

Encounters in Public Space: Miami in the 1950s

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In 1949, nine black golfers arrived to play on the public golf course at Miami Springs, violating segregation laws. Officials avoided a confrontation by allowing them on the course that day to play a stately round of golf under the eyes of all. In the wake of that encounter, the city commissioners offered to admit black players only on Mondays when the grounds crews watered the grass. The golfers, who were incidentally leaders in the local Civil Rights movement, sued the City of Miami for equal access under the principles of 'separate but equal' established under the Plessy decisions of 1896. Either the city must build a golf course for the black community or must allow black golfers equal access to the only public course. The suit moved through the system until Thurgood Marshall argued the case for the NAACP on behalf of the golfers before the United States Supreme Court. In 1953, a year before segregation law was overturned, they won the case at least in principle. Another three years passed before the golfers could play as equals.

Golf seems an odd concern for a black community struggling with endemic poverty, yet the case reveals several of the conflicts that defined modern public space in Miami.¹ Miami Springs golf course was a place of play, an amenity that was part of the world of luxury and leisure that Miami advertised to attract tourists. The golf course was a specialized facility located in a suburb outside the city, so it was part of the modern decentralized city then being built. The public course also sidestepped the class-bound clubs of the north to open the sport to the middle class, serving a large number of returning GIs and their wives who had recently moved to Miami to enjoy the climate and a perceived freedom from social strictures. Their liberty, however, was built on Miami's southern tradition of segregation

by both race and religion.²

The golfer's appearance at the course was a demonstration, a performance in a public space that dramatized the inequity of Miami's landscape. The golfers came onto the course so they could be seen, presenting themselves by name as individuals in a non-violent strategy used by the NAACP to expose legal injustice across the country. In Miami, however, the appearance of racial conflict within a landscape of pleasure was particularly pointed, revealing a city segregated into distinct communities that had distinct values and points of view.

Black and white was the primary division, but following WWII, Miami received a large influx of new Jewish residents, both young and old, enough to establish Miami Beach as Jewish city rivaling Brooklyn. In the 1960s, after Fidel Castro rose to power, Cuban immigrants rushed into Miami to introduce a forth population with a distinct identity defined politically, socially and physically. Relationships between and within these racial and ethnic groups were often negotiated in public space, sometimes in play, sometimes with deadly seriousness. This essay looks at how these several Miamis built or used public space in order to perform their roles in public life, both within their own communities and between groups. In particular, encounters between groups such as political demonstrations often spoke of the mis-fit between a minority community's needs and the structures of the city.

The golfer's demonstration was part of a strategy to challenge segregation in specific venues in the city. Throughout the 50s, black demonstrators slowly gained access to parks, bus station waiting rooms, the Miami Auditorium, and the Orange Bowl Stadium.³ In 1959, one group staged a series of sit-ins at lunch counters in downtown stores including McCrory's, Grant's, Woolworth's,



Sit-in at Woolworth's 1959

Kress's, Walgreen's and Burdine's.⁴ These public actions were highly visible, intended for the reporter's camera, yet also specific. Each location in the modern city had to be negotiated independently. Each was a separate entity with particular issues.

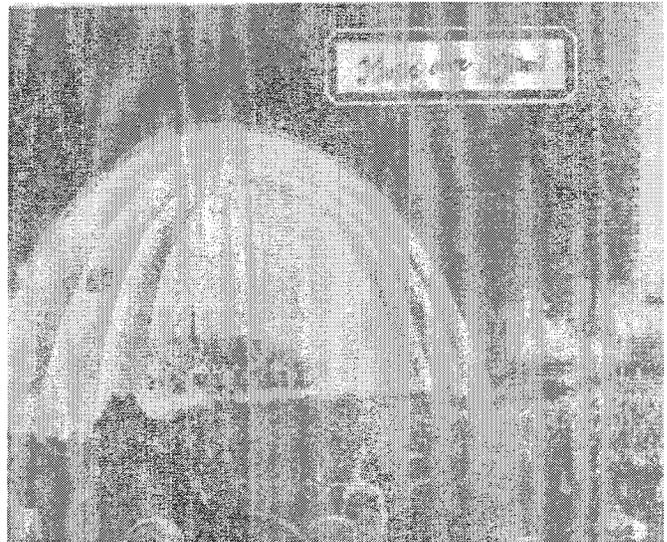
The task and tactics of the Civil Rights movement stood in contrast to the characteristic response of the Ku Klux Klan. In 1939 responding to a voter registration drive, a large convoy of Klan members threatened potential voters by driving through the main street of the "Central Negro District" at night wearing the white hood that masked their identity. In this menacing parade, the Klan also trespassed in an area where they were not welcome, but whereas small groups of three or four black demonstrators had entered white establishments in daytime intending to be recognized as individuals, the Klan came in a large group, in darkness and masked to threaten anyone who challenged white dominance.⁵

In Miami, the Central Negro District, now known as Overtown, was a complete black city with its own shopping district, movie theatre, hotels, clubs, and professional offices existing alongside the white city. This urban structure set the stage in which both the Civil Rights movement and for the Ku Klux Klan competed for influence in public space. The Civil Rights demonstrators confronted a large decentralized modern Miami made up of many specialized functions, while the Klan took advantage of the concentration of the black community in one area with a traditional hierarchical urban pattern. The Klan occupied the center, the most public streets

of the district therefore symbolically controlling the entire area.

Both the civil rights demonstrations and the Ku Klux Klan intimidation can be considered performances that appropriated public spaces of the city that were already designed for specific kinds of gatherings. They chose the urban stage where their drama would have the most impact. The civil rights demonstrators asserted their individual identity in a modern decentralized city as a means to challenge segregation, while members of the Ku Klux Klan concealed theirs in an effort to dominate a traditional hierarchical structure.

THE SPECTACLE: TWO DEFINITIONS OF PERFORMANCE IN PUBLIC SPACE



Bandshell in Bayfront Park, Miami, 1960

Public space in modern cities is often defined as a place of spectacle: amphitheatres, auditoriums and stadiums where a mass audience may watch a performance. Miami, the sparkling city of pleasure and leisure for visitors, offered a series of attractions that each presented a spectacle to transient audiences. Seaquarium, Parrot Jungle, Monkey Jungle, the Marine Stadium, and the bandshell at Bayfront Park drew large crowds to watch performances. Critic Guy Debord defined spectacle as a social relationship between people that is mediated by images, which replace real experience with unreal fragments.⁶ Architecturally, the tourist spectacle is shaped by distance and anonymity that characterizes the experience of a performance in a large amphitheatre. Each of Miami's attractions

scattered throughout the city was centered on an amphitheatre where dolphins, parrots, water skiers, or musicians performed in shows of tropical exoticism, hamming it up for strangers. Every day, the performances remained the same while the audience changed, drawing on an endless stream of visitors from elsewhere. In the 1950s and 60s, wintertime tourists from the US and Canada were increasingly joined by visitors from Europe and Latin America to make up culturally mixed audiences who sat next to one another watching the same performance. As spectators, they were passive, clearly separated from the show, and retained their anonymity. Far from home, no one would recognize them so they were loosed from their habitual social roles and free to watch from the detached position of outsiders. Miami's multiple attractions in conjunction with motels and restaurants located along highways created a tourist landscape that defined one kind of public space as the complete freedom of anonymity. At its extreme, a family could arrive in Miami without a reservation and spend an entire vacation without engaging anyone. They could stay in a motel called "Voyager," "Wayfarer," or "Sahara," names that make reference to exotic oases that received desert travelers. Like a suburban house, motel rooms opened directly to the parking lot so they did not have to traverse a lobby. At most, the motel had a swimming pool that guests shared overlooked by the rooms, otherwise the spaces were either private rooms or devoted to cars. From the motel, a family could make daily forays to attractions where they watched performances from the safety of amphitheatre seats where they sat next to strangers. When they returned home, they could compare experiences with neighbors and friends who had also visited Miami and seen the same displays of the exotic tropics.

The spectacles operate at the scale of a mass society, offering images like movies that cross boundaries of culture. The content of performances seems less important than their reach. No matter how absurd the image, it is part of a shared knowledge. The anonymous position of spectator that the attractions offered to tourists cloaked cultural differences so people in Michigan and Buenos Aires could share the same tourist images and talk about them with friends who would see the same performances when they visited, perhaps years later. The performances were reliable, a product that identified Miami elsewhere. In practice, however, the images were specifically for export within the broad culture of tourism. Black or Jewish visitors and residents

of Miami rarely went. They were either explicitly excluded or the venues were so far outside of their enclaves that they didn't go to performances in white, Christian Miami.⁷



Starlight Room Supperclub at the Doral Hotel, Miami Beach

An alternate interpretation of modern spectacle shaped performances in large Miami Beach hotels, notably Morris Lapidus' Fontainebleau. The Fontainebleau presented Broadway shows and Las Vegas style nightclub reviews in large auditoria that attracted crowds of people. These performances also presented images of tropical exoticism for tourists, welcoming spectators and performers from many countries and cultures. For example, the Fontainebleau presented feather-bedecked dancers from Havana's Tropicana Club and an entirely black performance of "Ain't Misbehavin'." These shows appeared in lavish halls before audiences dressed for the occasion. They were major events attended by parties in the hotels' large dining rooms and reception halls where everyone was part of the performance, their movements presented by gracious staircases, balconies, and fashionable furniture. In the crowd, people could see one another and be seen as if they played a role. Before the lights went down, spectators were already within the atmosphere of elegance and exoticism that carried into the performance.

On Miami Beach, shows traveled, not the audience. For hotel guests, modern public space was defined by neither the open freedom of the highway nor by privileged anonymity. Rather, the hotel was like a small city in which all luxuries were concentrated for their use. Guests were positioned within the urban performance rather than watching from the

outside. At an extreme, a family could spend their entire vacation on the grounds of the hotel. They could eat in the dining room, swim in the pool, shop in boutiques in the lobby, dance in the ballroom and watch the shows. They might traverse the lobby a dozen times a day, until the place, the staff and some of the other guests were familiar. Families often returned to the same hotel on vacations year after year until retiring to Miami Beach was simply a longer stay. Hotels such as the Fontainebleau interpreted the modern spectacle as a total performance that engulfed a spectator in fantasy. In Lapidus hotels, every surface offers decoration or sculpture that suggests a story, even if those stories are not consistent with one another. The atmosphere of narrative, that a play is about to begin, overrides any specific story that the details might tell. Regarding the references to native American arts in his Panamerican hotel, Lapidus wrote that a playful Aztec, or Azteckesque was preferable to real Aztec décor. The spectacle imagery generated fantasies with more images independent of any original or real story. Ultimately, the possibility of a story may be more compelling than the story itself. Similarly, the shows presented in the hotels of Miami Beach seem to be an excuse for the real play that takes place in the public spaces outside the auditorium. Lapidus interpreted the modern dream of the arts unified into a complete environment by offering a fantasy of fragmented references full of potential.

CIVIC LIFE: SEEING AND BEING SEEN

Civic life is a public performance characterized by a reciprocal relationship between people, like a conversation at an urban scale. Political demonstrations such as the golfer's stand or large gatherings to air an opinion are explicit expressions in the civic realm, but *café society*, *shopping*, and *cruising the strip* are also part of the civic life of a community.

The story of the Cuban community's search for public spaces for civic life in Miami reveals the dilemmas of modern urbanism. Many of the people who fled Castro's regime in Cuba arrived in Miami from Havana, a European style city designed and built around public space. Places such as Havana's Central Park, Malecon ocean promenade, plazas, boulevards, *paseos*, and streetside parks were miss-

ing in Miami. Yet, the Cuban community in Miami had strong opinions to express, both toward their home government and toward official policies of the United States. When they arrived, they considered Miami a temporary refuge until they could return to Cuba, so they had to make-do with the resources available. For example, the Cuban community had to find places for a series of civic events surrounding the return of prisoners taken during the ill-fated 1961 invasion of Cuba at the Bay of Pigs. Their spatial compromises illustrate the limitations of Miami's civic spaces.

Following the disastrous campaign, which had been largely orchestrated by Miami Cubans, the community repeatedly gathered in Bayfront Park to make themselves heard. Needing an appropriate place for a civic event, demonstrators occupied the park as if it were an urban plaza. In March 1962, the Cuban Revolutionary Council, a unified



Cuban demonstration in Bayfront Park

dissident group, organized a sit-down strike demanding that Castro release prisoners taken at the Bay of Pigs. Council president José Miro Cardona spoke in the Bayfront Park bandshell before a large crowd of ex-patriots demanding that the US government pressure Castro on behalf of the prisoners. After occupying the park for six days, demonstrators were finally removed by police who arrested 152 people.⁸ This public action specifically mirrored massive rallies in Havana that took place in a large plaza facing government buildings. In Miami however, Bayfront Park was the only public space in downtown both large enough and visible

enough for an effective rally. The park was also adjacent to the Miami Daily News tower known by the Cuban community as the "Freedom Tower" which had served as a Refugee Center where they had been received by the government on their arrival to Miami. In addition, the Hotel Miami Colonial, which had catered to Cuban tourists in happier days, faced the park.⁹ Both the Freedom Tower and the hotel provided familiar landmarks that gave the park an urban dignity and position that the Cuban community could read as a plaza even though the park was designed as a pleasure garden.

In April, injured prisoners were released and flown to Miami Airport. Thousands of Cubans greeted them on the tarmac. They waved from the terminal building that overlooked the plane, transforming the airport into a ceremonial urban space. The terminal had already been adopted by many Cubans as a promenade, a place to go to stroll and see one another, even if no one was traveling.¹⁰ The airport provided air-conditioned public space, the planes offered something to watch, and other people went.

On Christmas Eve, 1,113 prisoners were ransomed by the US government and flown into the Homestead Air Force base. They were brought to meet their families at the Miami Auditorium on Dinner Key in Coconut Grove. Some officials spoke to the crowd, but the main purpose of the event – people greeting each other – did not fit into an auditorium designed for spectacles. The personal, emotional, and civic nature of a public welcoming eliminates any separation between actors and audience, demanding a open and festive yet dignified setting. The architecture of fixed seats facing a stage simply didn't fit. Again, a plaza would have served the community better.

On December 29, President Kennedy spoke to the community to honor the 2506 Brigade that had fought at the Bay of Pigs. This ceremonial event was staged in the Orange Bowl, a football stadium surrounded by parking lots near an area where many Cubans had settled. Again, a compromise was made both because the Cuban community was still considered marginal in Miami and the city simply did not have the ceremonial civic spaces they needed. The Orange Bowl was both accessible and could physically accommodate the event but lacked the gravitas that the event required.



Domino Park on Calle Ocho, built 1968

Finally, on New Year's Day 1963, José Cardona gave out US government checks of \$250 to the released prisoners as a token for their service – from his home at 1034 Michigan Avenue in Miami Beach. A small Cuban enclave had found lodging in Miami Beach amidst a large Jewish community from the north. Indeed, a significant number of Cubans were Jewish. Dispensing checks from an apartment turned what could have been a public event into a private one, bringing the veterans to a residential street that at that time was lined with retirement hotels for the elderly.

In the 1960s, a section of 8th Street, "Calle Ocho" took shape as the heart of Little Havana where Cuban entrepreneurs bought run-down buildings and started businesses to create a commercial center. Gradually, they adapted the four lane right-of-way and narrow sidewalks of 8th street to serve an urban community, defining a hybrid type in between an American strip shopping center and a Cuban shopping street. The first restaurant to open was the Hong Kong Cuban Chinese, followed by many others including El Centro Vasco, La Carreta, and Versailles, which became venerable institutions of the community. When new restaurant buildings were built in the later 60s, they were set back from the street to create small paved patios just off the sidewalk served by a coffee bar.¹¹ The community also set aside a larger area at the center of commercial strip for Dominó Park, a patio with tables and chairs where retired men play the game overlooking the street. Further down Calle Ocho, a memorial to the martyrs of the Bay of Pigs graces the green center of an intersecting residential street. Together, these respites from the right-of-way carry a European tradition of sociable streets punctuated by stopping places into an American strip where they meet car

dealerships and drive-in fast food joints.¹²

In the late 1960s, Castro banned all religious festivities associated with Christmas in Cuba, outraging the predominately Catholic community.¹³ In response, Cubans in Miami instituted a Three Kings Parade in Miami on Calle Ocho every January. The Parade confirmed Calle Ocho as the symbolic center of the community even as Cuban families abandoned the area for the suburbs.

In conclusion, each of Miami's minority communities – black, Jewish and Cuban – challenged the dominant modern structure of separation and spectacle that characterized the city. Either through protest, building an alternate architecture, compromise or adaptation, they attempted to make the city fit their needs as a community. Each interpreted modern architecture to create public spaces for an urban life that stood in contrast to the increasingly suburban structure of the city.

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NOTES

¹ In 1950, blacks lived under oppressive Jim Crow legisla-

tion that restricted where they could live, what jobs they could have, where they could go.

² Raymond Mohl, *South of the South* (Gainesville: University of Florida, 2004) p.20. After WWII, Miami had at least two active Anti-Semitic organizations: the American Defenders and the White Front. The virulent local Ku Klux Klan was headed by James A. Colescott, the Klan's national imperial wizard, who had retired to Miami. Their goals often overlapped.

³ "Looking Back at Being Black," *The Miami Herald*, February 1 1976. Article offers a chronology of major events of the Civil Rights movement. In 1949, blacks were allowed into the Orange Bowl in restricted seats, full access in 1953. 1965 was the last year that blacks had to carry identification cards on Miami Beach. In 1970, Miami-Dade School Board begins process of desegregation under court order.

⁴ Mohl, *South of the South* p.192. Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) challenged both racism and anti-Semitism.

⁵ Ibid. p.22

⁶ Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (NY: Zone Books, 1994 (1967))

⁷ Interview with Judy who grew up in Miami Beach in the 1950s. She does not recall ever going to attractions on the mainland. "They were for tourists." She and her family crossed the causeway very rarely.

⁸ "Police arrest 152 Cubans in Bayfront Park," *The Miami Herald*, March 13 1962.

⁹ Robert M. Levine and Moiss Asis, *Cuban Miami* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000) p.21

¹⁰ Conversation with name who remembers going to the airport just to walk around.

¹¹ Miguel Gonzalez-Pando, ed., *Greater Miami: Spirit of Cuban Enterprise* (Ft. Lauderdale, Florida: Copperfield Publications, 1996) p.103.

¹² Monica Ponce de Leon, "Calle Ocho," *Journal of Architectural Education*

¹³ Name noted that many Cubans had not been particularly observant Catholics when they lived in Havana. After they arrived in Miami however, they filled the local churches and parochial schools, particularly Sts. Peter and Paul, Il Gesu, and St. Patrick's.