

Inspiring Conversations with Steven J. Wernick of Wernick and Co



Today we'd like to introduce you to Steven J. Wernick.

Hi Steven, so excited to have you on the platform. So before we get into questions about your work-life, maybe you can bring our readers up to speed on your story and how you got to where you are today?

Growing up in 1980s suburban Broward County, I recognized at a young age that South Florida was being developed in a way that was unsustainable and contributing to the “brain drain,” as young people were moving to other cities for better jobs and a sense of place. I went to college at Boston University where I was a sponge for American History and was fortunate to complete an internship with the Boston

Redevelopment Authority during my senior year, which introduced me to the importance of transit-oriented development in city-building. I then earned a master's degree in city planning from the University of North Carolina. Soon after, I pursued my law degree at the University of Florida and discovered an opportunity to merge my background in planning and law.

I was lucky to work with some amazing attorneys and clients early in my career who were big influences on my career trajectory and introduced me to the relationship of placemaking and storytelling. One of those clients was Morris Broad, son of Shepard Broad, the founder of the Town of Bay Harbor Islands and the Broad & Cassell law firm, and a key contributor in the creation of the State of Israel in 1948. Morris was in his early 80s (and I was in my early 30s) when I started working with him in Bay Harbor Islands to prevent an involuntary historic designation that would block the intended sale and demolition of a co-op building facing concrete spalling and not suited to deal with the impacts of sea level rise. I spent months with Morris learning about the origins of Bay Harbor Islands and how this spoil island in the middle of Biscayne Bay was developed and financed by his father after World War II. We eventually succeeded in front of the County Commission in overturning the historic designation. Morris had the most fascinating stories and a way with words that drew you in and opened your mind. We lost Morris in 2016, but those conversations are with me forever. I ended up working over the past decade to secure approvals for the Town's two hotels and

numerous multifamily projects constructed over the past decade, contributing to an ongoing renaissance of this mid-rise community that has become a desirable destination for families and empty nesters.

Another key influence on my career was my relationship with Goldman Properties and working to advance a new vision for the Wynwood Arts District. As Miami's former garment district, this 200+ acre neighborhood had faced a downward trajectory since the 1970s. Led by the late Tony Goldman, known for leading revitalization efforts in New York's Soho and Miami's South Beach, Goldman Properties saw in Wynwood a district with great bones and old warehouses serving as canvases for Miami's graffiti artists and an opportunity to create a mixed-use neighborhood that could thrive on its unique character as the world's largest street art destination. Having represented Goldman Properties on the first rezoning application in the neighborhood and working on the Miami Design District Special Area Plan, I served as special counsel to the Wynwood Business Improvement District from 2014-2015. Working in collaboration with Plusurbia and the City of Miami Planning Department, we created the City's first Neighborhood Revitalization District, NRD-1, a zoning overlay district to facilitate the transformation of Wynwood to a 24/7 live, work, play neighborhood and reinvest in the district's aging infrastructure, while retaining its unique industrial and artistic aesthetic.

Wynwood has become an economic engine and laboratory for creative placemaking with far-reaching influence and has given me a platform to utilize my background in urban planning and law in conjunction with my passion for placemaking.

As my practice grew, I left my partnership at one of Florida's largest law firms in 2019 and launched Wernick & Co, PLLC, a boutique law firm specialized in land use & zoning, local government relations, and placemaking solutions for emerging neighborhoods in South Florida. Our firm has grown steadily since 2019. It's also given me an opportunity to work on important civic projects, including The Underline, contributing to Miami's growth and evolution as a world-class city.

Would you say it's been a smooth road, and if not, what are some of the biggest challenges you've faced along the way?

Wernick & Co opened its doors in 2019, just months before the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic brought with it a lot of uncertainty, so there was no way of knowing how Wynwood and our client base would be affected or how long these effects would even last. The immediate impacts were felt in restaurants, retail, and street life as businesses were forced to shut down and people transitioned to remote working. Thankfully, things soon began to open again, and people began to migrate to South Florida from other cities and states.

Wynwood was already undergoing an immense transformation into a 24/7 area for all to live, work, and play, thus making this neighborhood the perfect candidate as Miami's emerging tech hub. We found ourselves fielding calls from local and national developers interested in acquiring properties and developing next-gen multifamily and office projects to accommodate Miami's new growth.

Currently, a challenge we face is the pace of change Miami is experiencing. Projects are being submitted across the city at unforeseen volumes, so the approval process is taking much longer than in previous years, making it even more difficult to deliver affordable housing or open a restaurant. It is more important now than ever before to highlight how a project can be accretive to a neighborhood and remain flexible enough to accommodate any changes that may arise in the market. We've been able to successfully combat this issue through extensive collaboration and dialogues with the client and working closely with community organizations and civic leaders, plus our established relationships with staff and the credibility we've built through our experience and collaborative approach.

Thanks – so what else should our readers know about Wernick & Co, PLLC?

We represent experienced real estate developers on land use and zoning and local government affairs, with a particular focus on real estate development and neighborhood revitalization. The firm also consults on select projects with public sector clients, advising cities in the areas of economic development and creative zoning tools to help create inclusive growth in emerging neighborhoods.

In addition to working on a variety of mixed-use projects throughout South Florida's urban core, Wernick & Co has worked on the majority of new construction projects in Wynwood – including 250 Wynwood, the Wynwood Garage, Wynwood 25, and 545 Wyn. The firm currently represents over 5 million square feet of projects in the pipeline, ranging from F&B to multifamily to Class A Office.

While Wernick & Co is building a reputation as the go-to firm for developers that seek approval for projects in Miami's emerging neighborhoods, the firm's work transcends the boundaries of Miami. In 2021, working as a consultant for the City of Greenville, Wernick & Co unveiled the Village of West Greenville Micro-Area Plan, identifying inclusive growth strategies to unlock the potential of this burgeoning arts and enterprise district in the heart of Greenville's Textile Crescent. Our involvements in Greenville, SC, as well as in Miami, all align with the firm's core values: *Character, Commitment, Collaboration* and *Community*. Our practice has grown tremendously since Wernick & Co was founded in 2019, and our projects emphasize creativity with a focus on identifying solutions to complex urban revitalization challenges. Today we represent from 30 to 40 active clients in various neighborhoods across Miami and South Florida.

So maybe we end on discussing what matters most to you and why?

We always strive to deliver high-impact solutions for clients and to see positive change in the neighborhoods we work in. It's not about quantity – it's about quality.

The key to neighborhood revitalization today is the empowerment of the community to be actively engaged in charting a course for reinvestment and inclusive growth. Emerging neighborhoods rely on people within that community working in harmony to improve the built environment while also recognizing and reinvesting in the core character traits that define and strengthen the fabric of the neighborhood.

Wernick & Co's commitment to placemaking is one of our core values and key factors for success working on neighborhood revitalization initiatives in Miami's urban core, forging successful partnerships to deliver win-win solutions for all community stakeholders. The best example of this commitment is our work on the Wynwood Norte Community Vision Plan and the recent adoption of the Wynwood Norte Neighborhood Revitalization District (NRD-2). Coming out of my involvement in the Wynwood Arts District, we helped create the Wynwood Community Enhancement Association in 2018 to bring a voice to a diverse group of stakeholders in the working-class residential enclave of Wynwood, immediately north of the arts district and west of Midtown Miami. The neighborhood, which had been ignored for many years, was starting to face uncertain development pressures and was at risk of losing its unique identity and character.

Working with the Wynwood CEA, we lobbied Mayor Francis Suarez and the district commissioner to authorize the implementation of new zoning changes and policies to help restore missing middle housing. The result was 2 years of hard work and community engagement – applying technical expertise and artful advocacy to bring attention and a brighter future to Wynwood Norte. The NRD-2 allows for increased residential densities while retaining the scale of the village character and creates funding mechanisms to support mobility enhancements, affordable and workforce housing, and infrastructure improvements. Spearheading the revitalization of Wynwood Norte has been one of my proudest endeavors and we continue to provide land use counsel to clients looking at contextual development opportunities in the neighborhood.

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