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## Bohemian or Business: Identities Collide in Miami's Coconut Grove

The city's development boom has finally caught up to a lush haven of shade trees and cafes. Some worry the neighborhood growth is too fast.



By Jane Margolies  
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With its profusion of parks and shade trees, Coconut Grove is celebrated for being one of the greenest parts of sun-baked Miami.

It has some of the best schools in the city, drawing students from all over the metropolitan area. And it has long been a magnet for artists, writers and musicians who have given the neighborhood a bohemian vibe.

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But lately, Coconut Grove has become known for yet another thing: a real estate boom.

The area did not experience much of the pre-recession wave of development that swept other Miami neighborhoods. But now, luxury residential towers by renowned modernist architects have been rising in Coconut Grove along Biscayne Bay, a snazzy hotel recently opened, and a well-known shopping center is getting a makeover.

And boutique office buildings are going up, attracting brand-name tenants in the tech, finance and creative industries.

The office square footage is a small fraction of that of nearby Brickell or downtown Miami, but the development is occurring in an area under six square miles, much of it zoned for low- and midrise construction.

The fast pace of growth and gentrification is pushing out longtime residents. And it is raising a question about the neighborhood's identity: Can the Grove grow without losing its groove?

"We're at a crossroads," said Ken Russell, a city commissioner who also heads the board of the [Coconut Grove Business Improvement District](#).



Settled in the early 19th century, Coconut Grove has some of the oldest and grandest single-family homes in Miami. One of the best-known estates, Vizcaya, has been converted into a museum and gardens. Much of the land on which the city was built was clear cut for development, but the Grove retained its subtropical lushness.

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By the 1960s, it was a hippy haven, South Florida's answer to New York's Greenwich Village and San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury district.

A whiff of that anti-establishment attitude still lingers. It says something about the neighborhood that four years ago, the person elected commissioner of the district that encompasses it was Mr. Russell, a Grove native whose background was in yo-yo and paddleboard sales.

In a phone interview, Mr. Russell acknowledged that he hadn't known anything about land use or historic preservation when he took office. Now he does.

"I'm running hearings on land-use appeals, upzonings," he said. "I've been thrust into this with a very steep learning curve."

Luxury residences helped kick-start the surge in development.

First came the Grove at Grand Bay, developed by Terra Group, a local firm, and designed by BIG, founded by the Danish architect Bjarke Ingels. Completed in 2016, it consists of two 20-story towers that twist as they climb. (The former Yankees slugger Alex Rodriguez installed his investment company, A-Rod Corp, in commercial space on the ground floor of one of them.)



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Next up were the curvilinear towers of Park Grove, a project designed by Rem Koolhaas's OMA and developed by Terra and the Related Group, which is based in downtown Miami. The 276 units are nearly sold out, with the handful left priced at \$3.1 million and up, said Jon Paul Perez, executive vice president of Related.

And soon to break ground: [a 20-story condo companion to the new Mr. C Miami-Coconut Grove](#), the latest property in the upscale Mr. C hotel chain.

But housing is also needed for the working class.

A solar-powered mixed-use project, under construction at the Metrorail station, will have 400 apartments, including market-rate, co-living and affordable units. The \$320 million project, Grove Central, is being developed by Terra and Grass River Property, another local firm.

Residential development has spurred retail and office development. New restaurants, cafes and stores have opened, a mix of national brands (Warby Parker, Bonobos) and local companies ([Books & Books](#), [Fireman Derek's Bake Shop](#)).

[A waterfront development](#) in the works from the TREO Group will encompass a marina, restaurants and a food hall in hangars that were originally part of a naval air station and later used by Pan Am Airways, which operated seaplane flights to Cuba.

Terra just completed a five-story office building known as Mary Street — a reuse of a municipal parking garage — and Related is erecting an eight-story office building. Madison Marquette, which is based in Washington, paid \$47.4 million for two existing office buildings.

Even established neighborhood hot spots are getting a refresher.

Federal Realty Investment Trust, based in Rockville, Md., is working with Grass River and the Comras Company to breathe new life into CocoWalk, an upscale, open-air mall that dates to the 1990s. When it reopens this summer it will have a recalibrated mix of stores and restaurants (the Cheesecake Factory, out; a vegan restaurant, in). This time around, the mall will have an office component that will house, among others, the co-working company Spaces.

An investment fund of Brookfield Asset Management, which is based in Toronto, recently bought the eclectic Mayfair Hotel, which has a facade inspired by Gaudí's Barcelona buildings, stained glass by Louis Comfort Tiffany and Moorish tiles. Brookfield declined to discuss plans for the property.

Developers say they are having no difficulty finding office tenants, even with rates in the Grove averaging \$52.48 per square foot for Class A space, compared with \$43.54 in nearby Coral Gables, according to the Avison Young Miami-Dade County year-end 2019 office market report.

Sony Music Latin America and SapientNitro, an advertising firm, are among the companies that have moved to the Grove or expanded their business there in the last five years.

Many residents cheer the changes. Among them is Bernardo Fort-Brescia, who founded

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Arquitectonica with his wife, Laurinda H. Spear, four decades ago. They have raised their six children in Miami while their firm has grown and acquired an international reputation, and they have designed multiple projects in town.

“It’s a natural evolution,” Mr. Fort-Brescia said. “More people want to live here, more businesses want to be here.”

But the real estate activity has also caused unease in some quarters.

Juan Mullerat, the founding principal of PlusUrbia Design, which worked with Perkins & Will, a global design firm, on a master plan for the business improvement district a few years ago, expressed concern about vacant storefronts.

In some cases, short-term investors may be sitting on properties, waiting for their value to rise before flipping them. Some owners are offering only short-term leases, Mr. Mullerat said, “making it difficult for businesses to make investments in their stores.”

Real estate speculation and gentrification have been occurring in the West Grove section, which was settled by Bahamian immigrants who labored in construction and agriculture. Starting in the late 1800s, they built themselves wood-framed houses on yards now shaded with trees; some homes have been in the same families for decades.

Now, however, many of these modest homes have been supplanted by large houses built right up to lot lines. Aging apartment houses have been demolished.



“We see vacant lots where hundreds of families used to be,” said the Rev. Nathaniel Robinson III, the senior pastor of West Grove’s Greater St. Paul A.M.E. Church, which owns 40 affordable housing

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units that it rents out.

West Grove's black population declined more than 32 percent from 2000 to 2017, while the white population increased more than 176 percent, according to preliminary data compiled by the [Community Equity, Innovation and Resource Lab](#) at the University of Miami Law School's Center for Ethics and Public Service.

Many feel the displacement needs to end. Jacqueline Gonzalez Touzet, a co-founder of Touzet Studio, the Miami architecture firm that designed Terra's Mary Street office building and the Grove Central project, hopes the Grove doesn't "swing too hard" in the direction of high-end development, pricing out longtime locals and others who wish to enjoy the Grove's charms.

She and her husband, Carlos Prio-Touzet, the firm's other founding principal, would like to move their offices to the Grove but are not sure they can afford to.

About the neighborhood's future, Ms. Touzet said, "It's a wait and see."