which may come and go, provides a unique base from which to build interest and support for an area, not always the first approach in commercial redevelopment.

## REFERENCES

*Americas Advancing the Common Agenda*. Prepared by the Office of Regional Economic Policy and Summit Coordination, U.S. Department of State, August, 1997.

City of Miami Department of Planning and Development, *Upper Eastside Master Plan*. First Draft, May, 1997.

City of Miami Department of Planning and Development. *Upper Eastside Neighborhood Enhancement Team Target Area, 1997-2000 Draft*

*Eastward Ho! Revitalizing Southeast Florida's Urban Core*, South Florida Regional Planning Council, July, 1996.

Jencks, Charles. *Heteropolis*. London: Academy Editions, 1993.

Official City of Miami Website. [Http://ci.miami.fl.us](http://ci.miami.fl.us)

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The summit was the first of its kind in 27 years, held in Miami, December 1994, President Bill Clinton and fellow leaders from the Americas met to commemorate the region's commitment to democracy and free market economy. The summit themes were: strengthening democracy, promoting economic prosperity, eradicating poverty and discrimination and guaranteeing sustainable development as quoted in summit of the *Americas Advancing the Common Agenda*, Prepared by the Office of Regional Economic Policy and summit Coordination, U.S. department of State, August 1997.

<sup>2</sup> *Eastward Ho! Revitalizing Southeast Florida's Urban Core*, South Florida Regional Planning Council July 1996, p.i

<sup>3</sup> City of Miami Department of Planning and Development, *Upper Eastside Master Plan*. (First Draft, May, 1997):11-12

<sup>4</sup> As such it is eligible and is included in the Community Development Block Grant Target Area for Edison/Little River (often know as Little Haiti)

City of Miami Department of Planning and Development. *Upper Eastside Neighborhood Enhancement Team Target Area 1997-2000 Draft* p 7

<sup>5</sup> City of Miami Department of Planning and Development, *Upper Eastside Master Plan*. First Draft, May 1997, p 5

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.* p19

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.* p19

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.* p5

<sup>9</sup> It should be noted that the Morningside neighborhood has applied for and received historic district designation.

<sup>10</sup> The Design Team:Elizabeth Marshall-Beasley, Cecelia de Grelle, Monica M. Mirkin, Dustin M. Mizell, Giovanni Gonzalez Sangiovanni, Audrey Marion Solomon. *Biscayne Boulevard Corridor Study Book II*. December 1997.