

A Rumination on Hope

Written by Eleazar David Meléndez, BT Contributor
December 2016

Miami's future may mean a magnificent aquarium that helps stop street burglaries



he first thing that struck me as odd as I was walking back to the curbside parking spot by NE 10th Street and NE 1st Avenue was the strange way the illuminated signs reflected off the side of my car. For a few seconds as I walked toward the setting sun, it dawned on me that the neon name of the future luxury condo tower beaming from atop the sales center was only half visible.

Strange, I thought.

Was my Corolla really so dirty it wasn't reflecting neon lights anymore? Perhaps the fading twilight was creating an illusion, warping the image in some odd way. Fitting, I thought, that multimillion-dollar residences wouldn't want their brand to reflect for a moment off an old, beat-up Toyota.

My amusement died a few seconds later when I did see the lights reflected off the side of my car. Or more precisely, I saw the lights reflected off the chips of glass and assorted shattered pieces that remained of the driver's-side front window. Alone in the quickly darkening street, I began to curse at everything and nothing in particular, kicking the glittering debris that now decorated the gutter where I stood.

As I fished an old magazine out of the back and started the painstaking process of sweeping away shards of glass from between the seat cushions, I thought back to two hours before, when I'd stood in absolute awe at a different reflection from a different window.

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Taking a tour of the construction site that will eventually be the Patricia and Phillip Frost Museum of Science, I'd briefly seen my own face smiling back from the oculus, the 30-foot glass circumference at the base of what will be soon be a very impressive aquarium.

The 14-inch-thick acrylic window, which made its way from an Italian kiln to its permanent spot in the museum next to Biscayne Bay, will likely be the center of Miami's arts and culture for decades to come. If it's anything like the show-stopping renderings that have been made available so far, the oculus will allow a bottom-up view of hammerheads and barracudas swimming in the half-million-gallon tank.

The martini-glass-shaped receptacle, held up by columns and connected to a grandiose hall below with a winding staircase, will be the center of the center of the center: a tour de force in the middle of a focal institution at the center of Miami's cultural core.

I'm not exactly sure how many millions of dollars were spent creating and installing that breathtaking oculus. In a press release announcing the final installation last month, the museum noted that the institution had to secure a crane powerful enough to carry the 60,000-pound piece 100 feet in the air, and then use specialists to set the window at exactly the right angle.

A special motorized platform was built to ensure that the oculus could be transported through the streets of Miami safely. Engineering was used to make sure that once the aquarium is filled, the light distortion will make it so that visitors won't even see the walls of the tank.

As I tried not to cut myself on the bits of broken glass, I thought about the investment that this magnificent new aquarium had taken. Not just the investment in terms of money or effort or scientific expertise, but also in terms of trust, of the overarching hope that people will embrace downtown Miami's amenities and drive here to thrive.

The Frost Science Museum, with its incredible semi-open walkways that will allow visitors to work on their tans between the exhibits on nutrition science and the history of flight, is built on that hope. But so is the massive Miami Worldcenter project, whose construction site I could see as I cleaned the shards of window glass out of my car's cup holders and out from underneath the floor mats.

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In just a few years, the hope goes, this very spot, where some no-good thief had relieved me of a car window in order to take a pair of running shoes and an iPad, groups of friends might order sangria from tables set outside for al fresco brunch.

Just a few blocks to the west, hope still springs that the supercharged internet connectivity that's held inside the National Access Point (NAP) of the Americas building could serve as a springboard for tech companies in some kind of Latin America-focused cluster.

A few blocks south, All Aboard Florida is setting the groundwork for what will soon be (hopefully) not just a popular regional commuter railroad hub, but (the company hopes) a city-within-a-city locus of development centered around the coming bustle.

It's a high level of expectation for a city that's used to having its expectations alternatively exceeded and dashed. But then again, hope is par for the course here, isn't it? What could be more emblematic of Miami -- in the city that was a hurricane-ravaged, mosquito-infested swamp back when other cities were already great -- than hope for the future? What more could you expect in the foremost immigrant city in America, a place built by people driven fully on the hope that their future lives would be better than the ones they left behind?

At a gas station in Brickell, as I was feeding the last few quarters from a ransacked center console into the vacuuming machine, I wondered how that dream of downtown Miami, if it were true now, would have affected my current situation. Certainly it's going to become a lot less likely for anyone to break a car window in broad daylight once NE 10th Street goes from desolate to part of a high street open-air mega mall.

Then again, it will probably be nearly impossible to find any parking on the street once that whole affair is finished. Life is always a trade-off, I guess.

Driving back home, I turn on SW 7th Street and end up snarled in traffic long enough to look up at the cranes working on the other Miami development boom just south of the river. From the corner of my eye, I see a piece of plaster falling from a high-rise construction site. It sails down and a few seconds later crashes harmlessly in the parking lot of a Burger King, missing

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everyone and everything on an otherwise fairly busy shopping plaza.

I think back to downtown and the coming development. I guess we'll have a few more broken car windows before it's all done there too.

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