

Makeover returns Bayfront Park to its glory days

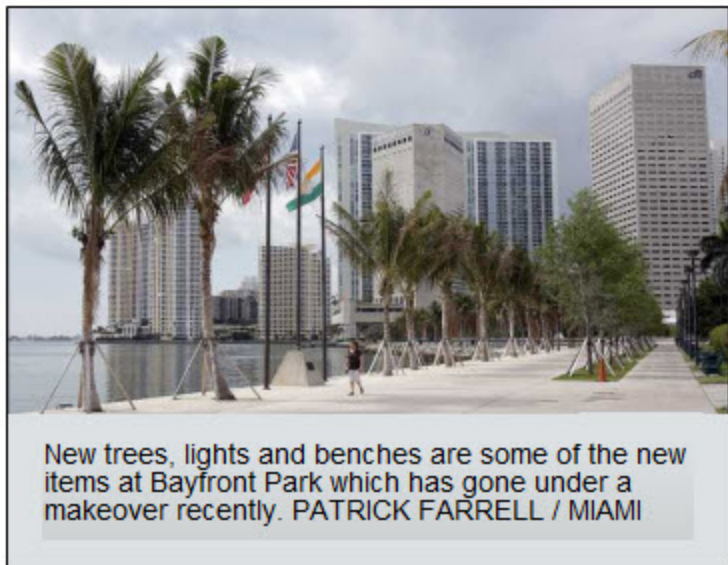
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When the managers of Bayfront Park, downtown Miami's historic centerpiece, called in a prominent consultant to find out why so few people used it, his answer boiled down to this: *It's too hot.*

A minimalist redesign in the late 1980s by revered American sculptor Isamu Noguchi was a flop, consultant Dan Biederman said, because it turned much of the once-shady park into a monumental expanse of sunbaked grass and concrete.

Now, more than five years later, the trust that runs Bayfront Park has finally done something about it: Oaks and palms by the dozen have been planted along the full length of the 32-acre park's edge on



New trees, lights and benches are some of the new items at Bayfront Park which has gone under a makeover recently. PATRICK FARRELL / MIAMI

Biscayne Bay, bringing instant shade to its broad baywalk and completing a gradual makeover designed to make it a far more inviting place.

"It's even better than I expected," said Timothy Schmand, executive director of the Bayfront Park Management Trust, the nonprofit group that runs the park for the city of Miami, as he strolled the sun-dappled baywalk on a recent warm afternoon to the sound of chirping birds. "This has changed everything. The moment we put those trees up, birds started nesting in them."

Last week, the park's groundskeepers put the finishing touches on what could be the makeover's crowning achievement: restoration of the picturesque rock garden, one of its few surviving original elements. The garden, originally installed in 1927, two years after Bayfront Park's inauguration, had become invisible and inaccessible, choked off by an invasion of exotic vegetation. Its pond was empty and leaking and its waterfall silent.

Now the waterfall gurgles again, the pond is full and home to a turtle, the little bridge was repaired and the exotics are gone.

Other changes are evident: Bike racks have been installed. And the park's sandy bayside "beach" has new moveable Adirondack chairs where several park visitors sat the other day, gazing out at the water.

The moves could restore Bayfront Park to its former luster as the city's front porch, said historian Arva Moore Parks.

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“It was always a central gathering space, and I think it's going to be that way again,” she said. “They're making it user-friendly again.”

The project came in at just under \$1 million, far less than initial estimates of \$1.6 million, Schmand said: “Trees were a lot cheaper than we expected.”

That proved to be enough for 151 trees, mostly oaks but also coconut palms and some gumbo limbos, with spot additions of flowering trees for color.

The park, which is largely self-sustaining, covered the cost from shows, festivals and other events, Schmand said.

Built in 1925 from fill, Bayfront Park was graced with abundant, flowering gardens and a lush tree canopy, serving both as central gathering spot for important events like political rallies and speeches, and in the 1940s and 1950s especially, as a tourist attraction. Over the years, it was home to a popular band shell, fishing piers and the public library -- all long gone.

The tourists were drawn to concerts at the band shell and to famous Pier 5, home to fishing and sightseeing boats.

“The tourists just poured into Bayfront Park,” Parks recalled. “People would go out fishing and bring in dolphin and sailfish and hang them up. And people would stand around watching.”

By the 1980s, as downtown declined, Bayfront Park became rundown and was overtaken by the homeless. Construction of Bayside Marketplace claimed a chunk of the park. The city decided to scrape the rest of it clean, saving just some of its largest trees -- including a massive kapok and a spectacular sausage tree -- and start over again.

But the Modernist design by Noguchi, one of the 20th century's great artists, proved unsuitable for Miami's climate, and the park remained sorely underused for years.

“It was like the southwest desert out there,” Parks said.

Six years ago, managers hired Biederman, famed for transforming Manhattan's Bryant Park from a drug-infested eyesore into one of the city's most popular gathering spots.

The tree-planting project is the last of a series of steps taken by management based on Biederman's recommendations, which focus on ways to attract visitors by making the park lively, safe and user-friendly. To draw families, a well-used playground went in a few years ago, for instance. Free yoga classes were instituted, and quickly grew into an attraction drawing people even from South Beach.

Last year, concert promoter Live Nation completed a renovation of the park's amphitheater, footing all but \$500,000 of the \$2.5 million cost, in return for long-term use of the facility.

The improvements come just in time, as thousands of new downtown residents settle in to their new digs. Schmand says daily counts of visitors are up substantially.

Another indicator of the makeover's success: Doggy poo became a problem. Managers say they cracked down, put up signs and provided plastic bags so pet owners could clean up.