

An Opening Act with Controversy

Written by Francisco Alvarado, BT Contributor
February 2019

La Placita owner pulls the race card on grumbling neighbors



Less than a month after getting caught sidestepping Miami's historic preservation rules to paint Puerto Rico's flag on the façade of the former Balans building, the owners of La Placita restaurant have been operating an illegal valet service, set up an unpermitted sidewalk café, and created a traffic nightmare for homeowners on a couple of quiet residential streets in the city's MiMo District.

"These people keep breaking the law over and over," says Mariella Lopez de Albear, who resides in a two-bedroom house on NE 68th Street, near the restaurant's entrance and parking area. "They just want to ram it in our faces that they are the badasses and they are just going to do whatever they want."

According to Lopez de Albear and some of her neighbors, City of Miami officials have allowed La Placita's celebrity owners -- telenovela star Julian Gil and five-time James Beard semifinalist chef José Mendin -- to avoid complying with city code and historic preservation rules because of their friendly relationship with Mayor Francis Suarez.

Homeowners' suspicions have been fueled by social media posts showing city manager Emilio Gonzalez dining at La Placita and Suarez posing with Gil on December 27, the day Puerto Rican artist Hector Collazo Hernández painted the flag on the front exterior wall of the building at 6789 Biscayne Blvd.

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Caroline DeFreze, whose five-bedroom house sits across from La Placita's valet parking lot, says she confronted Gonzalez about it during a January 16 meeting with homeowners who had bombarded him and his staff with photos and videos of the code violations and the onslaught of cars clogging NE 68th Street and NE 67th Street.

"He got very defensive and said he could eat wherever he liked and that the mayor is endorsing the restaurant," recalls DeFreze, who worked for 15 years as a community liaison official in the Miami Beach city manager's office. "Now we have a tourist destination on the corner of our very small street."

Miami city spokeswoman Stephanie Severino, in a written statement to the *BT*, disputes the accusations of favoritism and DeFreze's account of what Gonzalez said. "To say the city's leadership has given favorable treatment to the owners is incorrect," Severino asserts. "We will continue to ensure they follow the steps necessary to remedy this situation as we would with any other case."

Severino confirms that code compliance officers recently issued La Placita citations for having a sidewalk café and valet operation without proper permits, after homeowners presented their evidence with e-mails and at the January 16 meeting.



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Gil and Mendin did not respond to requests for interviews. When a *BT* reporter tried to reach both men during a visit to La Placita on January 23, a hostess said neither owner was available. She provided a cellphone number for Mendin, who is also executive chef and co-founder of Miami-based Pubblely Global. He did not respond to three messages seeking comment.

La Placita's clash with MiMo homeowners began when Gil and Mendin had the façade painted without first presenting their proposal to the city's planning department and the Historic and Environmental Preservation Board for approval.

Because of the architectural style of most of the buildings, and the MiMo District's historic designation, many properties must abide by strict guidelines, including using a set palette of paint colors for façades.

According to local press reports, La Placita's owners claim the building doesn't have to conform to the historic district's standards because it was completed in 2009 and it is not in the style of Miami Modern architecture.

In a selfie video posted to his Instagram social media account on December 29, Gil insisted he and his partners had received the seal of approval from the city's top elected official. "I want to thank Mayor Francis Suarez, who gave us the permit that you will see in end of this post," Gil says. "Not once did the city come to us and tell us we have to erase the flag. They never told us the day we painted the flag, that we couldn't do it. There were only three or four neighbors who said, 'we don't want the flag.'"

Officially, it was a special events permit from the Miami Police Department that gave "authorization to the owners to conduct artistic painting of mural at above listed location," which shows the address for the restaurant. It was only after homeowners complained about the mural that Miami officials informed Gil and Mendin they were in violation of the historic district's guidelines and that they needed a certificate of appropriateness for the mural.

"Since learning about the first violation for failure to apply for a certificate of appropriateness," Severino explains, "the city has processed their application, which is the first step needed to come into compliance, followed by a Historic and Environmental Protection Preservation Board

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public hearing.”

Yet La Placita’s owners have not shown any interest in working with their residential neighbors, according to Lopez de Albear and DeFreze. Instead, the two MiMo residents allege that Gil and Mendin continued to violate city laws, as well as wreak havoc on their quality of life by failing to control the traffic and parking flow at the instantly popular eatery.



Since the restaurant officially opened on January 1, Lopez de Albear has snapped photos and video-recorded La Placita patrons parking on private swales, blocking driveways, and speeding down the street, and of her neighbors’ parking spaces blocked off with yellow caution tape and city garbage cans.

“This establishment is too big to hold the traffic flow it is causing,” Lopez de Albear says. “Their patrons speed down the street at 45 miles per hour. It’s a shit show.”

Furthermore, Gil fueled tensions between residents and La Placita’s customers in his December 29 selfie video, in which he makes allegations of racism against unnamed individuals living in the MiMo District, according to Lopez de Albear, DeFreze, and Hannah Lasky, another homeowner on NE 68th Street.

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“When I was out here with Hector and others when the flag was being painted, they shouted obscenities like ‘motherfucking Latinos,’” Gil says into the camera. “And that we were going to bring down the neighborhood by attracting brown people here.”

DeFreze believes Gil’s comments angered Puerto Ricans coming to his restaurant. She says a truck rammed into her chain-link fence two weeks ago and the driver cursed at her as he took off.

“Julian Gil is being very irresponsible with his messaging,” DeFreze says. “He is inciting violence and trying to make it into a racist issue, which it is not. That is a shame and it is very disappointing.”

Lasky, whose home is across the street from Lopez de Albear’s residence, says she has also experienced unpleasant run-ins with La Placita patrons. “There are people with rage who say awful things as they go by,” Lasky claims. “We would like to see somebody in the city take charge and be responsible in directing traffic so that it doesn’t interfere with the people living on 68th Street.”

The day after the January 16 meeting, city manager Gonzalez, deputy city manager Joe Napoli, and code compliance officers descended on La Placita to address the homeowners’ complaints. In a follow-up e-mail to the residents, Napoli said city officials had cited La Placita for the unauthorized valet operation and sidewalk café; and took other steps, such as having police officers redirecting traffic and posting additional signs that 68th Street is for residential traffic only. According to Severino, La Placita’s owners were also instructed to place signs notifying patrons not to park in the residential area.

Lopez de Albear says the city’s response has been little more than lip service and that the recent steps officials took didn’t fix the problem. “It’s been a shit show with the traffic again,” she says via a recent text. “The police came out, but there is nothing they can really do. We need to get the street closed.”

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