

The Sharing Economy Hits Miami

Written by Eleazar David Meléndez, BT Contributor
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Here to stay, for both good and ill



Perhaps it was the mood set by those in the crowd who'd been celebrating Valentine's Day just a few hours earlier. Perhaps all the love and high-fiving was to be expected at this kind of a gathering, no matter the time of year -- especially in Miami, where a kiss on the cheek to meet a professional acquaintance is not a horrible faux pas, but a totally normal form of greeting.

Whatever the reason, as the speakers at a February 15 summit downtown touted the recent accomplishments that tactical urbanism and smart city planning had achieved in Miami, an overwhelming atmosphere of love for our city, and for the people dedicated to making it better every day, was in the air.

At the appropriately named Urbanism Summit, where I served as a moderator during an afternoon panel, planners, designers, and policy experts felt the love as they shared their war stories, narratives of moving projects forward through the sticky bureaucracy, or the work to obtain buy-in from various communities for forward-looking design ideas.

Helping set the mood for the event, at the beautifully remodeled WeWork branch inside the 1920s downtown skyscraper known as the Security Building, summit participants were able to spread out leisurely over comfortable benches, networking over the complimentary espresso and kombucha drinks that have become trademarks of this three-month-old shared workspace.

Indeed, even as some participants grouched in smaller conversations about how not everyone in Miami shares so passionately their love for the city and the spirit to make it better, it was hard to sense anything but deep affection and appreciation in the room for the important issues and

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work being discussed.

The gorgeously appointed space, which took over a failed residential condo conversion scheme in a former bank building, was a talking point in those discussions as well.

While it is only the most recent big shared office to open in South Florida, the well-designed space, which boasts a bank vault that has been converted into a quiet room, is at the tip of the spear of an office-sharing trend and a wider sharing economy that is wildly popular in Miami.

Just how popular? As first reported by the *Miami Herald*, a study analyzing commercial real estate trends, released in February, found the amount of the total stock that's dedicated to such shared office space -- at 3.5 percent of all commercial office space in the city -- sets Miami's center in a class of its own.

Buoyed by telecom and medical startups, as well as branch offices of multinational companies and export-import firms that increasingly prefer not to lease private office suites, Miami beats out cities with much higher cachet for being share-friendly startup hubs. Downtown Austin and New York City's Manhattan, for example, see less than two percent of office space dedicated to such shared setups.

Much of the space is in the urban core areas of downtown and Brickell, in places like the Security Building and inside Brickell City Centre operated by New York City-based WeWork; in popular and stylish locations run by homegrown competitors, such as Pipeline, Büro, and Building.Co.; or in longstanding outposts of national names, including Regus and Quest.

In a city where real estate is king, and where personal relationships and the ability to network and close the deal are woven so deeply as priorities of the entrepreneurial DNA, it's not surprising that a disproportionate number of companies choose shared office space.

But offices are only one of the most popular products on offer in what's commonly known as the sharing economy.

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A squishy term that encompasses a lot of the new ways goods and services are being made and delivered in the 21st century, the sharing economy covers business models based around collaborative consumption, rather than exclusive ownership of a product or service. Shared office space is an obvious and popular example, as are the ride sharing and home sharing facilitated by mobile apps.

But the concept also includes such things as networks created to connect potential students with amateur yarn-knitting instructors and socially focused websites that match musicians so they can jam and sell their music, even if they're located on different continents.

Miami is unique in the way that it has adopted the sharing economy -- not because the services and goods offered are in high demand, but because the models acquire a distinct tone when deployed here.

Take the well-deserved reputation for leisure and the often gaudy excesses of the super-rich. It's no coincidence that with its profile, Miami has become the corporate home for services that offer shared use of yachts and luxury supercars, for example. Or that entrepreneurs with apps offering massage on demand also gravitate to Miami. That has created a small niche of companies and corporate leaders who specialize in the luxury service aspect of the sharing economy, and Miami's take on it has our unique vibe.

Or take Uber, the quintessential sharing-economy company. Just as in most major cities in America and Europe where it has rolled out, the company faced a regulatory battle against the entrenched interests of taxicab medallion holders. As in every other big city, from New York to Paris, it undermined the competition with pricing.

And just like everywhere else it's up and running, the company's brand has lived on a knife's edge, pressed between the undeniable convenience a service of its kind brings to consumers, and the reality that the system it creates sacrifices the wages of full-time drivers at the altar of free-market techno-futurism.

But dropped in our beautiful land of sandy beaches and notoriously bad public transit, Uber has

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moved quickly to establish itself as a credible way for private industry to use a substitute to public bus routes, especially with a newly unveiled service that turns the mobile app into a jitney service, rather than a shared taxi.

Which brings us back to the Security Building and the folks discussing all the cool and exciting ways to make Miami better by using technology, design, planning, and good old common sense. As people in the city continue to embrace shared-economy models, issues will likely arise that bring on new challenges.

Already ride-sharing services and other companies built around the idea of consumers being able to demand a service with the touch of an app face tremendous issues around labor exploitation. And home-sharing apps have been credibly documented to worsen affordability issues around housing -- the last thing Miami needs.

Let's hope that at future urbanism summits, with the same level of goodwill, these challenges are tackled head on.

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