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DIVIDING A CITY: REAL ESTATE MEGA-SPECULATION AND CONTENTION IN MIAMI, FLORIDA

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ABSTRACT
Miami is not a newcomer to the history of gentrification that has reshaped the urban fabric in cities all over the world. Yet a new mega project to be implemented in Miami's Little Haiti neighborhood represents a strategic capitalist modification of the city's previous processes of class-based and racialized socio-territorial dispossession and displacement. As we argue in this paper, Little Haiti's Magic City Innovation District stands emblematic for a global boom in financialized urban corporate accumulation, which presents new challenges to local communities. We ask, what practical political options does a predominantly poor minority community have in confronting such challenges? Our discussion of Miami's Little Haiti suggests two conclusions: first, that real estate mega speculation potentially exacerbates politico-social divisions within such a community, subverts its capacity for resistance, and renders it more vulnerable to large-scale dispossession and displacement; and second, that mega speculation exacerbates socio-territorial divisions and inequalities within the fabric of a wider metropolis.

Keywords: Gentrification, Miami, Displacement, Dispossession, Mega speculation, Corporate Real Estate Hegemony

RESUMEN
Miami no es un recién llegado a la historia de la gentrificación que ha remodelado el tejido urbano en ciudades de todo el mundo. Sin embargo, un nuevo megaproyecto que se va a llevar a cabo en el barrio de Little Haiti de Miami representa una modificación capitalista estratégica de los anteriores procesos de desposesión y desplazamiento socioterritorial basados en la clase y la raza. Como argumentamos en este

documento, el Magic City Innovation District de Little Haiti es emblemático para un auge global de la acumulación corporativa urbana financiarizada, que presenta nuevos desafíos para las comunidades locales. Nos preguntamos qué opciones políticas prácticas tiene una comunidad minoritaria predominantemente pobre para enfrentarse a estos retos. Nuestro análisis del Pequeño Haití de Miami sugiere dos conclusiones: en primer lugar, que la megaespeculación inmobiliaria exacerba potencialmente las divisiones político-sociales dentro de dicha comunidad, subvierte su capacidad de resistencia y la hace más vulnerable a la desposesión y el desplazamiento a gran escala; y en segundo lugar, que la megaespeculación exacerba las divisiones y desigualdades socioterritoriales dentro del tejido de una metrópolis más amplia.

Palabras clave: Gentrificación, Miami, Desplazamiento, Desposesión, Megaespeculación, Hegemonía inmobiliaria corporativa

RESUMO

Miami não é um recém-chegado à história da gentrificação que remodelou o tecido urbano em cidades de todo o mundo. No entanto, um novo mega projeto a ser implementado no bairro Little Haiti de Miami representa uma modificação capitalista estratégica em relação a processos anteriores de expropriação e deslocamento sócio territorial racializado e baseado em classes. Como argumentamos neste documento, o Magic City Innovation District do Haiti é emblemático para um boom global na acumulação corporativa urbana finaceirizada, que apresenta novos desafios para as comunidades locais. Perguntamos, que opções políticas práticas tem uma comunidade predominantemente minoritária –e pobre– para enfrentar tais desafios? Nossa discussão sobre o Pequeno Haiti de Miami sugere duas conclusões: primeiro, que a mega especulação imobiliária exacerba potencialmente as divisões político-sociais dentro da comunidade, subvertendo sua capacidade de resistência e a tornando-a mais vulnerável à expropriação e deslocamento em grande escala; e segundo, que a mega especulação exacerba as divisões sócio territoriais e as desigualdades dentro do tecido de uma metrópole mais ampla.

Palavras-chave: Gentrificação, Miami, Deslocamento, Expropriação, Mega especulação, Hegemonia imobiliária corporativa

PREAMBLE

As the sun rises over calm ocean waters, I (Ulrich Oslender) get ready for the commute from Miami Beach to my workplace at the main campus of Florida International University (FIU). On a normal day, this should take no more than 35 to 40 minutes, meticulously planned and timed by the Google Map App running in the background of my smartphone. Leaving Miami Beach, I hit the interstate freeway I-195, which rises above the waters of Biscayne Bay that separate the barrier island from the City of Miami proper. I stay high above houses, parks, and city streets, as I first connect to Interstate I-95, and then to Florida State Road 836 (also known as the Dolphin Expressway), oblivious to the neighborhoods underneath me, their fabric, history and struggles.

The interstate highway system has effectively cut through the burgeoning metropolitan area, connecting traffic between outlying suburbs, while ripping through the heart of the city, at times dividing entire neighborhoods. Such is the case of the oddly named Overtown, one of Miami's oldest neighborhoods. Originally known as "Colored Town", because it was one of the few places where black people were allowed to live in Miami under Jim Crow segregation laws, Overtown was once considered the "Harlem of the South", the center of black society in South Florida.[1] Yet in the 1960s, the construction of Interstate I-95 literally cut the neighborhood in half, displacing thousands of its residents and destroying numerous local businesses (Connolly 2014; Dunn 2016). This marked the beginning of the decline of historic Overtown, a community that over time became associated with poverty, abandonment, drug-related violence, and unemployment. Racial and class divisions in Miami were painfully put on display in Overtown, if only one knew how and where to look. Yet, cruising over this town at 60 miles per hour in one's air-conditioned vehicle, one would be forgiven for ignoring this divisive history.

Similar racial and class divisions have played out in other neighborhoods of Miami, such as Little Haiti to the north. More recently, however, Little Haiti has attracted the interest of real estate investors, particularly as real estate speculation has accelerated since the world financial crisis of 2007-2009. As a working class and poor, immigrant-based neighborhood, Little Haiti is attractive, and thus vulnerable, to such speculation for several reasons. It is hemmed in by affluent adjacent neighborhoods and commerce to its north and east, and by the aggressive encroachment of the Design District from the south. It is conveniently located near Wynwood's ongoing corporate densification, the Brickell financial district, the world's busiest cruise port, Miami International Airport, and the latter's corporate business clusters. Of growing salience, moreover, is that the elevation of its land is notably higher on average than that of Biscayne Bay's affluent coastal neighborhoods to its east and hence is less immediately threatened by sea-level rise and flooding.

A stealth process of gentrification has been re-shaping Little Haiti over the last twenty years. Until recently, this process has been largely invisible to non-residents, as land speculators have assembled parcels—vacant lots, single and multi-family homes, small business locales, warehouses, institutional buildings—here and there, leaving the neighborhood as still a deteriorating, "drive through and past" landscape in the eyes of outsiders. During the last three years or so, though, an entirely new development has caught the headlines and thrown into relief processes of real estate mega speculation that are reshaping the neighborhood in not only its physical but also social landscape, and portend the eventual racial banishment of the community. The epitome of this development has been a mega development project known as the Magic City Innovation District, which is the project that we want to examine here in more detail. We believe in the power of deep ethnography to unearth and expose the workings of urban accumulation by dispossession and propose here an archaeolo-

1 The name "Overtown" was apparently adopted, because black residents of West Grove, a small community in Coconut Grove that was founded by Bahamians, used to say that they had to go "over town" to get there.

gy of real estate mega-speculation, so to speak, as it reshapes the urban fabric in Miami (and elsewhere). To clarify our positionality in this paper, we should state that Richard Tardanico has been involved with community activism in Little Haiti in response to the drawing up and the implementation of said Magic City Innovation District project.

THE MAGIC CITY INNOVATION DISTRICT: TOWARDS "A MIAMI … THAT IS HERE FOR EVERYONE"?

> *"A world-class cultural destination that merges immersive experiences with cutting-edge technology and innovations in the realm of art, culture, health and wellness. The development of projects and special programs focused on empowering the local community and creating a sustainable tomorrow" (MCID, n.d., Project Overview)*

Such is the official hype describing the Magic City Innovation District in Miami's Little Haiti, as outlined in the project's overview document. Of course, one is used to such general boisterous claims. Yet suspicions may certainly be warranted regarding the claim of "empowering the local community," as the Magic City partnership began assembling the site's property by evicting the residents of a nearly century-old mobile homes community (Bojnansky 2015). Pressed on whether this was not a sign of nefarious gentrification policies, the Magic City's managing partner declared that "There are no residential units on the site now, so we aren't moving people out or gentrifying anybody" (Bandell 2018).

A casual observer would perhaps detect little change of the urban fabric in Little Haiti, beyond what appears as a generally deteriorated neighborhood with a patchwork of art galleries and commercial venues that would not stand out in any suburban strip mall. On closer inspection, however, and engaging in conversations with local residents, a steady pattern of accelerating LLC intrusions into the neighborhood's housing market can be observed (Rodríguez 2018). Such land assembly had been part of Little Haiti's stealth phase of gentrification, largely involving incremental, if intensifying, displacements of small businesses and residents. Yet mere anticipation of Magic City's official approval by the City of Miami triggered real estate advertisements enticing speculators to buy Little Haiti properties before their prices shoot upward, as the mega-development's construction anchors the neighborhood's definitive transformation. The Covid-19 pandemic has delayed the start of Magic City's full-fledged construction activities. Nonetheless, the project's official approval in June 2019 accelerated speculative land purchases in Little Haiti and, together with rising property code violations and fines, increased the pace of the district's small business and residential dislocations.

As such, Magic City represents an abrupt departure from Little Haiti's prior processes of dispossession and displacement. In other words, Magic City's assemblage of 18 contiguous acres and eventual construction of high-rise residential towers and entertainment-commercial venues is expected to lead to what Saskia Sassen (2015) referred to as "a systemic transformation in the pattern of land ownership in cities: one that alters the historic

meaning of cities," as this poor, minority neighborhood of one and two-story buildings will be transformed into an urban landscape that will be economically unattainable for the vast majority of today's local residents. Elliott-Cooper, Hubbard & Lees (2020) refer to these forms of gentrification and displacement as "the violence of un-homing."

Seen through such a systemic lens, Magic City exemplifies a global boom in urbanized "accumulation by dispossession", a notion coined by Marxist geographer David Harvey (2003, 137-182), who developed Marx's original concept of primitive accumulation (and Rosa Luxemburg's adaptation of it to the early 20th century political and historical context), to account for capitalism's tendency to temporarily ameliorate the constant crisis of overaccumulation, a condition whereby capital surplus lies idle with no profitable outlets in sight. According to Harvey, accumulation by dispossession describes this strategy, as it seizes hold of common assets and turns them into profitable use, "pursued in the name of neo-liberal orthodoxy" (Harvey 2003, 148). From this viewpoint, the promotion of the Magic City Innovation District in Little Haiti is then not merely an expression of a local "gentrification 2.0" phenomenon, but an example of a further cycle of accumulation by dispossession, in which capital surplus searches and finds a profitable outlet for investment in the hitherto neglected and abandoned neighborhood.

We thus set out to frame the emergence of Magic City within the globalizing political economy of Miami, to then focus on local responses and their contentious politics challenging the project's top-down implementation. We shall see, moreover, that contradicting promises "to build economic prosperity for all, to preserve the thriving culture of Little Haiti" and to provide "affordable and workforce housing" (Flechas 2021), Magic City's partnership negotiated a minuscule financial obligation to the community and no legal obligation to finance such housing. Against that backdrop, City of Miami Mayor Francis Suarez, himself a property lawyer, pronounced with much-practiced political doubletalk, "Gentrification is real. But it's moments like this that remind us that we have to create a Miami that's not only here forever, but that is here for everyone" (Flechas 2021).

MIAMI AND LITTLE HAITI

The City of Miami likes to see and sell itself as "The Magic City": the early twentieth-century real estate razzmatazz describing the apparent wizardry that—abracadabra—commanded a city to arise out of swamps, mangroves, mosquitoes, snakes, and alligators. What was the seemingly hidden trick to the "magic"? Racialized repression, dispossession, and exploitation combined with destruction of nature to create a semi-tropical playground for frolicking wealthy whites. Despite nature's frequent revenge in the form of hurricane devastation, the Dixie-apartheid city grew in fits and starts, then boomed as a tourism and retirement destination after World War II. Since then, the Cuban Revolution and Latin American/Caribbean transformations have intersected with the twenty-first century's intensifying globalization to establish Miami as a transnational business and cultural hub, serving as the principal crossroads for exchanges connecting Latin America and the Caribbean with the U.S.

and the world (Portes and Stepick 1994; Nijman 2011; Connolly 2014; Dunn 2016; Portes and Armony 2018).

Yet underneath Greater Miami's long-standing image of sun, fun, and glamour and its emerging image as a dynamic global business and cultural hub is an economy whose indicators rank near the bottom among major U.S. metropolitan areas (FIU 2016; Florida and Pedigo 2019). Further, entwined with such low-scoring indicators are profound, racialized socio-territorial inequalities. Arising from this mix is a clash of economic, cultural, and political forces. Hurricane Andrew's devastation of the early 1990s triggered Anglo flight, creating a void in which Cuban-Americans consolidated local political dominance. Subsequent transformations of the global, U.S., and Greater Miami political economies, along with more diverse and fluid transnational migration flows, have fragmented local decision-making clout across multiple business and ethno-national players, although Cuban-Americans still firmly control the City of Miami's government apparatus. In spite of such fragmentation, the local interests of dominant classes revolve most clearly around propertied capital and real estate speculation, which the metropolitan area's government entities unequivocally serve. Distinctly subordinate within this power arrangement are the region's diverse Black communities, as evident in the case of Greater Miami's Haitian population and the City of Miami's Little Haiti (Dunn 2016; Portes and Armony 2018; Florida and Pedigo 2019; Viglucci et al. 2020).

Post-World War II Haitian emigration gained speed under "Papa Doc" Duvalier's dictatorship during the 1960s, led by exiled professionals. Under "Baby Doc" Duvalier's dictatorship, middle and lower-middle class Haitians increased their share among the exodus during the 1970s and, especially by the late 70s and early 80s, so did poor "Boat People." While New York City and Montreal were the focal North American destinations of the early migrations, Haitians came increasingly to South Florida. Wynwood, Buena Vista, and Lemon City, as north-of-downtown districts left behind by suburbanization, became the gateway neighborhoods for Caribbean newcomers, including Haitians. Civil rights era critiques of U.S. foreign policy's hardline stance against Haitian refugees intersected with local and national human rights movements to create political space to begin transforming Buena Vista and Lemon City into a community in exile. There emerged substantial growth of Haitian businesses in the district, albeit largely precarious small enterprises, as well as optimism that what had informally become known as "Little Haiti" would, like Miami's Little Havana, prosper as a tourism-cultural magnet (Portes and Stepick 1994).

But racist stereotypes and fears of crime deterred South Florida residents and tourists from visiting Little Haiti, as they spent their money instead in revitalizing Miami Beach, trendy Coconut Grove, and Little Havana's Calle Ocho. Upward mobility accelerated for Haitian skilled labor and professionals, who departed to reside and invest in South Florida's suburbs. Little Haiti became increasingly relegated to poor Haitians and other immigrants, as well as victimized by private and public disinvestment.

Nevertheless, the maturation of Haitian American community institutions launched a cultural and political reawakening by the turn of the twentieth century, mobilizing most vi-

Source: City of Miami Planning Department

gorously in response to the refugee crisis caused by Haiti's 2010 earthquake and, looking forward, to officially rename Lemon City as "Little Haiti." The latter action elicited a multiracial-ethnic backlash, involving real estate developers, landlords, business owners, homeowners, preservationists, and academicians. The opponents feared diminished commercial opportunities and stagnant property values, along with objections to privileging Haitian identity over that of the diverse groups—primarily black and white Bahamians and Americans—represented in the history of Lemon City (Bojnansky 1994; Sandler 2016; Smiley 2016).

The City of Miami Commission unanimously approved the renaming in May 2016 (Sandler 2016; Smiley 2016). That official concession was indicative of the mounting threat to Little Haiti: not only the continued march of stealth gentrification but corporate mega-speculation in the context of real estate's intensified global financialization following the world

financial crisis of 2007-2009. During the very year of Little Haiti's official renaming, several large real estate investors teamed up to announce their pursuit of city approval for a massive Magic City Innovation District located in the commercial core of Little Haiti. The focus of political controversy over their proposal was the City of Miami's zoning code, Miami 21, and its Special Area Plans provision.

MIAMI 21 AND SPECIAL AREA PLANS

The City of Miami replaced its land-use-based zoning code with a form-based code in September 2009, becoming the first major U.S. city to adopt a comprehensive zoning code based on the principles of New Urbanism. As has occurred elsewhere, Miami's original land-use-based code permitted chaotic growth, as the city rapidly grew in size and complexity. In response, the City of Miami's mayor recruited leading New Urbanism architect Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk to formulate an alternative code based not on disparate and disconnected land-use districts, but on rules governing "the relationship between the street and buildings, pedestrian and vehicles, public and private spaces, and the relationship between multiple buildings, a block, a neighborhood and transitions in scale" (CM, n.d., "Miami's Zoning History"; Patton 2016). The City of Miami adopted the Miami 21 form-based code in spite of objections that it would unduly restrict design options and property rights.

Although Miami 21 has garnered much praise, one of its components enables mega-land developers to subvert its New Urbanism principles. Miami 21's Special Area Plans (SAPs) permit owners of contiguous parcels greater than nine acres to dramatically exceed a location's designated restrictions on building heights and densities if 5% of the property is assigned to "civic space," which optionally may be augmented with "public benefits" such as historic preservation, green building, publicly accessible green space, or low-income housing.

The City of Miami's planning director during most of the Magic City negotiations, Fernando Garcia, praised Miami 21's SAP regulations as providing a forum "where the city comes in, stakeholders come in, and we can all figure out what the optimal shape this project can take is" (Smiley and Viglucci 2017). Magic City's lawyer Neisen Kasdin has argued that "The [Miami] SAPs built to date are some of the most spectacular, highly regarded projects in the country" (Smiley and Viglucci 2017).

In sharp contrast, critics argue that the political access and influence of mega-land developers is hardwired into the City of Miami's government machinery, relegating most stakeholders—particularly working class and poor communities—to the political margins. They oppose the height-rise and high-density upzoning of SAPs in residential neighborhoods, which—by displacing affordable housing and small businesses, exposing original residents to property code and public order fines, and disrupting social and institutional support networks—portend to weaken and expel communities and to compound the city's housing crisis. Critics additionally cite key voids in the SAP requirements: displacement studies and public benefits such as low-income housing are not required; and there is no provision for assessing the collective impact of SAPs when multiple projects are proposed for an area.

LITTLE HAITI AND MAGIC CITY

PROPERTY ACQUISITION

In 1929 the Magic City Tourist Court opened in Lemon City. Years later, in the 2000s, and by then renamed Magic City Park, it was described in a City of Miami historic preservation document as "a remarkably intact example of an early twentieth century tourist court in Miami … with approximately 45 non-historic, metal trailer homes" (CM, n.d., "Magic City Park"). Said document also suggested for it to be included in the National Register of Historic Places. But in the summer of 2014 Magic City Park and adjoining property were purchased by the venture capital firm Dragon Global. In early 2015 Dragon Global sent a blanket eviction notice to the trailer park's 40 resident families, who with minuscule financial compensation were expelled from the site within a few months (Bojnansky 2015).

In November 2016—the year of the City of Miami's official recognition of Little Haiti—plans were announced to turn the former trailer park and its adjoining land into an 18-acre, mixed-use project designed by Arquitectonica. The proposed project would include green space and a sculpture park occupying the former trailer grounds (Dahlberg 2016). The project's team would eventually present plans for office towers as high as 18 stories and residential towers as high as 27 stories—in an area of Little Haiti where existing buildings are no higher than two stories. With no sense of irony, the project was named after the banished trailer park, "Magic City Innovation District"; the addition of "innovation" to the title serving to create high-tech marketing panache.

The proposed project dramatically exceeded Miami 21's height and density restrictions for the project's site, located within Little Haiti's commercial corridor. It thus required that the investors submit and obtain City of Miami approval for an SAP. The Magic City partnership submitted its SAP proposal to the City of Miami in January 2018 as well as held an open house on the project's property. The partnership predicted glowing impacts of the Magic City project for Little Haiti and the City of Miami over an 18-year schedule of construction: 9,000 new jobs, $500 million in wages and spending, $40 million in permit and impact fees, and $25 million in tax revenues. They also touted the inclusion of a significant portion of low-income housing among the development's apartments (Bandell 2018; Rodriguez 2018).

COMMUNITY CONTENTION

In such a context of mega-speculation, what practical political options does a predominantly poor minority community have in confronting such challenges? What could an effective contentious politics look like in such a scenario of extreme power differential? We want to focus here on two main community expressions, as they became articulated over time vis-à-vis the Magic City Innovation District proposal.

An already existing organization, Little Haiti's Family Action Network Movement (FANM), initiated the political response of Greater Miami's Haitian community to the threat of gentrification in 2017. Its CEO, Marleine Bastien, raised the issue initially with Father Reginald Jean Mary, head administrator of the Notre Dame d'Haiti Catholic Church. Bastien eventually became the inaugural head

of the Little Haiti Advisory Board. Other such groups soon emerged. When in July 2018 the City of Miami approved Magic City's request to pursue its SAP application, stipulating that its team initiate meetings with Little Haiti's community leaders, Father Jean Marie suggested to Bastien that the diverse groups form a united organization. A month later, the leaders met at Little Haiti's iconic Libreri Mapou and joined forces as Concerned Leaders of Little Haiti (CLOLH). But by October of that year Bastien and FANM split from CLOLH. The rift became not only political but also painfully emotional within a leadership community characterized by deep interpersonal bonds forged through shared histories of not only Haitian struggle and immigration but also decades of unified dedication in constructing Little Haiti. So, what caused the rift?

Given the hegemony of powerful real estate investors and their associates within the City of Miami's government machinery, there was no doubt within CLOLH that the City Commission would eventually approve some version of Magic City's SAP application. To be sure, CLOLH's diverse coalition included Haitian propertied/business interests who stood to gain financially from Little Haiti's gentrification. Yet even CLOLH's most committed community activists did not see a conceivable opportunity for a meaningful public/grassroots program to reverse Little Haiti's de facto deterioration. CLOLH concluded that the only practical questions were, what would be the terms of the SAP's approval and how to mitigate anticipated community dislocations (Tardanico, Personal Interviews). CLOLH thus opted for an accommodative strategy: accepting Magic City's negotiating overtures; securing a seat at the table with Magic City; and attempting to bargain community benefits from within the status quo.

So, what were Marleine Bastien's objections to CLOLH's strategy? First, she insisted that bargaining with Magic City must fundamentally take place in community-wide venues, instead of the one-to-one and small-group sessions that were the focus of Magic City's strategy. Bastien regarded the latter as a standard top-down, cooptive, and divide-and-rule strategy by land developers and their government partners intended to marginalize the breadth of community interests and voices. Her second objection was that only by organizing grassroots political awareness and solidarity could the Little Haiti community mobilize the clout required to focus effectively not on securing piecemeal community benefits, but rather on winning a robust community development agreement. Doing so, in turn, would underpin a trans-neighborhood movement to incorporate such agreements into Miami 21 and institutionally empower otherwise disenfranchised communities (Bastien 2019; Bastien and Winker 2020).

From the perspective of Bastien/FANM, the negotiation of a far-reaching development agreement must become a foundational component of a city's zoning code and SAPs, ensuring that impacted communities have a guaranteed influential say in decision-making at every stage of a corporate or government real estate project. An agreement's intent should be "to incorporate equity, inclusion and trust with the community and key-stakeholders and strengthen community and business partnerships both economically and socially." Any specific agreement must be negotiated by a representa-

tive coalition of community groups—involving a robust slate of accessible neighborhood-wide forums to incorporate the broadest possible range of interests and voices—with a real estate developer and government officials. Community allies based elsewhere, such as legal service, labor, church, environmental, and university organizations, would also participate, including as consultants.

Bastien/FANM's priorities for a Little Haiti SAP/community benefits agreement can be summarized as follows (FANM, n.d.):

- Housing: a minimum of 20% on-site, long-term guaranteed affordable units pegged to the neighborhood's annual median household income; and a meaningful financial contribution to funds for housing ownership via affordable housing and a community land trust.
- Employment: a minimum of 50% of construction jobs and 50% of permanent jobs with living wage and benefits for Little Haiti's residents; job, management, commercial lease, and small business programs; a job and business grant fund; a ban on big box stores.
- Community: meaningful financial contributions to neighborhood service programs and facilities (such as parks, recreation).
- Architecture: appropriate scale and visual/physical connections to the neighborhood.
- Arts: a minimum of 70% of project artwork created by local Haitian artists; memorials for Haitian pioneers and earthquake victims.
- Traffic: subsidized transportation for the neighborhood's low-income, senior, and disabled residents; enhanced bicycle and pedestrian paths integrated with city-wide networks.
- Environmental/climate: meaningful financial contributions for neighborhood tree canopy, other green space, and community gardens.
- Youth: significant financial contributions to local public schools, educational programs, and scholarships.
- Accountability: ensure overall compliance by means of a performance bond with community beneficiary.

CLOLH frequently voiced respect and admiration for Bastien's community leadership in galvanizing attention to the threat posed by gentrification (Le Floridien 2019). Their concern, however, was that the negotiating posture of Bastien/FANM—anchoring a broader group of grassroots activists from throughout Greater Miami, along with varying levels of support from affluent adjacent neighborhoods principally fearing damaging impacts on their quality of life—was too polarizing and the demands too ambitious, jeopardizing the willingness of Magic City to bargain even a modest benefits package. Bastien, on the other hand, recognized the political effectiveness of Magic City's divide-and-rule, cooptive methods, which dangled business deals, jobs, monetary contributions, and more to CLOLH's diverse coalition (CM, Nov. 15, 2018; Feb. 28, 2019; March 28, 2019; June 28, 2019; Kasdin 2018; Gierczyk 2020).[2]

2 This is of course a central dilemma for many communities and social movements facing cooptation at the hands of

These differences in community contention and local strategies of engaging the Magic City project would become apparent and at times passionately put on display during a number of City of Miami Government Sessions and Town Hall meetings.

CITY OF MIAMI GOVERNMENT SESSIONS AND TOWN HALL MEETINGS

At a City Commission Planning and Zoning meeting in November 2018, Miami Mayor Francis Suarez began public discussion of the proposed SAP, praising Magic City's innovativeness. The SAP's supportive public comments from across Miami-Dade County reflected interests seeking to attract tech investment and promote commercial development, touting the project's "sustainability" and "health-wellness" themes, regarding the SAP as the viable way to revitalize small businesses and a distressed neighborhood. Lauding the ownership group, a public commentator said, "from what I've seen from Little Haiti, it's been the same for 10 years, from its poverty to failed businesses. With Magic City and its innovation and its programs and its buildings, it's going to bring a lot of jobs... and it's going to help the community as a whole" (CM Nov. 15, 2018).

A lawyer representing prominent Little Haiti business and property owners described how "for three or four years" (dating back to 2015-2016) Magic City's partnership had paid the insurance for the neighborhood's youth soccer participants and co-sponsored local job-training programs such as for security guard licensing. According to an affordable housing developer:

> *This developer [Magic City partnership] has committed over and above to provide affordable and workforce housing. We have had several meetings where we have entered into an agreement that I would sort of head up some of the affordable housing development... Upon approval of this project ... we will roll out an aggressive plan to increase the number of minority homeowners. (CM, Nov. 15, 2018)*

Critical perspectives, on the other hand, observed that the project's massive scale and density violated the principles of Miami 21, would cause serious traffic congestion and late-night noise radiating outward from Little Haiti, and did not include a population/housing displacement study. From an explicitly racial justice perspective, a representative of a women's community development organization argued:

> *I hear what you [the Commissioners] say, but I don't see what you say. We make conversation here quite often between those "haves" and the "have nots"... and I don't see the fairness in the community planning ... To me, [the zoning process] it's not comprehensive and it's not fair. Magic City, now you see it, then you won't ... The buildings go up and your house disappears... We're steadily disappearing. I see no magic, I see no miracles, and I see no fairness. (CM, Nov. 15, 2018)*

The executive director of the Community Justice Project (self-identified "social movement

state institutions or external capital interests intent on exploiting local lands and resources. See, for example, Oslender (2016) for an account of how oil palm growers in Colombia "offered jobs" to impoverished peasants, in order to break down resistance that growers had encountered by social movements.

lawyers" allied with FANM) reinforced the above argument:

> *… small business owners and renters who have come together and who are dealing with crazy displacement right now … should be at the table and be meaningfully allowed to shape the future of this community, and not ceding it in a process that was broken to begin with… [T]he special area plan process in general needs to be looked at … to really look at what affordability, what displacement, what impact on small businesses is going to look like from the get-go…The property at issue here was a mobile home park; one of the last forms of affordable housing. When the [Magic City] applicant took possession of it, those families, dozens of families were displaced to make room for it… [T]hat's really important to know, because the displacement that's happening is not just going to be about what's in this property, but it's going to rapidly accelerate what's going on [across Little Haiti] … (CM, Nov. 15, 2018)*

A CLOLH co-founder combined support and concern by articulating the dilemma of CLOLH's community activist wing:

> *I believe that Magic City Project will be productive and beneficial to the new generation, especially to our young people. I also believe that this project will bring a new face to Little Haiti. . . [but] I'm not yet satisfied with the development agreement. . . because on affordable housing, I am not pleased. The only way we can have our voice heard is if you give us a seat at the table. I am requesting that from you. On jobs, I'm not satisfied…There must be an ongoing dialogue with Magic City. But at the same time … I am for the project. . . (CM, Nov. 15, 2018)*

These critical public interventions clearly had an impact. Following the November 2018 meeting, the City Commission requested clarification of Magic City's proposed public benefits and other terms, deferring further official public discussion until February 2019. A key issue within the ensuing negotiations was a proposed third-party entity to administer funds that Magic City's partnership would contribute as a hub for its revised SAP-public benefits package. CLOLH's community activist wing argued to select The Miami Foundation, a highly regarded philanthropic organization. Others within CLOLH and Magic City's team instead proposed to establish a new Little Haiti Community Revitalization Trust. The latter's establishment was eventually unanimously approved by the Commission in their March 2019 meeting (Bojnansky 2020; Buteau 2021).

Yet, the negotiations also eliminated Magic City's previous commitment to construct affordable and workforce housing, instead opting for an upfront $6 million contribution for indeterminant "community" benefits to the Revitalization Trust, together with a plan to contribute another $25 million over the next 30 years. These funds would be administered by the Trust, which would make expenditure recommendations to the City Commission. Moreover, the funds would neither be inflation adjusted nor guaranteed, but would be contingent on the achievement of a series of construction benchmarks over the 30-year period (Crespogram, 2019; Viglucci and Flechas, 2019; Bojnansky 2020; Gierczyk 2020).

While the Commission then moved to preliminarily approve Magic City's SAP, it also supported a call for CLOLH-organized town hall meetings, at which public support for the project should be further gouged.[3] These town halls took place in the auditorium of Notre Dame d'Haiti Catholic Church on the evenings of April 29 and May 6, 2019. With more than 100 attendees at each of the meetings, they provided one last stand for the community to voice their concerns. Particularly at the second meeting in May, the atmosphere grew tense. One issue of contention referred to jobs for locals provided by the Magic City Innovation District project. When Magic City's representative explained that "we employ contractors, so what employment benefits those companies provide is on a company-to-company basis," an audience member responded angrily: "You can't tell me that you can't provide health benefits to your workers … with the money you're making that you cannot provide a pension plan. There's something very, very wrong … We don't just need a job, we need careers" (TH 2019).

Another bone of contention was Magic City's refusal to reveal how much the investors anticipate profiting. One member in the audience was quite vocal about this: "When we hear that from you, we know you're not listening… You're talking numbers [proposed monetary benefits]. We're asking how the numbers will translate into the lives of the community… You won't tell us what you expect to make in the coming years and what we'll get out of that" (TH, 2019). In the end, these protest statements were well registered, but what effect would they have?

On June 27, 2019, the City Commission convened, and the answer became apparent. Little. Magic City's supporters reiterated their praise for the SAP, or else continued to describe the SAP as pragmatically superior to the alternatives for a deteriorating neighborhood. While some critique was still launched, the more general legitimacy of the project's critics was also put in question. As one CLOLH member argued, the alternative of not having the project materialize would be continued deterioration: "Magic City cannot do everything the people want. . . People say I am against that project … [but] they gonna let us [stay] the way we are. . . So I am coming to support Magic City" (CM, June 28, 2019). This position was reiterated by another of CLOLH's leaders: "This project may not be perfect, but we, the Concerned Leaders of Little Haiti, have really worked hard to negotiate agreements with the developers. I'm here again in support of the project."

Not surprisingly, after public comment closed, the Commission moved to unanimously approve the Magic City SAP, without acknowledging that the Magic City group escaped with no legal obligation to construct low-income housing and that only $6 million of Magic City's loudly touted $31 million contribution to Little Haiti was guaranteed.

3 Town hall meetings, or town halls, are a common feature of American grassroots politics. Their purpose is for local and regional officials to hear a community's views on public issues. Attendees have the opportunity to present their ideas and opinions, and also to ask questions of elected officials and public figures. They often become a prominent feature during primary election campaigns.

CONCLUSIONS

Magic City represents an abrupt departure from Little Haiti's previous pattern of stealth gentrification. In so doing, it epitomizes what Saskia Sassen (2015) describes as "The spread of [corporate] mega-projects with vast footprints that inevitably kill much urban tissue: little streets and squares, density of street-level shops and modest offices, and so on." As Sassen so poignantly challenges us to reflect on: "Who owns our cities—and why this urban takeover should concern us all." Little Haiti, one may argue, looms as a "poster child" of David Harvey's arguments on "accumulation by dispossession", a decidedly unfortunate distinction, we should hasten to add. There is widespread fear in Little Haiti that such accumulation will kill not only urban tissue but also the socio-spatial foundations of an immigrant-hub, predominantly black community forged out of homeland histories of brutal colonialism, imperialism, and U.S.-client dictatorships.

Moreover, the case of Magic City and Little Haiti has significant implications for the wider metropolis of Greater Miami. Much the same process already devastated another immigrant-based neighborhood, creating hyper-gentrified Wynwood of street-art fame. The process is also ravaging Wynwood's neighboring Overtown—the "Harlem of the South" before government's aggressive highway construction smashed it into marginalized fragments—and is gaining momentum, as it takes aim at other working class and poor racial-minority districts to Overtown's west and north.

It is understandable that a swath of Little Haiti's most committed community activists saw no practical option beyond seeking amicable negotiations with Magic City and bits and pieces of corporate divide-and-rule handouts. Since Magic City's official approval, however, the community's wing of contentious activists has been seeking the elimination of the zoning code's Special Area Plan loophole that enables large land speculators to menace, dispossess, and banish disenfranchised communities across Miami's expansive metroscape. Until that loophole is closed in concert with substantial redistributions of wealth and power, the history of Greater Miami can be aptly characterized as a many-decades transition from apartheid based on brute coercion to apartheid based on the seemingly invisible politics of the market.

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