

## DWNTN UPTRN, Part 2

Written by Pamela Robin Brandt Photos by Silvia Ros

There's only one good way to see the new downtown Miami: On foot

By day it was strictly a 9-to-5 business area with mostly low-rent support amenities -- fast-food joints for office workers, discount electronics and luggage stores for tourists. At night it was, in a word, dead.

But that was downtown Miami then.

Suddenly, almost overnight, downtown seems to have transformed into an exciting, vibrant, night-and-day live, work, and play zone. In 2009 alone, according to statistics from Miami's Downtown Development Authority, 60 new businesses opened, and not one of them was a discount electronics and luggage emporium. The majority were independently owned, individualistic restaurants and lounges with only-in-Miami personality to spare.

According to Alex Gonzalez, founder of the social-networking website Miami Urban Life and downtown Miami resident since late 2007: "Downtown took a major upturn in 2009. It's like night and day."

Actually a closer look at the DDA's figures shows that not *all* of downtown's upturn has been quite so sudden. Of the 60 new businesses, 28 set up shop in relatively affluent Brickell, which the DDA considers part of "downtown" Miami (see map). Brickell's restaurant numbers have been on the rise for several years. In contrast, only eight new businesses opened last year in the northernmost sector of the DDA's territory, an area called the Media and Entertainment District.

It's really the formerly blighted Central Business District (CBD) where revival reached warp speed last year: 23 new businesses, 18 of them restaurants -- and all those are doing well enough to still be open in 2010. In comparison, ten CBD restaurants opened in 2008, four of which had closed by 2009.

"Quality restaurants are traditionally the first retail to open in emerging areas," says Alyce Robertson, director of the DDA, a quasi-independent City of Miami agency charged with improving the quality of life for downtown businesses, residents, and visitors. "It's especially hard for shops like boutiques to open during a recession. But I'd say there'll be a noticeable difference within two years."

Indeed intriguing shops are already catching up to the CBD's explosion of eateries, including the celebrity-studded opening of Igal Haimov's opulent jewelry store -- supplier of \$62,000, diamond-blinded designer watches to the likes of Paris Hilton, Lindsay Lohan, and a host of rappers and NFL players.

Downtown's upturn has already progressed to the point that the DDA feels it's ready for prime time as a tourism magnet.



Area 31 chef John Critchley invents things, just like the new downtown itself.



From his new downtown jewelry store, Igal Haimov sells very expensive watches to very wealthy clients.



The Downtown Athletic Club has added new facilities for new residents.

Most of the agency's initiatives, Robertson admits, have been oriented toward new downtown residents. After a couple of years of stalled luxury condo sales, newcomers have filled the high-rises to 62 percent occupancy, thanks to plunging rental rates and sale prices. Robertson adds: "But we've also been heavily promoting downtown in partnership with other entities: the Beacon Council, the Downtown Miami Partnership, the Convention and Visitors Bureau, American Airlines Arena, the Port of Miami, and others, reaching out locally but also internationally. There are campaigns locals wouldn't have seen unless they'd been in target countries, consisting of visuals that convey the new urban experience downtown.

"The perception of downtown is one thing. The reality," she says with confidence, "is another."

Still skeptical that downtown's upturn isn't mostly hype? See for yourself on a stroll in the part of downtown that resident and restaurateur José Goyanes, of La Loggia and the cool new Tre Italian Bistro, calls "the closest thing, structurewise, that downtown currently has to a mini New York."

This is the southeastern section of the Central Business District, which contains the largest concentration of occupied new condo buildings as well as, not coincidentally, other amenities, including, in Bayfront Park, a flying-trapeze school. Consequently it's currently the most pedestrian-friendly part of downtown, night and day.

A recent ramble began alongside the Miami River, with lunch at Area 31, downtown's most nationally recognized new restaurant. Chef John Critchley's swoonworthy sustainable seafood specialties (imagine seared Key West yellowtail snapper with salsa verde and cloud-light chestnut purée) are definitely chef-driven -- a perfect fit for an urban area also inventing itself.

"The neighborhood spirit here seems to be: Let's do it together," agrees Area 31 general manager (and new downtown resident) Carlos Bohlen, who says that even though Area 31 is located in the Epic Hotel, 80 percent of diners, surprisingly, have been locals. "When I ask if they need their valet ticket stamped," Bohlen reports, "they say, 'No, we walked tonight.' Many sound amazed when they say it. It's like, 'Wow! Maybe we *do* live in a real downtown after all!'"

Certainly the glittering views from the 19th-floor restaurant's best tables -- on an outdoor dining balcony -- make Miami look impressively urban-glam.

Walking north on SE 3rd Avenue, the still-under-construction Met complex makes the point that the emerging urban area is still not fully emerged. Signs on construction walls trumpet the imminent opening of the much-anticipated Daniel Boulud restaurant DB Bistro Moderne, a golf school, and several similarly upscale ventures. Miamians who know that such signs mean the



Flossie's on SE 1st Avenue will bring out your inner hippie.



This hidden courtyard is home to an array of restaurants.

venues may open anytime from later to never will not be impressed.

Never mind. Looking to the right after reaching SE 2nd Street, you'll see contemporary Italian hot spot Puntino (packed at lunch since a restaurateur from Naples opened it in June of last year), where a half-dozen suits are still power-lunching al fresco at 3:00 p.m. Luckily the place is open Monday through Saturday until 11:00 p.m.

On the same block, in the sprawling Wachovia Financial Center complex, is the chic Roy Teeluck Salon, which opened last fall. The Big Apple original won *Vogue's* "Best Haircut in NYC" accolade. Also in the Wachovia is the Downtown Athletic Club, a venerable Miami establishment that has added many new facilities

designed with new residents in mind -- including a rock-climbing wall, boxing studio, and double-size cardio theater. "We've been seeing a very different demographic than even a year ago," notes marketing director Rob Aylward.

The Wachovia complex's 35,000-square-foot outdoor plaza, already arguably downtown's most popular urban park, is currently being renovated to attract new restaurant and retail tenants to its ground-floor level.

Continuing north on SE 3rd Avenue, there is the stylish, fast-casual pasta/salad place Spoon (other branches in Beverly Hills, New York, and Paris), which opened early in 2009. Motto: "Create What You Crave."

Across the street is Smokeshop, much more elegant than Lincoln Road's tobacconists. Aside from cigars and imported cigarettes, the shop also sells snazzy pens like Mont Blanc and Cartier.

Look to the right at SE 1st Street and you'll see the House of Wine & Liquors. Admittedly the name doesn't scream "yuppie safe," but the floor-to-ceiling wooden bins of quality classic and boutique wines, plus chichi packaged snacks, make it clear there's nary a bottle of Ripple in this house. Wine shopper and new downtown condo resident Andres del Corral is enthusiastic. "If I want to stay home," he says, "they'll deliver locally until 2:00 or 3:00 a.m."

Turning left in front of a Starbucks and walking west on SE 1st Street, you'll find yourself in La Petit Paris: Café Bastille, serving tapas but looking like an authentic French sidewalk café, then La Paris café, then Croissant d'Or. Okay, probably only one is interesting enough to review, but it's fun to stroll by what's almost a "restaurant row," downtown French-style.

Across the street is the Downtown Book Center, whose proprietor, Raquel Roque, is one of the founders of the Miami Book Fair. The eclectic shop, which has been there since her Cuban-immigrant father, José Rabide, opened it in the mid-1960s, boasts exactly the large, varied stock of



The Gusman's ornate interior: Many more shows are planned.

books that readers are always complaining Miami doesn't have. Who knew?

"That's a great thing about downtown becoming more pedestrian-friendly," says the DDA's Alyce Robertson. "There's plenty of great old stuff there that people never discover when they just drive in to work and then out."

In the last building before reaching SE 2nd Avenue is Fratelli Milano, which opened several years ago with lunch-only hours, but expanded operations last year to include dinner, joining some 17 other restaurants north of the Miami River that are now open at night.

Fratelli offers an interesting example of the new downtown rubbing up against the old. The restaurant, with its outdoor tables and colorful umbrellas, is next door to Las Palmas cafeteria and North Rio, a discount electronics store. But a new awning over all three establishments allows them to them co-exist with visual charm. Throughout your walk, you'll notice many such spruced-up storefronts, most courtesy of beautification grants from the Downtown Development Authority.

Across SE 2nd Avenue on the corner is Ecco Pizzateca, opened in 2009 by emerging-area veterans Brian Basti and Aramis Lorie, the duo formerly responsible for the legendary Poplife nights at PS14 in the still-iffy western Arts and Entertainment District of downtown. Basti, who is taste-testing a new truffle oil pizza (highly recommended), takes time off from work to play tour guide, eager to share a few of his favorite "neat old places people never knew about," places he believes fit perfectly into the new downtown.

First stop is Flossie's (111 SE 1st Ave.), a candle/crystal jewelry/African mask/spiritual book/Haitian art/scented oil/potpourri/incense shop. One whiff and you're back in 1968. Far out.

Next, catty-corner from I.M. Pei's Bank of America tower on SE 1st Street, sits a low-rise building whose hidden inner courtyard houses a tropically landscaped warren of international restaurants. At least a couple of them serve dinner as well as lunch: attractive, contemporary Martini 28, opened last fall by a Peruvian husband-and-wife team who change the menu every few days; Giovana, where the "only authentic Italian food in downtown" has evidently been secreted away since 1996; and Thai Angel, which Basti asserts is "best Thai food in Miami."

From 2003 to 2006, the warren also housed a charming, budget-priced bistro called Lila's, run by three dynamic young Peruvian sisters who tried repeatedly to nudge downtown tastes into this century with evening hours, chef-driven creative dishes, housemade sauces, and more. When they finally folded, one sister explained they'd held out for a year after they'd gone broke, "hoping downtown would turn into a *real* downtown, like New York or Chicago." Too bad it didn't happen for them, and for today's downtown denizens.

Basti slows at the landmark 1926 Olympia Theater at the Gusman Center for the Performing Arts. This fantastical, Moorish-turreted jewel, once the cultural center of Miami, has suffered horrendous setbacks for decades -- fiscal disaster, artistic decline (the theater has been run strictly as a rental hall since 1992, with no original programming), serious structural decay, and a series of "improvements," like a 1970s effort that replaced the theater's brass-and-wood-trimmed seats with bright red plastic ones.

There was a slow fade to near black in terms of community visibility, according to Margaret Lake, who



Brothers Pepe and Tony Alonso in front of their family-owned department store.

moved to downtown Miami two and a half years ago to become the Gusman's new director. Lake has since overseen a complete structural rebuild and restoration of the theater's gloriously ornate décor. Still, she sighs, "You wouldn't believe how many times I've taken people inside to see it, and they say, 'I didn't know it was *beautiful*. I didn't know it was *there*.'"

Now Lake has some good news: The Gusman will present a season of its own programs, possibly as early as this fall (depending on funding), but definitely by 2011-2012. "Presenting will restore our credibility," she says. "When you're just a rental hall, all you can do is hope the quality is up to par. And there's no financial stability because it's hard to get people to buy into a sporadic calendar." (Currently the Gusman operates only 75 nights a year.)

Lake hired a consulting firm, the North Group, to assess the Gusman's potential. The results of creating its own programming were projected to be stunning. Increasing to 125 operating nights annually would have "a major impact on the economic vitality" of all downtown; 225 nights, and the effect would be "transformative" in revitalizing the area.

So Lake is now scrambling for money in order to develop original programming. "I've been able to write grants myself," she says. "Thank God I was raised by an English teacher." In the meantime, another summertime mini season is certain. Last summer's "Flickin' Summer Series" featured several classic film musicals, each screening followed by an on-stage dance party with three-dollar beers and five-dollar cocktails.

Across SE 2nd Avenue at La Época, an expansive department store inside a striking 1936 Art Deco building, Basti points out three stacked logos on each floor of the Alonso family's store. The top sign is a replica of the original La Época in Havana, a massive, five-floor structure that was the third-largest department store in Cuba.

The middle sign is from the original, smaller Miami store that family patriarch Diego Alonso and his two sons opened down the block, after the family fled Cuba in 1965. At bottom is the sign that's been there since La Época relocated in 2005.

Inside the store, son Tony Alonso, a genial gentleman and DDA board member, tells the story of downtown's fall and rise, from the mid-1960s to the present. After opening as a small corner shop in the Alfred I. DuPont building, La Época rapidly expanded to 7000 square feet.

At the time, Alonso says, downtown was the healthy city center of a much less populated Miami. "There were a few suburban malls, but they weren't big. In fact, you know what Dadeland was nicknamed? *Deadland!*"

Then in the 1970s, urban sprawl virtually emptied downtown Miami. "It was happening everywhere in the country," Alonso recounts. "In the 1970s and 1980s, nobody wanted to live in downtowns except New York and San Francisco. Miami was a lot of little low-rise cities with no personalities, a little Los Angeles. Congestion got to the point where nobody wanted to live downtown."

La Época nevertheless remained profitable, thanks largely to its women's boutique and electronics department, because, Alonso points out, "25 years ago, it was the boom of the Latin tourist."

Meanwhile the New Urbanism theories espoused by Miami's own Andrés Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk were gaining adherents across the nation. (New Urbanism advocates compact, densely populated city centers as the solution to ecologically and aesthetically atrocious suburban sprawl.) "In the early 1990s, almost every center city around started renovating and bringing back residents," says Alonso. "Charleston, Savannah, Jacksonville, West Palm Beach, Fort Lauderdale with Las Olas. Every city *except* Miami."

Why not?

"The City of Miami went broke!" he exclaims. "It was like, 'We don't have time to renovate our downtown. We're too busy going bankrupt!'"

Despite the civic neglect, Alonso anticipated a need for more inventory and space, so he purchased the present building in 1992, but didn't move in right away. In fact he didn't move in for more than a dozen years. Instead he cut the old store's space and stock in half. "The store was low price, bargain tables. Levis were my top-of-the-line jeans."

These days, inside La Época's three-story, 24,000-square-foot space, Alonso says, "Levis are my *lowest*-end jeans. The \$90 Diesels outsell \$35 Levis five-to-one! The stock is high-end, similar to a Neiman-Marcus. And my sales are going up every year."

Seems like a reason to celebrate. And in fact La Época has been doing just that every week since last year, on "Mojito Tuesdays," a happy hour with live bands and complimentary mojitos handed out just inside the front door. Try finding that in a New York department store.

Outside on Flagler Street, epicenter of the DDA's beautification efforts (75 percent of retailers have partnered with the agency to improve their storefronts' aesthetics, says Robertson), downtown Miami looks dramatically revived.

Yet as night falls, it's clear that downtown's upswing is still a work in progress. Even within José Goyanes' "mini New York," pedestrians are sparse. And Goyanes admits, "north of Flagler has to grow yet" in terms of nighttime restaurants and other inviting businesses. Perhaps not surprising, given that many new high-rise condo buildings north of Flagler, finished more recently than those to the south, are still largely devoid of the residents who would create a demand for such nightlife.

There are scattered bright lights, like the restaurant Cvi.che 105, nearly always packed with diners craving creative, "new style" ceviches and tiraditos. But try venturing just a bit farther northwest in the Central Business District, over near the federal courthouse, to the Wallflower Gallery. This eclectic, all-ages, mixed-media space -- with its cutting-edge art shows plus five-buck live band performances and large collection of Miami indie-music CDs -- *should* fit perfectly into this energetic young downtown. But the owner, Flash, is currently seeking new digs. "I don't think these new residents even know we exist," he laments.

Nevertheless, strolling downtown's southeastern streets after dark no longer feels like creeping through a ghost town. You'll see joggers, some couples walking to restaurants, even a few lone women. From his bustling Tre Italian Bistro on Flagler, Goyanes observes, "I see women walking their dogs at night from



Restaurant owner José Goyanes (with Jennifer Porciello) sees a mini New York emerging downtown.

Macy's to Bayfront. Just a short while ago, a woman who did that? You'd say: 'You're crazy!'"

At Chandi, a wine and liquor shop across Flagler Street from La Époque, manager José Huaman says, "Four years ago, when this store opened, I went home when the business people went home, because the area was empty. But one and a half years ago there were enough people that we began staying open, and making local deliveries, until midnight. Now the area feels safe."

Jeffrey Glasko, the Miami police department's downtown Neighborhood Resource Officer, confirms that the streets don't just feel safer -- they *are* safer. From 2008 through 2009, according to department statistics, robberies (including purse-snatching) dropped 13.1 percent, auto theft decreased 39.5 percent, and assaults decreased 7.8 percent. Comparable crime figures in nearby areas like Wynwood, Edgewater, and the Upper Eastside are significantly higher, he says. "Downtown," he says, "is really a very safe place."



Officer Jeffrey Glasko: "Downtown is really a very safe place."

At a January meeting with the DDA, newly appointed Miami Police Chief Miguel Exposito made a commitment to beef up the police presence downtown. Says Glasko: "That is already being implemented."

Obviously Miami's central business district is nowhere close to New York in terms of an energetic, 24/7 urban life. But it is being rapidly transformed by intrepid entrepreneurs and pioneering residents. Now just might be a good time to explore and enjoy downtown before it gets *too* trendy.

"The area has already changed dramatically in a very short time," Tony Alonso says with a smile. "Everything has a beginning, and this is the beginning of downtown."