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How Downtown Miami is getting its groove back

After more than a decade in the doldrums, the heart of the city is in the spotlight as it reinvents itself as a lifestyle and business hub



Over the past decade, Miami has undergone rapid development as well as a Covid-era growth spurt, known as the Great Relocation, which attracted hordes of new residents and businesses opting for a less restricted, sunnier life in South Florida. Downtown Miami, the oldest settled part of the city that dates back to the 1870s, sandwiched between Brickell, the gleaming financial district across the Miami River to the south, and the hip arts hub of Wynwood just north, was somewhat left behind.

Once the heart of Miami corporate life, Downtown was hit particularly hard by the 2008 recession and again by the pandemic and the rise of remote working; many offices closed or opted for shinier pastures in Brickell or elsewhere. (Brickell is administratively part of Downtown but is considered by locals to be its own entity.) Around a quarter of Downtown's office buildings lie vacant, while others have been converted into affordable residences, often populated by students and twentysomethings drawn to lower rents.

"Across the city, Miami's neighbourhoods are coming into themselves, figuring out what they are and becoming more defined," one Miamian tells me. Downtown has been a "slower burn".

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Now, restaurateurs, developers and local authorities are turning their attention to the area, with hopes that, like its neighbours, Downtown has the right ingredients for reinvention as a lifestyle and business hub. New high-rises are shooting up in every direction — the whirring of saws, hammering, clanking, drilling, the works, is audible from everywhere — with wallscapes showcasing luxury properties and glistening swimming pools. Thousands of visitors pass through the area's cruise terminal, concert and sports venues, while students at the local college, government workers and law firms pound the pavements by day. And with free public transport, relatively low rents for Miami and an incentive programme for retail businesses, the oldest part of the city could finally reclaim the spotlight.

“Downtown is the perfect hybrid of everything: you’re near the Beach, Brickell, nine-to-fivers, there’s lower rents...” says Valentino Longo, bartender and co-owner of [ViceVersa](#), a cocktail bar and restaurant that since opening over the summer has rapidly become one of Miami’s most popular new venues. It is already heaving at 5pm on a Monday, with mostly hospitality-industry folks enjoying their day off. I am sitting at the bar, tucking into aperitivo cocktails, prawn crudo and local oysters with Amber Love Bond, a local food and drink writer with an encyclopedic knowledge of the city’s bar scene.

“There are not a lot of corporate people Downtown any more, but a lot of great bars,” Bond says, as she rattles off names like songs on an ’80s rock album: [Over Under](#), [Lost Boy](#), [Mama Tried](#), [Tipsy Flamingo](#), and so on.

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The surest sign that change is afoot can be found seven-storeys high and driven by one of the world's most celebrated wearers of chefs' whites. In August, Massimo Bottura, chef-patron of three-Michelin-starred Osteria Francescana in Modena, one of the most sought-after restaurant reservations in the universe, threw wide the doors to [Torno Subito](#), a casual fine-dining restaurant on E Flagler Street, Downtown's main thoroughfare and one of Miami's first streets. Bond and I pop in for a crisp Lambrusco on a warm October evening, and the restaurant's rooftop bar is surprisingly sedate. Tourists, gourmands and industry types aside, "I don't think Miami knows who [Bottura] is yet," she says.

Bottura largely credits nostalgia for drawing him to the area: "I was in New York in 1983 and a friend called telling me he found the most amazing record store downtown [Miami]," he says. "I flew down and found a Commodore record label recording of Billie Holiday singing 'Strange Fruit'. Ever since then I have been fascinated with Downtown Miami, a place that holds a lot of history."

Happy memories aside, Bottura is an astute restaurateur; there is plenty of attention on Miami at the moment, and Torno Subito commands the top floor of [Julia & Henry's](#), a multistorey food hall (named after the city's founders, Julia Tuttle and Henry Flagler) that opened last year. It features 26 stalls from top local, national and international culinary talent, including Jose Mardin, Tomás Kalika and [Michelle Bernstein](#). With eateries as far as the eye can see, it is akin to the type of mall you might find in Tokyo rather than here.

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Massimo Bottura's Torno Subito Miami

“Julia & Henry’s is an anchor for the changes that are going on on Flagler Street,” says MJ Green, chief of economic development and strategy at the [Miami Downtown Development Authority](#) (DDA). “It is the most significant street in Miami and we’re breathing life back into it,” Green says. “It’s going to be our Broadway or Fifth Avenue.”

Green is giving me a tour of the neighbourhood on a [Freebee](#), the area’s all-electric complimentary shuttle service that can be hailed like a taxi. (The [Metromover](#), an automated people-mover, is another Downtown-based public transport service that is free of charge; both are unique to the region, and particularly remarkable in an otherwise traffic-choked, car-reliant city.)

August saw the launch of a new weekly [vintage and artisan market](#) on Flagler Street, which features more than 40 vendors each Sunday, and over the holidays this year the area will host a charity toy drive by its Christmas tree, and visitors can bring their dogs for pictures with Santa or glide around an alfresco ice rink. There is plenty of new retail joining the neighbourhood too, from craft coffee shops, chocolatiers and bagel shops to new art galleries, nightclubs and restaurants.

Many of these businesses are eligible for grants through the DDA’s business incentive programme, which was historically used to encourage traditional corporations to the area. The focus has shifted to B2C retail in recent years in an effort to attract diverse businesses to relocate to or expand in the neighbourhood. Restaurants, bars or shops, for example, can apply for grants to help them move into ground-floor, brick-and-mortar venues, and the DDA has allocated more than \$1mn in grants over the past few years. “We think we have an awesome opportunity to have one of the most unique retail spaces in America,” Green says. These businesses should certainly have the footfall: more than 500,000 visitors pass through the nearby cruise terminal each month, while Downtown is also home to a Miami-Dade College campus and the offices of the Miami-Dade County government, which is one of the largest employers in the US.

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Wealthy residents, property investors and holidaymakers are increasing in numbers too: the [Aston Martin Residences](#), a 66-storey tower with 391 flats on the north side of the Miami river, was completed in April of this year; it was 99 per cent sold before opening. The 70-storey [Okan Tower](#), which is currently under construction and is located a couple of blocks away from the courthouse, will include 399 residences, the Hilton Miami Bayfront Hotel and 64,000sq ft of office space, while the [Waldorf-Astoria Hotel & Residences](#), expected to be completed in 2028, will be Miami's first "supertall" tower (a building that's at least 984 feet or 300m tall). It is already 90 per cent sold. Related Group, the biggest condo developer in South Florida, says the focus on introducing hotel-branded residential properties is an effort to appeal to high-end buyers by offering five-star hotel-style service and amenities.

While some facets of Downtown are on the up, the area is already well on its way as a cultural hub. Some of the city's top museums are clustered in Maurice A Ferré Park, at the northernmost edge of Downtown, including the [Frost Science Museum](#) and the [Pérez Art Museum](#), and more are expected to join the city's ranks in the downtown core: one for the 2026 World Cup, another celebrating Cuban culture and an outpost of the F1 experience.

"One thing Miami has done right is knowing that cultural capital is important," Green says, citing the success of events like Art Basel and the Miami Grand Prix. "It's important to attract businesses, tourists, conferences, it's a huge selling point."

Niki Blasina travelled to Miami as a guest of the [DDA](#)