

### Which city thoroughfares are paved but passé?



we had the best seats in town for July 4th fireworks. I figured the view of the bay would allow us to see at least a few distant shows. Hitting SE 13th Street at the Brickell waterfront, we found the mother lode: a bayside walkway across from Jade at Brickell Bay. Revelers were lined up along the walk's length, hanging their feet over the seawall or chatting with partygoers on Jade's lower balconies.

The show was perfect -- a panorama of the Bayfront Park, Miami Beach, and Key Biscayne displays. Even so, from the first bang to the last pop, I was more captivated by the space we'd chosen.

A bayside public walkway, closed to vehicular traffic, unabashedly open to anyone, even though it ran alongside private residences with waterfront rents. Strangers engaging, kids playing, and general levity were all around. Maybe it was the spirit of the holiday, but I'd like to hope the neighborhood had lightened up just by its walkability.

What is it about walking space that changes a neighborhood's tone? New York transplants may be familiar with Manhattan's Public Plazas Project, in which their DOT closed vehicular traffic on portions of Broadway for six months in 2009. The study demonstrated a viable alternative to auto-centric living.

While cars were diverted with little impact, commercial areas opened to pedestrians and sidewalk retail, boosting tourism, encouraging visitation, improving conditions for residents, and generally warming the atmosphere. The closures have endured beyond the project's timeline, and the design of Manhattan's movement has changed for the better.

Granted, Manhattan is accustomed to foot traffic; owning and parking a car there amounts to paying rent on an extra apartment. Nevertheless, revolutionary thought reflecting the Broadway plazas can apply to Miami. Our city is dotted with vestigial streets: objects that, like an appendix or pay phones, have become nearly obsolete.

These public spaces can be repurposed to encourage walking, commerce, and leisure. As the city develops, residents and elected officials alike should contemplate our roadways and consider their potential. Is every artery essential? Are some roads more accommodating than mere traffic would warrant?

In a city that is building upward while running out of space to sprawl, one way to enhance the quality of life is to find throughways that we will use as creative alternatives: promenades, widened sidewalks, or transit hubs and lines. Our Downtown Development Authority and Metropolitan Planning Organization have initiated this discussion in their Bicycle/Pedestrian Mobility Plan, which declares that "it is critical to enhance non-motorized transportation mobility and accessibility for Downtown Miami to sustain its status as a major world city.

"Pedestrian-friendly downtown environments," it continues, "invite residents and tourists alike to patronize downtown businesses, enjoy beautiful waterfront vistas, walk to work, access public transportation for longer trips, and marvel at the spectacle of grand boulevards."

Upcoming developments in downtown Miami are seizing upon the DDA and MPO's vision. These include the epic Miami World Center, which boasts 30 acres of "the city reimaged" planted atop and around the vacant lot that was once the Miami Arena.

Plans will focus on walking space, with the intention of enhancing retail opportunities. This ambitious project could be our long-awaited Times Square, plazas and all, once again proving

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that when a private endeavor takes an interest in changing the landscape, the sky is the limit. The same needs to be said for public endeavor and public space, such as our roadways.

Drivers who frequent NE 2nd Avenue between I-395 and downtown (one-way, southbound): Have you noticed the leftmost lane's construction project has ended? This lane closure, which has lasted more than two years, was attached to construction of the string of condos fronting Biscayne Boulevard. The work spilled out of the buildings onto the sidewalk, and required barricades in the left lane, narrowing the avenue from three lanes to two.

Despite this stretch of road's proximity to the I-395 off-ramp, the American Airlines Arena, and the Adrienne Arsht Center, the overall traffic flow seemed, for the most part, unaffected by the closure.

The lane reopened this summer, with no fanfare or profound change in traffic conditions. This begs the question: Do we need this much roadway?

Widening the sidewalks for pedestrians and green space by reclaiming the lane could set a standard for revisiting arbitrary urban planning. The foothold that roadways maintain reflects an outdated vision for Miami's development. Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, co-founder of new urbanist powerhouse architecture and design firm Duany Plater-Zyberk, & Company, tells the *BT* that the fixation on automotive traffic is a holdover from development booms in the 1970s, which "reflects an era when moving cars was more important to get people downtown." Says Plater-Zyberk: "I still have ringing in my ears from when I heard people say no one would ever want to walk when we discussed transit. People are indeed saying, 'Where's transit and pedestrian friendliness?'"

Miami has its Broadways -- streets that were once sole options to move traffic but which now have reasonable alternatives or are maintained out of habit. S. Miami Avenue, for instance, expands from two lanes in Brickell to four lanes by Vizcaya and Mercy Hospital, then back to two until it hits Coconut Grove.

There's a narrow sidewalk on the east side, with runners and bicyclists competing for space. The west side is nothing but grass and dirt. Repurposing those shoulders, or cutting down the lanes while leaving a median open for hospital traffic, could reduce excessive roadway,

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enhance walkability, and contribute to the city's beautification efforts.

Plater-Zyberk suggests that in instances like S. Miami Avenue, *depaving* the road would be a step toward ameliorating a number of issues, walkability among them. In addition to beautification, the effort "would help the whole drainage problem in town, which will be exacerbated with sea level rise. It could be effective countywide."

Depaving the roads to allow conversion is in many ways more of a publicity challenge than cost-effective issue. According to Plater-Zyberk, "Nobody's out there actively advocating for repaving or depaving. Agencies aren't being pressured to do it. No higher authority is saying, 'We want this to happen.' And they're a little wary of decreasing road width because vocal people are asking for more capacity. They are reluctant to stick out their necks."

This is a frustrating impasse in Miami design. In a city where walking can be physically risky, trying to change that condition can be politically risky. If civic leaders and developers are apprehensive about identifying the roads we *don't* need anymore, perhaps it falls on us as residents to vocalize for them. What would you change?

*This column originally appeared in September 2014.*

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