

Once and Future Metropolis

Written by Craig Chester - Special to the BT
September 2012

Miami is finally becoming a city -- but not for the first time



Miami is finally becoming a real city.

That's a phrase you might have heard with increasing frequency lately. Coupled with its sister line: "Miami is finally growing up." These expressions represent the notion that Miami is cultivating the amenities worthy of a world-class urban destination.

Presumably, when people conjure ideas of a "real" city, they imagine a downtown urban core full of vitality, efficient public transportation, art and cultural, signature parks and public spaces, a dynamic mix of businesses, a center for entrepreneurship and innovation, and a hub for a regional economy.

By those measures, Miami is in fact beginning to fall into the category of "real city." We now have a Metrorail link to the airport, a booming arts scene, and new downtown cultural attractions like the Adrienne Arsht Center and the Miami Art Museum under construction. Lights are glowing in the towering condos, and new stores and restaurants are opening daily.

But the idea that Miami is "growing up" and "becoming" a real city implies that it's never been one -- perpetually lacking the qualities of other important places around the world.

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Nothing could be further from the truth. To see what a “real city” looks like, we only need to see the Miami of the past.

Let’s begin with a modern Miami gripe: public transportation. Did you know that Miami once had among the most extensive streetcar (rail) trolley networks in the developed world?

In the era of the Miami streetcar, from 1916 to 1940, Miami boasted 11 trolley lines that crisscrossed the county from Miami Beach to the City of Miami and even down to Coral Gables. Between the streetcars and Henry Flagler’s FEC railroad that linked Miami with the rest of Florida, rail coverage in Miami in the 1920s dwarfed what we have in 2012.

You read that correctly. In 1925 you could hop aboard a trolley and ride over the County Causeway (now the MacArthur) to Miami Beach. That line was torn out in 1939. If it existed today, not only would it represent a sorely needed transportation link, but it would certainly be one of the nation’s foremost transit-oriented tourist attractions.

Back on the mainland, the Coral Gables Rapid Transit Electric Line took riders from downtown Miami to Miracle Mile in 12 minutes, at speeds close to 75 miles per hour along Coral Way. The year was 1925.

In the 1920s, downtown Miami underwent a revolution. The city’s population in 1920 was 30,000. By 1925, annexations and real estate speculation had swelled it to more than 100,000.

With newfound wealth pouring in, all the trappings of more celebrated cities soon followed -- world-class shopping and entertainment, luxurious hotels, and a landmark public space: Bayfront Park, which was once quite grand.

With each passing season, returning visitors would remark that Miami had “grown like magic,” and thus Miami’s commonly known moniker was born -- the Magic City.

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So when did Miami begin to lose its magic? What caused the decline that stripped it of its status as a *real* city? In short, the development pattern we call suburbanization wreaked havoc on the heart of the city. The damage was nearly fatal, and we've only now begun the healing process.

The incessant westward march of suburbia in Miami after World War II had many unintended consequences. As people fled the central city in favor of new homes on former swampland, businesses followed them. Downtown ceased to be a hub of retail activity, which shifted to suburban shopping malls and the ubiquitous, auto-oriented strip malls that now flank our roadways throughout the county.

As automobile commuting became the norm, downtown Miami was utterly recalibrated to accommodate the soaring number of suburbanites who came to work each morning in cars. The disastrous effects of this transformation are quite visible today.

The final Miami streetcar line was torn out in 1940. Entire blocks of downtown buildings (that today would be considered historic) were leveled to create vast parking lots and garages. The landscaped medians of Biscayne Boulevard were paved over. A once thriving nearby neighborhood, Overtown, was literally purchased and razed so I-95 could skirt downtown Miami, a traumatic dismantling from which the community has never recovered.

By the 1970s, downtown had completed its degeneration from a bustling cosmopolitan center to little more than an asphalt conduit to a string of bland office towers surrounded by a patchwork of on-ramps, expressways, and parking lots. By 5:00 p.m. each day, it was deserted. The magic had vanished.

It's a sad story, but it just might have a happy ending.

Today there is new interest and major investment in Miami's urban core, after our misadventures in suburbia. Between the housing crash and a younger "Millennial" generation rediscovering the pleasures of walkable communities (and rejecting the long car commutes of their parents), the energy, wealth, and accompanying amenities are returning to urban Miami.

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Yes, we are becoming a real city -- only it's not for the first time.

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