

How Cubans reshaped downtown Miami

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MIAMI, Fla. — It was just this past week that the last flight of refugees likely to come out of Castro's Cuba arrived at Miami International Airport. The highly emotional reunion of families that had been separated for years was a reminder of the freedom which we enjoy in this country and for which many others are still waiting to come here to also enjoy.

The mass migration and escape of more than 600,000 Cubans over this past one and one-half decades has had the greatest impact on South Florida's Dade County whose Spanish speaking population swelled to 23 percent of the total in 1970, and which now stands at 33 percent of the 1.5 million population.

Many of the refugees came from Havana and other cities, and these city-oriented people found their way to Dade's largest urban center, Miami, where this Cuban migration has had the most profound impact. Today, more than one-half of this city's population of 355,000 is Latin, with the remaining population about equally divided between blacks and anglos.

It should be noted that Latins and anglos are classed as white but since the great migration of Cubans here, the distinction is made between Latin Americans and anglo-Americans and current data show these differences.

The Cuban-Spanish influence in this city is everywhere apparent. Bi-lingual signs in all public and some private places, Spanish-speaking Volkswagen mechanics, Spanish-speaking radio stations, Cuban-style Italian spaghetti (not bad!), and "Little Havana" — an almost-solid-with-small-shops commercial strip of about 20 blocks on S.W. 8th Street, where Spanish signs and language are the rule rather than the exception. These are some examples of this presence.

Although not quite as obvious as S.W. 8th, it is in the downtown that the Cubans

have made their mark and their major contribution to revitalization, a process that became evident in the early 70's.

Empty stores and declining retail activity were some of the visible signs decay prior to that time; this has changed dramatically today. On a Saturday noontime, pedestrians and shoppers crowd downtown. At night, the benches of the recently landscaped Flagler Street are well-occupied, while strollers window-shop and the restaurants are heavily patronized. The majority of these people are Spanish speaking; especially is this true at night.

The recently formed Downtown Miami Business Association has 100 Latins in its membership of 120, and it is estimated that up to 90 percent of all retailers in the downtown are Latins. It is easy to pick out the non-Latin operated shops because they have such signs as "Bienvenidos Amigos Latinos" in their windows.

Downtown businessmen report their best year ever with some merchants reporting 60 percent increases this past year and, in one case, an increased gross of \$5 million. This business comes from both the local Latins and the Latin American tourists who now come to Miami to buy consumer goods because of the Spanish identity here and go on to other parts of the country as tourists. But Miami is the home base.

Helping to provide direction to this growth and working with the public and private sectors to capitalize on this vitality of the downtown is the unique (in Florida) quasi-governmental Downtown Development Authority (DDA). The DDA has tax assessment and collection, eminent domain, project development, and bond selling powers. Under the leadership of its second director, the DDA has begun to put many of the jigsaw pieces in order.

Roy Kenzie is a former college professor and most recently worked with the Central Atlanta Progress, from which this 33-year-old architect came to serve as the \$34,000 per year director. In slightly more than one year on the job, Kenzie has increased his staff from three to 29, only five of whom

are on his payroll, and parlayed his \$300,000 budget into a \$1.5 million annual expenditure through outside sources.

His technique of "financial leverage" well illustrates the role of a downtown catalyst, which is the role of DDA's. Kenzie utilized \$144,000 that the city had set aside for tree plantings by matching every dollar spent by merchants on tree plantings. The result was \$288,000 spent on tree plantings in the downtown, and these trees are maintained by the merchants because they planted them!

Another example is his use of \$98,000 of federal money to hire 10 unemployed sanitation workers for downtown environmental control, i.e., rubbish collection, cleaning vacant lots, and serving as a general cleaning force. The money come through his office but not out of his budget.

Having just moved from a 900 square foot office to a 5000 square foot location on the 20th floor of the tallest building in the downtown with a magnificent view of Biscayne Bay and Miami Beach (office space and rental came from a private foundation), Kenzie hopes this setting to be a "one stop service center" where any developer can come in and get all the information he needs, from financing and taxes to building codes and zoning changes. Any developer would be impressed by this service, in this setting, delivered by this articulate and competent staff.

The Cuban influence is reshaping the Miami downtown. The DDA is in the enviable position of putting the pieces of this strong private investment together with those of government, such as the \$300 million governmental complex now under construction, to make this city center one of the strongest to be found in the South. A good example of public and private sectors working together for some solid success in bringing cities back to their positions of prominence.

Chester E. Smolski, Director of Urban Studies Rhode Island College, is touring several southern cities.