

A brave NEW PLAN

NEW URBANISM GURU ELIZABETH PLATER-ZYBERK TEAMS UP WITH CITY OFFICIALS TO PLAN AND DEFINE THE MIAMI OF THE FUTURE By Paul Borden

It has been said that the wheels of justice grind slowly, but grind exceedingly fine. So too, it seems, it is with Miami 21, the city's ambitious overhaul of the zoning codes and policies that have guided – or misguided – construction in the past. When it was first unveiled at a public meeting more than a year ago, lead consultant Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, of Duany Plater-Zyberk & Company, said the hope was that the city's "blueprint for the 21st Century and beyond" would be complete in about two years.

The city was divided into four quadrants with the work on each expected to take about six months. The east quadrant – an area essentially north of Southwest 15th Road and the Miami River, and east of Interstate 95 to the northern city limits – was first up. The goal was to have something in place to take to the city commission by last December.

"Whether we get there or not remains to be seen," Plater-Zyberk said at the time.

They didn't. The goal now is to take recommendations for the east quadrant to the commission by the end of this year. Then work will start on another, yet to be determined quadrant.

The delay came, says Miami Mayor Manny Díaz, "because it is a very complex process. As we've gone along, the project has grown in scope. For example, now we are looking at all kinds of green building initiatives that can be included into the code – originally not contemplated. We are looking at what other cities have done to see what we can adopt from those models into our code. Things like that have come up along the way."

"Also, we decided to have more public meetings, increasing the number from when we started. We have gone into NET districts and shown citizens the plan, received feedback and then returned with the changes incorporated. We have had a lot of back and forth in the area of public discourse."

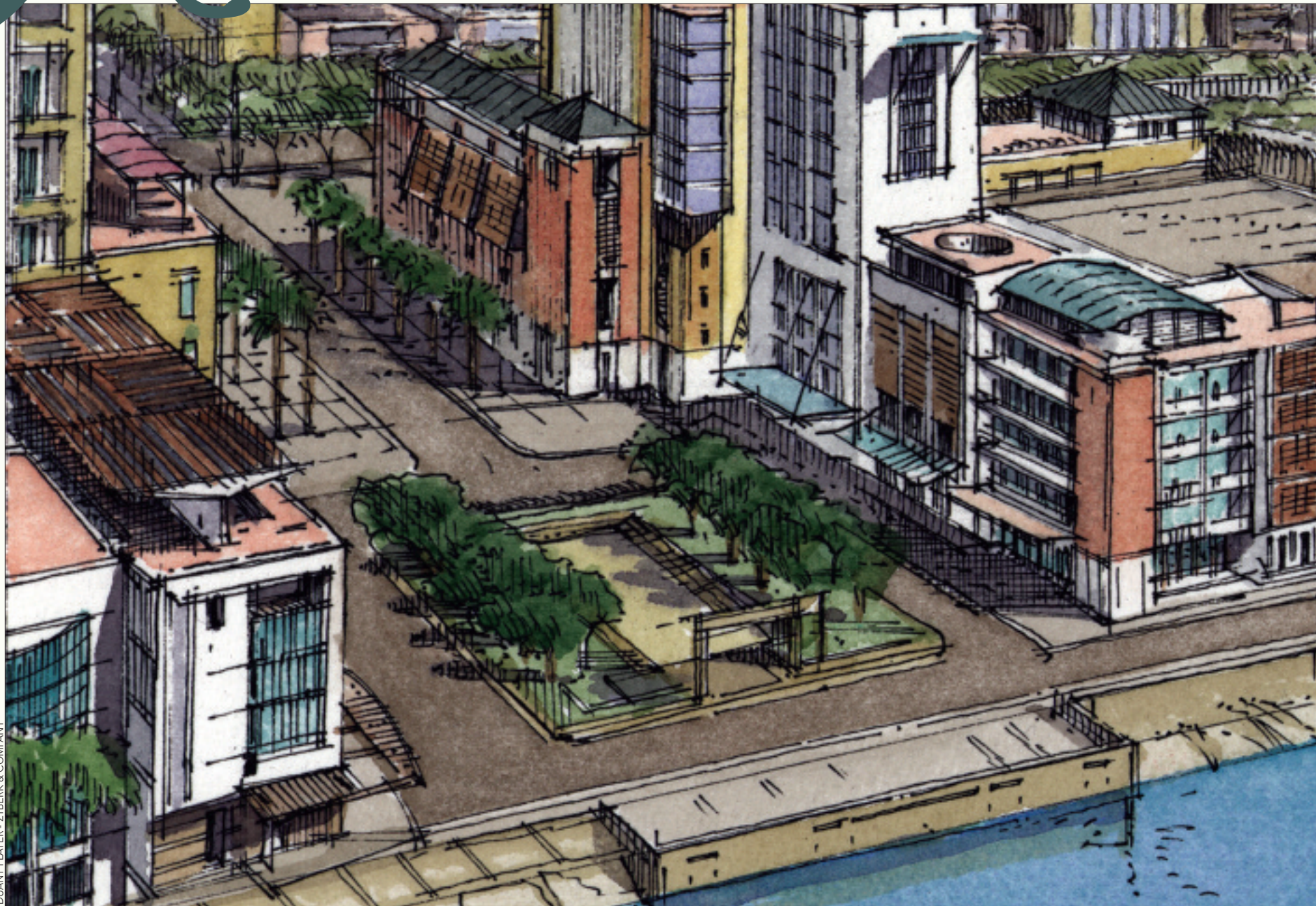
Miami Commissioner Linda Haskins, whose district encompasses the greater part of the east quadrant, says: "I know there are changes being made and guidelines that still need to be put in, that sort of thing. I have been holding about two meetings a week with my various neighborhoods to sit down with the planning department so people can go over their concerns with Miami 21. And my sense is that it is moving forward, but there are still a lot of concerns out there that need to be addressed."

At this pace perhaps the project should be renamed Miami 22. But Díaz says it's worth the wait.

"This is 100 years overdue – what is a few months?" he asks. "We need to get this as close to perfect as we can."

Plater-Zyberk, whose firm has designed hundreds of such plans nationwide, told Miami Monthly she expects the process to speed up with the lessons learned from the studies on the east quadrant.

"I think it's fair to say whichever quadrant would have been first would



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Proposal for incorporating Miami's waterfront along a public street with mixed-used buildings



National Leader: Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk's efforts to end suburban sprawl have received widespread recognition

PHOTO BY SCHERLEY BUSCH

have taken longer because you are trying to keep your eye on the whole picture as well," she says. "Decisions are being thoroughly discussed because we are also thinking about conditions elsewhere."

NEW URBANISM

At the core of the plan are the principles of New Urbanism, a movement that began in the late 1980s to reform the way the country goes about building our cities and communities. Plater-Zyberk, dean of the University of Miami School of Architecture, and holder of a bachelor's degree in architecture and urban design from Princeton and a master's from Yale, is one of the founders of the Congress of New Urbanism.

According to its charter, the CNU advocates "the restructuring of public policy and development practices to support the following principles: neighborhoods should be diverse in use and population; communities should be designed for the pedestrian and transit as well as the car; cities and towns should be shaped by physically defined and universally accessible public spaces and community institutions; urban places should be framed by architecture and landscape design that celebrate local history, climate, ecology, and building practice."

A prime example of what New Urbanism is all about is Seaside, the Florida panhandle town built from the ground up using New Urbanism guidelines. The development began in 1981 on 80 acres of coastline and soon became known for its pedestrian friendly ways, architecture, streets and easy access to public places, as designed by Duany Plater-Zyberk. Its success – parcels that originally sold for \$15,000 in the early 1980s reached \$200,000 within a decade, and house prices now may top \$3 million, according to Robert Steuteville, editor and publisher of New Urban News – spawned future projects in other Florida locales such as Gainesville (Haile Village Center), West



Man With a Plan: Miami Mayor Manny Díaz has been the driving force behind Miami 21

J. PEREZ/CITY OF MIAMI

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Palm Beach (City Place), and the town of Celebration near Orlando, among other locations across the country.

Developments following Congress of New Urbanism guidelines are not gated but do have sidewalks; mixed-use facilities with a combination of retail, office space or housing; a neighborhood center that is easily reached on foot; and buildings with front doors and windows, not parking garage entrances, facing the street. Some developments may call themselves new urbanist, but if they don't meet that criteria, they are not the genuine article, according to the CNU.

There is also the "Popsicle test," which states that an eight-year-old in the neighborhood should be able to bike to a store to buy a Popsicle without having to deal with highway-size streets and free-way-speed traffic.

TOO LITTLE, TOO LATE?

Some local residents, however, wonder if it's not already too late for Miami 21 to have a significant impact, given all the construction going on in the city, and more to come.

"Yes, I'm glad it's going forward," says Steve Hagen, an activist who vigorously fights for park space in the city. "Yes, I'm glad the builders and everyone else are going to have a more concise picture of what can and cannot be built. But in the meantime the barn door is open and the horses are running."

The suggestion is that builders rushed to get their permits in before new restrictions could be implemented.

"I've heard anecdotally that there may be some of that going on," says Haskins, appointed early in the summer to replace the suspended Johnny Winton. "But you know, with interest rates, and the condo market being saturated, especially on the high-end side, I don't think people are going to start projects just for the sake of



Built in the 1980s, Seaside, Fla., is the archetype of New Urbanism. Designers across the country have used the community as a model for their New Urbanist developments.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF DUANY PLATER-ZYBERK & COMPANY



Public input is essential to the success of Miami 21

COURTESY DUANY PLATER - ZYBERK & COMPANY

starting projects if it is not going to work economically.”

While some have suggested a moratorium on issuing new permits, the mayor says neither he nor commissioners support such a move.

“The ‘why’ is a long protracted answer, which ranges from what people are legally entitled to build today – their property rights – to the fact that it could kill growth and the economy,” Díaz says. “If you can’t build in Miami, people will just go somewhere else.”

The point may be somewhat moot because, according to Haskins, some of the principles likely to be put in place by Miami 21 are already being addressed under present operating guidelines, such as the way designers provide parking for business areas. “Pedestrian-friendly” is the mantra.

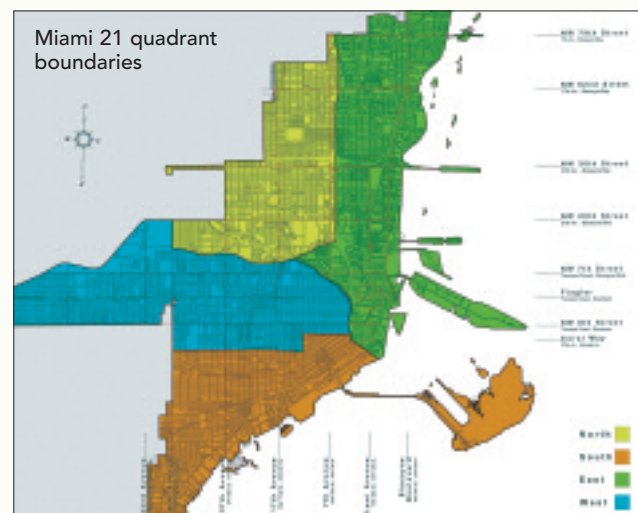
But Miami 21 does not restrict growth or high-density projects, assuming the proposed high-density project is in an area zoned for that purpose. Nor is it concerned with such things as height limits in appropriate areas, or specific architectural styles. For some, that is a concern.

“We view [Miami 21] as a positive thing as long as in the public process neighborhoods are able to preserve and protect what they think is important within the context of growth,” says activist Nina West, a spokesperson for Miami Neighborhoods United.

“For instance, residential neighborhoods out of the downtown core are low-rise, and we are not interested in very high-density, high-rise buildings in these corridors.” Residents are also wary of the kinds of businesses that could come in to residential areas under the “mixed-use” plan, she says.

A SYNERGISTIC APPROACH

Developers need to work with the community and the neighborhoods involved to ensure that doesn’t happen, one developer says.



“There is no better time than now for Miami 21 to replace an antiquated code with applications and provisions that date back 50 to 100 years”

“The development community must coordinate their visions, so that we do not end up with a mall with 10 Neiman Marcus’ or build ten malls in one neighborhood,” notes Evangeline Gouletas, chairman and CEO of Skyline Equities Realty.

“We must take a synergistic approach to our business, where we all help each other, knowing that the success of our fellow developers will lead to our own personal success, the success of the community and the achievement of the highest quality of life for our residents.”

Gouletas is developing Skyline at Mary Brickell Village, the condo portion of the huge multi-use project, Mary Brickell Village. She believes the project could serve as prototype for development under Miami 21 because the retail portion of the development features more than 50 restaurants, shops, boutiques and services, and has a Metrorail stop at one end and a Metromover station at the other, giving residents immediate access to public transportation options.

Many issues concerning Miami 21 have been addressed through the project’s website, www.miami21.org, which allows residents to ask questions or make comments.

“Things go up on the website and people let us know right away if we have gone too far with it, too far from what the reality is,” Plater-Zyberk says.

But overall she is satisfied that the general concept is right.

“We may have a few details wrong, which we can work on later,” she says. “Right now the big job is to get it into a real document so it is not just isolated illustrations of the ideas.”

As Miami 21 has inched its way forward, Plater-Zyberk has had to balance what are usually seen as competing forces in development.

“I think the worst fear from the development side was that we would decrease capacity,” Plater-Zyberk says. “And from the neighborhood side it was that we wouldn’t protect their conservation effort.”

Miami 21 attempts to achieve that balance by calling for restrictions on new projects such as lining parking garages with townhouses, offices, businesses or other habitable space to make an area more pedestrian friendly instead of giving the aura of a warehouse district.

Gouletas says Miami 21 “will force developers to practice ‘developer’s responsibility.’ Miami 21 will succeed in creating an environment where developers can work in concert with our community leaders to promote the best interests of the entire city.”

“I never thought Miami 21 was anti-growth,” she adds. “As I stood in the audience at Mayor Díaz’s first introductory speech on Miami 21, I was delighted that the government was setting forth to present a comprehensive plan of action to address Miami’s key economic development elements at this time of unprecedented growth.”

Gouletas has developed more than 100 condominium projects in more than 40 national markets, including New York City and Chicago.

“I liken Miami to the urban expansion of both New York City and Chicago, which were fueled by historically famous and well-documented plans,” she continues. “Miami 21 presents similar preparation that is essential to Miami’s future and status as a world-class city.”



The plan calls for buildings of various heights to coexist harmoniously

RENDERINGS BY DUANY PLATER - ZYBERK & COMPANY

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In fact, Díaz points out, “Chicago’s Burnham Plan – their Miami 21 – was created a hundred years ago when Chicago had a population of two million people. It shows you that it can be done in an existing city with a large population.”

PUBLIC INPUT IS KEY

Getting input from area neighborhoods may be the key to Miami 21’s future success.

“What we are trying to do,” says activist Nina West, “is have an impact on what is good for an already-built city with stable neighborhoods, because nobody knows the neighborhoods better than the people who live there. Most of this smart growth has been successful where it has been imposed on a blank slate.”

West would like to see much more input from citizens, emphasizing that the final plan will have a long-lasting, dramatic impact on the city’s future.

“Not enough citizens understand this,” she says.

But Alejandro Miyar, a spokesman for the mayor, points out that Miami 21 has received extensive coverage on Channel 77.

“Meetings have been televised and thoroughly covered by the channel,” Miyar said. “The most recent public meeting on July 15 was shown in its entirety on 77. The channel is also currently airing a half-hour show exclusively on Miami 21.”

He also notes the popularity of the Miami 21 website.

“The website receives about 500 daily hits, with almost 400 questions submitted to date, 320-plus comments, and innumerable phone calls, emails, and walk-ins handled by our outreach staff.”

Meanwhile, discussions with various commissioners and city staff are still ongoing as Plater-Zyberk and her team finish up the plan’s details.

“We’re a little bit frustrated that we haven’t been able to write it up and get it out there, but the extra time we have taken to listen and converse with groups and individuals has served the process well,” she says. “And we look forward to producing it in the next month or so.”

There is no better time than now, Mayor Díaz emphasizes, for Miami 21 to replace an antiquated code with applications and provisions that date back 50 to 100 years.

“Particularly since the alternative is not to do anything at all,” he says. “We can create something spectacular that someone 100 years from now will be thankful for. This is a visionary long-term project that will create a beautiful city. In 40-to-50 years a lot of the buildings we see today will be gone, and new buildings will have to be built with the code we are now creating.

“Yes, it will help the current Miami – but it is really for future generations. We are paying the price for the mistakes and inaction of the people 50 years ago.” **m**



Examples of New Urbanism from the Ruskin Square area of Seaside, Florida. As designed by Duany Palter-Zyberg, mixed-use buildings look out on broad public walkways.

PHOTOS BY DUANY PLATER-ZYBERK & COMPANY