

Mullin

Build a Park, Turn a Profit

When was the last time you spent a day by the bay at Virginia Key? When did you last take a casual stroll through Bicentennial Park? Or sit down for a quiet picnic on Watson Island? Shaking your head? Okay, let's try this: When was the last time you visited Greynolds Park? Matheson Hammock? Crandon? Everglades National Park?

Publicly owned properties all of them, and each in its own way uniquely attractive. But chances are you've paid far more visits to those in the second group. And with good reason. Historically the first three — all of them owned by the City of Miami — have been, to put it charitably, somewhat less than enchanting venues for public recreation. That, however, is about to change in a very big way.

Thanks to the wise men at Miami City Hall, Virginia Key, Bicentennial Park, and Watson Island are in the process of shedding their tarnished reputations as haggard old bats — repositories for bums, trash, and sewage — and, barring unforeseen obstacles, will emerge as the most beguiling public spaces in all of South Florida.

Virginia Key will be the first to strut down the runway, and what a beauty she'll be. From a dowdy stepchild once consigned to serving the needs of hapless Negroes, and later scarred by the malodorous intrusion of a colossal sewage plant, Virginia's makeover will be dazzling.

On February 12, Miami's city commission took the first bold step toward transforming Virginia Key by approving a visionary plan that will replace its scruffy landscape with a bevy of happy entertainments for the entire family: 500 finely crafted campsites for Winnebagos, trailers, and tents; softball, volleyball, and tennis facilities; hiking trails, bike paths, and playgrounds; docks and boats for fishing and diving; spiffy restrooms and concession stands; even a six-acre water-theme park. Virginia will open her arms wide and offer all this and more at virtually no cost to taxpayers. Standing discreetly in the wings, watchful of every detail and counting every penny in rental fees, will be a small army of crisply attired campground professionals, each of them dedicated to keeping Virginia spotless.

With any luck, Bicentennial and her nameless stepsister, that weebegone slab of concrete on her southern flank, will be next. Call this one a miracle of modern metamorphosis, the rejoining of separated twins. And a complicated operation it will be, for these girls aren't just homely, they've been badly abused as well. Spurned by the very public they were created to serve, overrun by filthy, drug-dealing squatters, the Bicentennial ladies have become — let's face it — disgraceful hags.

Under the steady hands of our civic surgeons, however, they will blossom into knockouts. In place of forbidding geography and smelly homeless people, the downtown waterfront will virtually burst with amenities such as inviting green spaces, museums, theaters, and convenient parking for thou-

sands of citizens hungry for the main attraction: a rare chance to get up close and personal with the exciting world of cruise-ship baggage-handling.

Poor Watson Island won't be far behind in this renaissance, though she'll be struggling against a long history of misfortune. Many a farsighted entrepreneur has been seduced by this gal's charms, but so far none has been able to score. Sitting pretty as she does in Biscayne Bay, it's no wonder that countless efforts (regrettably unsuccessful) have been made to exploit the intrinsic value of her 87 tantalizing acres — amusement parks to rival Disney's best, spacious exhibition halls for nautical extravaganzas, performing arts centers, vast parking areas, you name it.

After years of false flattery, you wouldn't blame Miss Watson for being a bit circumspect when it comes to eager suitors, but finally a blueprint has arrived that has her swooning. Imagine a top-of-the-line, deep-water marina for the world's most luxurious yachts and their fabulous owners. That's not all. How about a swanky 300-room hotel for tourist sophisticates? And here's the clincher — a new home (and fully landscaped parking lot) for Miami's most cherished cultural institution, Parrot Jungle. A frustrated virgin no more, Watson Island will glow with the radiance of a woman who has

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found just the right man.

It has required extraordinary courage for Miami's city fathers to break free of anachronistic notions about public parks that have long stifled true innovation. For generations the philosophical legacy of landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted has hobbled creative thinkers who bridled under the constraints of his antiquated views. According to Olmsted, city parks should offer people respite from the "cramped, confused, and controlling circumstances of the town [and] the incessant emphasis of artificial objects." They should "supply to the hundreds of thousands of tired workers...a specimen of God's handiwork." Such romantic nonsense may have been fine when he and Calvert Vaux designed New York's Central Park nearly 140 years ago, but new challenges demand new solutions, and Miami's planners and politicians have risen to the occasion.

In their roles as custodians of the public trust, however, these civic prophets have been attacked mercilessly by throngs of shrill critics. Watson Island's vistas are too darling to be marred by a hotel, these critics have grouched, no matter where it's located or what its size. Amusement parks and tourist traps — with their traffic, noise, and congestion — would destroy the pleasure of experiencing open green space. Seaplanes and helicopters are incompatible with pedestrians. Furthermore, the place has been allowed to deteriorate so badly that any new

Continued on page 16

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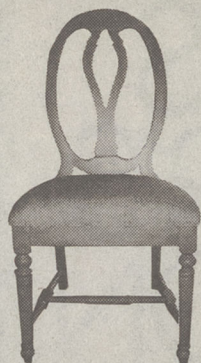
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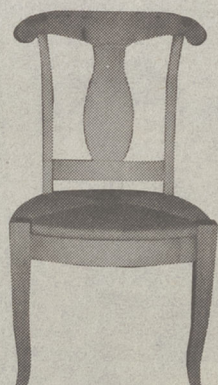
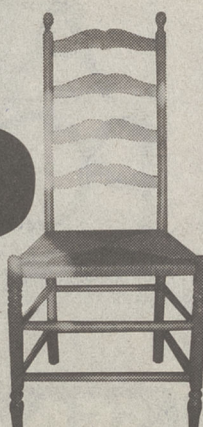
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Park

Continued from page 15

development will be viewed as an improvement. Hand-wringing cries of financial hardship have masked an abdication of responsibility to maintain the property for future generations to enjoy. And blah, blah, blah.

Bicentennial Park, the critics shamelessly charge, was no sooner opened on July 4, 1976, than it was declared a failure and left to rot like so much garbage to be picked over by vagrants and Grand Prix promoters. What's more, these skeptics righteously scold, civic leaders have once again turned out their empty pockets, shrugged their shoulders, and abandoned their duty. And Bicentennial's southern neighbor, purchased at great taxpayer expense for park purposes, has languished untouched as improvement costs have soared beyond reach.

These ignorant and unwarranted assaults have been hard enough to bear, coming as they have from pointy-headed, tree-hugging elitists who wouldn't know a budget from a widget, the very same people who pouted like spoiled brats when the city cut a smart deal by selling advertising rights at the Bayfront Park amphitheater to AT&T.

But the most galling affront was suffered just a couple of weeks ago, when a bunch of whiny kids had the audacity to bitch to city commissioners that Virginia Key's imminent transformation from rustic playground to commercial campground would somehow interfere with activities at their precious little Maritime and Science Technology High School.

Such are the thankless burdens of leadership.

The stalwart, however, will persevere despite the carping. Cash-laden Winnebagos will arrive from the frozen north as promised. The intriguing mysteries of cruise-ship-provisioning logistics will delight a grateful public. Caged birds will sing on Watson Island while millionaires enjoy the view from their poop decks. And depleted city coffers once again will overflow with lucre.

Vindication will only be a matter of time, and you can bet it'll be sweet for the beleaguered members of the Miami City Commission. Others will take note of the cheerful crowds, the ringing cash registers, and they sheepishly will acknowledge their error in not recognizing obvious genius. Those sprawling parking lots at Crandon easily can support two or three condo towers, and Metro commissioners rightfully will brag about the double-barreled benefits: coveted development rights and high-end property taxes. Why not put the hills of Greynolds Park to good use? Modern drilling technology easily will convert them into naturally insulated storage caverns for low-grade radioactive waste — an extremely lucrative field these days. With just a little jiggering to the shoreline and some simple dredging, Matheson Hammock could accommodate a much-needed bulk-cargo port, again very profitable. And if designed with appropriate sensitivity, the entire operation could be shielded from view by Matheson's lush foliage. The money generated by Everglades National Park may not do much to reduce the federal deficit, but a beautifully executed theme park (Swamp World?) at least would make the place economically self-sufficient.

So what do you want? A financially impotent city that can't even afford to buy a decent meal now and then for its hard-working public servants? Or a future bright with the prospects of paying customers?

By Jim Mullin

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