

Commentary

## Miami 21 Revisited. Adaptation Is Key to Miami's Future in Age of Coronavirus

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By **Steven J. Wernick** | April 10, 2020



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While Miami's skyline has expanded tremendously, Miami 21 has become a source of consternation in more recent years. From oversized self-storage facilities to heartburn over special area plans (SAPs), growing frustration culminated in December 2019, as the city commission adopted a resolution calling for comprehensive reforms to Miami 21.

When I started writing about Miami 21, I thought the column would focus on the divide between rich and poor, and the neighborhoods left behind. However, within a matter of weeks, the whole world has changed because of the coronavirus pandemic. And we are all in this together.

## **A public health crisis and the new economic reality: What comes next for Miami?**

On March 12, Mayor Francis Suarez declared a citywide state of emergency to combat the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). That same day, the Dow Jones plummeted 10%. As schools have closed and restaurants and bars have been forced to shut down, vast numbers of Miamians have started working remotely. Economists are projecting an economic recession to grip the United States for the better part of 2020.

Moving forward, how do we adapt and grow in a manner that creates healthy communities — where all stakeholders feel a sense of ownership with access to resources in times of need. What purpose can Miami 21 serve over the next 10 years to ensure public health, safety and welfare?

## **Zoning: a Tool for Public Health, Safety and Welfare?**

Zoning's legal basis lies in the state's police powers— to protect the public health, safety and welfare of its residents. But it is not fundamental to human existence, not is it the only or most utilized tool for land use regulation in the history of placemaking. Its legal origins date back just about 100 years to New York's state zoning enabling act, and ultimately, the Supreme Court's decision upholding an Ohio municipality's zoning code in *Euclid v Ambler Realty* in 1926.

The policies behind zoning have shifted over time and with changes in transportation, housing and other areas of daily life that alter the way we think about improving the quality of life of our cities and neighborhoods. The cities we all love to visit— the ones we are currently viewing as screensavers like Paris, Barcelona or Cartagena— often did not rely on zoning codes at all to shape their walkable shop-lined streets or grand boulevards.

Luckily for Miami, change is in our blood. The population changes, the politics and economics change; everything is susceptible to change and evolution. And we can embrace that because it is the one biggest advantage that will bring us back in this Age of Coronavirus and economic disruption that is affecting so many of our residents. While we are rightfully reflecting now on the disturbances and checking in on our families, friends and coworkers to make sure all are healthy and safe and getting through this difficult time, let us not be afraid to pivot and reimagine what our neighborhoods need to thrive. Including redefining the zoning standards and maps if they serve to stifle economic opportunity or fail to elevate the public health, safety and welfare in our community.

**Miami's Emerging Neighborhoods: Adaptation = Neighborhood Revitalization.**

Miami 21 is a one-size-fits-all approach to zoning. To a great extent, neighborhoods have been treated as nondescript squares on a map, negating 30-plus special districts under the prior code. Despite the boom in Brickell over the past 10 years, most neighborhoods have been hamstrung by restrictive zoning—leaving commercial corridors with aging buildings and high vacancy rates. Facing an economic recession already causing major impacts on hospitality and service industries, Miami must embrace neighborhood identity and creative placemaking. This might mean temporary activations to promote local businesses; incentives for adaptation of buildings resilient to sea level rise, facilitating modular manufacturing produced faster at lower cost, supporting uses ranging from biotech to affordable housing.

Looking back the past 10 years, the Wynwood Arts District stands out as Miami's laboratory for creative placemaking. Once one of the most dangerous neighborhoods in Miami, Wynwood has reinvented itself several times over. In the mid-2000s, local street artists, galleries and real estate pioneers like David Lombardi and Tony Goldman found a common vision—the creation of a mural arts district. Wynwood was a disruptor, ignoring code requirements prohibiting graffiti from building facades. Interestingly, Wynwood's success was in large part tied to the financial collapse of 2008. Culture in Miami was changing; young people no longer sought red velvet ropes, but rather, experiences. And the era of economic recovery favored eliminating regulatory hurdles, like parking requirements, key to repurposing the old warehouses for new creative uses.

Wynwood is also the city's first NRD (a zoning overlay district that facilitates redevelopment while recognizing the unique character of a neighborhood). Working with the Wynwood Business Improvement District and Planning Department, we crafted the legislation to guide Wynwood's transition from former garment district to a live, work, play neighborhood that reinforces its art and industrial character.

By all accounts, the NRD-1 has been a great success. Today, Wynwood is a global arts destination and home to 400-plus businesses, including enterprises like Zak the Baker and Panther Coffee. The NRD-1 received the APA's National Award (2017) for Best Economic Development Plan.

**Welcome to Wynwood Norte: Adaptation = Healthy Resilient Communities.**

Zoning applications pursued without community engagement often lead to tension. But it need not be that way. Perhaps, coming out of this public health crisis, we will see renewed interest in community—that life is better together than apart.

Since 2018, I have been advising the Wynwood Community Enhancement Association, whose mission is to speak as a cohesive voice for neighborhood improvements and quality of life for current and future residents in Wynwood Norte, the former Puerto Rican enclave north of 29th Street and west of N. Miami Avenue, anchored around Roberto Clemente Park.

After 30 years of disinvestment, this diverse group of stakeholders came together to shape a community vision for inclusive growth. Sponsored by Commissioner Keon Hardemon, the city commission in November recognized the community-led [Wynwood Norte Community Vision Plan](#), produced by PlusUrbia Design, which builds on the neighborhood's strengths — investing in schools, cultural organizations and creating new housing opportunities for current and future residents.



Is Wynwood Norte a template? In this new economic reality, Miami 21 needs to be a tool for reinvestment in neighborhoods that brings jobs closer to residents; to allow community health care facilities to locate in areas walkable to families and seniors alike. Changes in zoning might include better land use patterns along main street corridors; accessibility to preventative medicine; accessibility to education. All of this to support healthier more resilient communities.

## Conclusion

If Miami is going to ascend and become a global city, its success will be defined on its ability to adapt to disruption and change. Thus, it is critical that zoning and other regulations are not obstacles to change. Rather that Miami 21 fosters economic development that builds on the unique character of each neighborhood, and elevates health, safety and welfare for all residents.

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