

Worldly Delights: Miami Design District

Coming of age: Miami has matured into a cultural hot spot
 Mary Luz Mejia



Culture, art and fashion converge seamlessly in this subtropical city by the sea.

When I lived and worked in the **Miami** area, my Canadian friends would sympathetically proclaim, "Great beaches, but there's no culture in **South Florida**." I'd point to the city ballet company, the art deco revival in **South Beach**, the festivals and galleries like **Romero Britto's** headquarters on **Lincoln Road Mall**. They'd be unmoved. But now, even die-hard naysayers will have a tough time shrugging off gems like the ever-expanding **Miami Design District** or the newly minted **New World Symphony** in South Beach, where culture, art and fashion converge seamlessly in this subtropical city by the sea.

In the nightclubbing days of my youth, there was no cooler nocturnal hangout than the **Power Studios** in what was

then a non-gentrified Design District. Street after street of abandoned warehouses stared unblinkingly as we drove past in the inky night to our party destination. That was in the late nineties. Comparing the Design District today with the one I left behind is an exercise in marked contrasts.

On a typical Technicolor Miami day, I meet up with Tiffany Chestler of **Dacra** – the innovative real estate development company behind the revitalization of South Beach, Lincoln Road Mall and now the Miami Design District. We begin our walking tour of the area at the industrially cool **4141 Building** (NE 2nd Avenue, Miami) where the **Haitian Heritage Museum** shares space with retail shops and cutting-edge galleries like **Primary**

Projects. It's here, she explains, that **Books IIII Bischof** and his partners opened up their own space more than a year ago to curate shows of artists they like and admire.

On our visit, we're greeted by an enormous elephant on display in the middle of the room, made from found objects by local artist **Andrew Nigon**. A gallon water bottle partially comprises the beast's right front knee and a rug makes up his giant ear. Nigon, a film and TV prop master, takes us into a world where, he explains, "seductive and tortured characters permanently exist halfway from somewhere to nowhere."

This is street art with indoor cred. Bischof describes it more eloquently: "Street art and graffiti is the purest

contemporary art form, by definition, that's specific to its region and artists' age group." He pauses, adding, "We influence what's going on out there. This art changes quickly."

In what to me seems like the blink of an eye, so has this district. It used to be called **Buena Vista** and though it's hard to believe today, before the stylized, sleek buildings housing design giants like Italy's **Driade** or France's fashion icon **Christian Louboutin** set up shop this was produce-growing country. By the 1920s, 'Pineapple King' Theodore Moore switched gears and left fruit growing for another kind of business: making furniture for the wealthy who started building homes in the neighbourhood. The refurbished **Moore Building** still proudly stands today – as an event space for special occasions.

By the 1990s, the area had completely lost its former lustre. That's when Dacra's **Craig Robins** stepped in, attracting high-end home designers to set up shop. Now, it's expanded its artistic boundaries and is being touted as the next SoHo for its fusion of fashion, art and culture.

The same can be said of nearby South Beach – long known as the epicentre of the never-ending party and parade of bodacious bodies. SoBe has matured, however, and now boasts the stunning New World Symphony (newworldcenter.com) under artistic director Michael Tilson Thomas, designed by Canadian-born starchitect Frank Gehry. Part 'laboratory for musical education' where only 30 out of a thousand applicants from around the world are accepted as fellows, and part performance centre, this symphony is like no other.

Live performances are broadcast free of charge in the adjacent park via a 7,000-square-foot wall cast projection system in surround sound. Inside, guests are also treated to a state-of-the-art experience with multiple HD cameras and projection 'sails' to stimulate the senses. "We're working on attracting a younger audience," says symphony director of sales Sabrina Anico, adding, "It's our hope that a child watching an outdoor performance will fall in love with music and enjoy it for the rest of his or her life!"

TRAVELLERS' TIP: Outdoor concerts start in November at 7:30 p.m. and run through the winter. The symphony also offers mini half-hour indoor concerts during the winter months for \$2.50 – less than a cup of coffee!

Anyone who says that Miami is a cultural wasteland clearly isn't venturing beyond the outlet malls, the clubs or the beaches, because this city has grown up in ways that should make any culturally inclined visitor pack something a little more sophisticated than Bermudas and a pair of flip-flops.

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE MIAMI DESIGN DISTRICT:

Michael's Genuine Food & Drink (www.michaelsgenuine.com), **Sra. Martinez** (sramartinez.com), and **Sugarcane** (www.sugarcanerawbargrill.com) are all delicious dining or cocktail hour choices. Michael's Genuine (for modern American) and Sra. Martinez (with an Iberian/Latin influence) both offer exceptional brunches and dinners. Sugarcane's global sharing plates on its terrace make for a sexy finish to any art-filled day. It doesn't hurt that Michael Schwartz, Michelle Bernstein and Timon Balloo are the stellar, award-winning chefs behind these respective eateries.

Y-3 (150 NE 40th Street) Yohji Yamamoto's high-end fashion meets athletic/street wear is given a U.S. outlet in collaboration with adidas. Yamamoto is a long-time favourite of A-list celebs, and his first stateside store features apparel, accessories and footwear.

Friends With You (www.friendswithyou.com) A think tank, retail shop and creative hub of Miami artists Samuel Borkson and Arturo Sandoval III. From whimsical toys and furniture to massive art installations, this artistic duo creates here and continues to exhibit around the world, including Toronto's 2010 Luminato Festival.

TRAVELLERS' TIP: The second Saturday of each month, a **Gallery Walk** is held from 7:00 to 10:00 p.m. Art galleries and design showrooms welcome the public – a perfect way to get an overview of the area if you're short on time and big on wanting to take it all in! For details, go to the events section of miamidesigndistrict.net.



©MCT VIA GETTY IMAGES

©MARY LUZ MEJIA

©MARY LUZ MEJIA