

June 9, 2009

## How to Kick the Concrete Habit

Written by Jim W. Harper

### In downtown Miami, pocket parks provide relief

The newest public-space sensation sweeping the nation is the iPark. This tiny patch of green goes wherever you go, creating a quiet space just for you. The aromatherapy function simulates fresh-cut grass, and you can download songbirds from anywhere in the world. Why sweat and strain to get back to nature when your fingers can take you directly to iPark?

The iPark may be a fantasy, but some parks in Miami are so small they feel like they could fit in your pocket. Hence the term "pocket park," which is what the City of Miami calls its diminutive parks sprinkled around downtown.

A couple of them have popped up recently with a fresh new look.

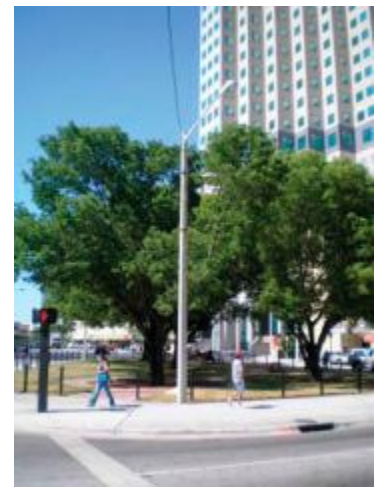
The main attraction is a restored park with a waterfall across Flagler Street from the county courthouse. It involved tearing down a restaurant on the site to revive a pocket park that had been there 15 years ago. The Paul S. Walker Urbanscape (urban escape?), located at 46 W. Flagler St., was dedicated on April 28. There's nothing else around quite like it.

The gate is an attraction in itself. Sporting huge metallic butterflies, the gate opens from the center by pulling apart the wings of the largest butterfly. People walking by the open gate twist their heads to figure out if it is some kind of giant dissection. At night the butterfly gets put back together again.

Stepping inside the gate does not reveal green space. Instead you get beige, with a few plants as accents. The pale palette includes a few pastel tiles at ground level, and the shape is a long, rectangular box. A huge blank canvas rises on the east side, as created by the windowless wall of the Courthouse Tower, running 30 stories high. Across from that canvas stands the two-story flank of Viaggio, an Italian café.

The waterfall, covering half of the back wall, invites reflection. This beige cascade sends its rapids bouncing down a series of obstacle-bricks, and the water lands in a thin, turquoise pool adorned with decorative water plants. The fountain's high edge discourages but does not prevent anyone from trying to dive in and act out *La Dolce Vita*, or simply taking a free bath.

The main activity going on in the Paul S. Walker pocket park seems to be executives talking on cell phones. Certainly there is some posing, ogling, and daydreaming going on, but mostly it's the iPhone in the iPark in the iCity. Some limited seating is available on ledges, but there are no tables or benches. The gates shut everyone out at 6:00 p.m.



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Measuring about 4200 square feet, the resurrected park cost \$284,993, covered mostly by funds from the Downtown Development Authority and the so-called Homeland Defense/Neighborhood Improvement Bond passed by Miami voters in November 2001. Was it worth it? Considering that crappy condos downtown sell for more, I would say yes. An oddity? Yes, but that makes it a destination.

Downtown Miami lies within city Commissioner Marc Sarnoff's District 2. "Restoring Paul Walker Park to its past glory was my very first initiative when I was elected commissioner," Sarnoff stated in a press release. "I am extremely proud to see that it has now become a reality."

Another \$65,000 was thrown at two other nearby pocket parks, formerly managed by the county, and these are disappointing in size. They are barely oversized medians.

You might recognize the monument in the Joan Lehman Sculpture Plaza, located adjacent to the transit lines and Government Center. The 1988 sculpture, *Rhythm of the Train* by Lehman, a Miami artist, is a series of tilted, brushed stainless-steel arches that reach to 17 feet in the center. You can walk through them and feel like you're in the belly of a whale.

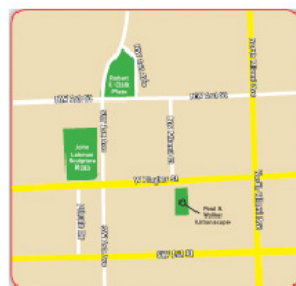
This refurbished, more sizable of these two pocket parks is nicely landscaped, with convenient brick walkways that converge on the sculpture. A few black benches offer great views of the Metrorail.

The lamest of the three improved pocket parks sits in between the courthouses at the intersection of NW 1st Avenue and NW 1st Street. Officially known as Robert F. Clark Plaza, it consists of four trees, a couple of benches, and a winding brick path about 30 feet in length. There's nothing wrong with it, but it is embarrassing to call it a park. It's a traffic median, surrounding on all sides by a sidewalk. I even saw one guy walking in circles around the "plaza," as if on a spiritual quest. Each loop took about 40 seconds.

Apparently these two pocket parks had been off limits to the public until they were restored, so perhaps the City of Miami deserves extra credit for making them pedestrian-friendly. It's hard to imagine why or how they were blocked off before.

More pocket parks could be part of the solution to downtown's addiction to concrete, but they cannot provide the amenities of a "real" American park. These are Tokyo parks, crammed into leftover, Hello Kitty-size spaces, trying to achieve Zen. Could there be another solution?

Hello, iPark!



#### PAUL S. WALKER URBANSCAPE

Park Rating:



46 W. Flagler St.

Miami

Hours: 7:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m.

Picnic tables: No

Night lighting: Yes

Special features: Waterfall

#### JOAN LEHMAN SCULPTURE PLAZA

Park Rating:



W. Flagler Street at NW 1st Avenue

Miami

#### ROBERT F. CLARK PLAZA

Park Rating:



NW 1st Avenue at NW 1st Street

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