

Taking It to the Streets

Written by Craig Chester - Special to the BT
October 2012

Shouldn't Wynwood's monthly Art Walk be for people instead of cars?



Have the surging crowds at Wynwood's Second Saturday Art Walk sent the monthly event over a tipping point? In the wake of a code-enforcement crackdown on street performances and vendors during September's Art Walk, concerned citizens and business owners are banding together to work on solutions to ensure the event's continued success.

What began only a few years ago as a subdued evening stroll around Wynwood's NW 2nd Avenue, with visits to local galleries as the centerpiece, has morphed into a regional destination event drawing thousands of people from all backgrounds -- artists, partiers, performers, curious onlookers, and the young and old. Dozens of popular food trucks keep visitors well fed and are a significant draw in themselves.

As the crowds have swelled into the thousands, so have the number of local performers, musicians, and artists who come to Art Walk to perform for a captive audience. While most local galleries close their doors by 8:00 or 9:00 p.m., these performers keep later hours. Until September's Art Walk, you'd be likely to see anything from DJs to stilt-walkers to sidewalk art vendors to impromptu break-dance parties.

With the escalating crowds have come significant growing pains. What was once a leisurely, fun, safe stroll through an emerging arts district has evolved into a competition of sorts --

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thousands of pedestrians jockeying for space on narrow, overcrowded sidewalks while a row of dense, idling, exhaust-belching traffic sits on NW 2nd Avenue. As people spill off the sidewalks and into the street, the conflict between vehicle and pedestrian is exacerbated.

Art Walk is now less about “walking” than it is about delicately squeezing between rows of parked and idling vehicles to make your way down the street.

One thing is abundantly clear: With two lanes of traffic and two parking lanes on NW 2nd Avenue and only about four feet of sidewalk on either side, there is too much space reserved for cars and not enough space for people for this event to be successful, or even safe. The latter is a concern echoed by some Miami police officers I spoke with at August’s Art Walk; they were worried about potential delays for first responders in the event of an emergency.

Recognizing this obvious problem, I began a few months ago building a coalition of local businesses, organizations, and individuals interested in turning Art Walk into an “open streets” event that would close NW 2nd Avenue to motor vehicles between 23rd and 29th streets and open it up to people.

The “Open Streets Project” is a collaboration between two national organizations -- the Alliance for Biking and Walking and the Street Plans Collaborative -- that support initiatives to temporarily close streets to automobile traffic so that “people may use them for walking, bicycling, dancing, playing, and socializing.”

The movement on Facebook is called “Put the WALK into Wynwood’s Art Walk” (@WalkWynwood on Twitter) and we are calling for a temporary street closure to allow visitors, local performers, and vendors to fill the street rather than a giant, angry traffic jam. The premise is simple: If Wynwood is known for its street art, then it’s time we put the art (and people) in the street for everyone’s safety and enjoyment.

While progress is being made in generating support and the funding required to pull off an open street event, there is still work to be done. Not all the gallery owners are sold on the idea, with the Wynwood Arts District Association recently voting against it at a September board meeting.

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However, what happened at September's Art Walk may change their minds, if they care about the future success of the event. Last month Miami police and the local Neighborhood Enhancement Team staged a crackdown on impromptu street performers during Art Walk, sending street artists, DJs, and vendors packing. Regular attendees could sense a different vibe in the air; something was missing without the action on the street. The event was sterile.

While things like open-container laws were rightfully enforced, stifling the artists and local performers who rely heavily on Art Walk for their livelihoods over dubious permit requirements does not bode well for the future of the event.

Jeanine Joysmith, a writer for the local blog S.Y.L.I.E (Support Your Local Indie Everything) is calling for an open forum among local businesses, the Wynwood Arts District Association, artists, and concerned citizens to come together and discuss how the event can continue to be inclusive. "None of us benefit if Second Saturdays are shut down or certain people are excluded," says Joysmith. "Temporary street closures are only the beginning to keeping Art Walk a communitywide event for artists, gallerygoers, and vendors."

It's important to recognize that Art Walk needs a community-sourced strategy to ensure its future success in the midst of enormous crowds, popularity, and growing pains.

The next step is making it happen.

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