

Tale of Two Neighborhoods

SoFi: 1960-70s

Like many of Florida's best old neighborhoods, downtown Orlando's Lake Eola/Thornton Park and Miami Beach's "South of 5th" — "SoFi" — had their heydays in the 1950s, when children filled the sidewalks and shopping, services and worship were a short walk away. In the latter half of the 20th century, the two areas' decline and their fight for renewal typified the struggles of urban neighborhoods throughout Florida. Today, Lake Eola/Thornton Park and SoFi are becoming harbingers of Florida's future, as cities across the state work to build urban centers that remain affordable and diverse — even as development pressures drive up the cost of urban living.

SoFi: By the 1960s, Miami Beach had established its reputation as "America's Playground" with its wide, tropical beaches, nearly 500 hotels and star power — from the Beatles doing the "Ed Sullivan Show" at the Deauville Hotel to Jackie Gleason's weekly filming of his television show. The playground was ethnically divided, however. Neighborhoods to the north, as well as many of the resort hotels, had little tolerance for diversity. Some featured "restricted clientele" rules; some came with deeds prohibiting "Hebrew blood." South of Fifth Street, however, the city was home to a thriving, mostly Jewish community, with many families living in tidy bungalows or small apartments. The Beth Jacob Synagogue on Washington Street flourished, and four kosher markets



Before the creation of Ocean Drive, only a boardwalk and sand separated the original Brown's Hotel (shown here in 1924) from the Atlantic Ocean.



Into the 1960s, the Beth Jacob Synagogue on Washington Street was still a centerpiece of Jewish life, packed for weddings and other religious and community events.

and delis sold challah and smoked fish in a two-block area on Collins Avenue between Third and Fifth streets. “We knew that there were neighborhoods where we weren’t welcome, but we were still living this wonderful, really glorious era of Jewish life,” says Seth Bramson, whose father had a sign shop on Fifth Street. “Growing up in Miami Beach right after World War II until the very early 1970s was like growing up in paradise.”

By 1970, Jews accounted for 80% of the permanent population of Miami Beach, according to Abe Lavender, a sociologist at Florida International University who studies Jewish life and has lived in the neighborhood since 1988.

And SoFi had become a haven for Jewish retirees, many of them low income. Meanwhile, younger Jews stopped moving in, says Lavender, in part because they were by then welcome in other parts of Miami and in part because they didn’t want to live in “God’s waiting room.”

As the neighborhood declined, its identity crisis became so acute that in 1967 the city formed a Committee To Keep Greater Miami Beach Young. But as Howard Kleinberg writes in his book, “Miami Beach,” the campaign couldn’t alter the destiny imposed by the area’s senior-dominated demography. In 1973, the city created a South Shore Redevelopment Area that aimed to get rid of every structure south of Fifth, save

Miami Beach’s Jewish population peaked in 1970 at 80%. At that time, the Hispanic population was only 22%. Today, the Jewish population is 37%, and Hispanics make up more than 50% of the population.

for Joe’s Stone Crab restaurant. City leaders imagined the \$400-million plan would revitalize the southernmost point of America’s Playground. Instead, it all but guaranteed the area’s decline.

Lake Eola/Thornton Park: 1960s-70s

Lake Eola/Thornton Park:

For the first half of the 20th century, the area east of downtown Orlando was home to cattle barons, then to citrus growers and the bankers who loaned them money. They built brick streets and neo-classical and Tudor homes. After World War II, Lake Eola/Thornton Park boomed with families and businesses that grew — just as in SoFi — along a Washington Street. The future looked bright in 1957, when city leaders spent \$350,000 for a fountain in the middle of Lake Eola. But in the ‘60s, the neighborhood began a swift decline — embodied in a different fountain, this new one at Orlando’s first shopping mall, Colonial Plaza. Only two miles away from Lake Eola, the suburban mall featured a Woolworth’s counter and a multistory Jordan Marsh. The city also began sprawling westward, where Glenn Martin Co. — later Martin Marietta, later Lockheed-Martin — built a missile factory in what had been the boondocks.

The mall may have begun the demise of downtown Orlando and its neighborhoods, but Disney World cinched it. When Disney opened its doors in 1971, it didn’t just draw tourists. It further lured population, highway infrastructure and businesses to the west of the city — on the other side of town from Lake Eola/Thornton Park and other eastern neighborhoods.



Downtown Orlando’s Lake Eola was always a centerpiece of urban life, with residents congregating for dances, radio broadcasts and band performances (above). The lake’s fountain was first installed in 1912 at a cost of \$10,000. The city built a replacement in 1957 dubbed “the Millennium Fountain.”

“Disney had a real glamour, and many people wanted to be part of that,” says Sara Van Arsdel, executive director of the Orange County Regional History Center. Just as in SoFi, Thornton Park’s population began to age, and young professionals were looking for more youthful neighbors — along with bigger homes and yards. There were, of

course, exceptions: As a young married couple, Sue and George Macnamara bought their white colonial on East Washington Street in Thornton Park from his parents in 1972. They had noticed aging neighbors and lots of turnover “but had fallen in love with the house, and that was that,” Sue Macnamara says.

SoFi: 1980-90s

SoFi: Theories abound as to why the \$400-million South Shore Redevelopment plan was such a disaster for SoFi. But one thing seems clear: The prospect of the city coming in and demolishing buildings led many property owners to stop taking care of their existing buildings and to avoid developing anything new. “Nobody would repair their buildings, which made it a very difficult place to live, particularly for the elderly,” says Abe Lavender. As elderly Jews died or moved away, they often were replaced by immigrants. Because the neighborhood was so cheap, it attracted the poorest of the poor, including Mariel boatlift exiles. Crime was rampant. “Everything that wasn’t tied down, and half of those, were stolen,” Lavender says. “Elderly Jews walking down the street would be attacked for the very little that they had.”

Before things got better, they would get worse. By the time assistant city planner William Cary moved to Miami Beach in 1994, the city had abandoned its redevelopment plan — without producing much redevelopment. In 1995, Cary was called out to inspect an old structure known as The Brown’s Hotel — the city’s very first hotel, a two-story, wood-frame building built in 1915 by William J. Brown right on the sand. By the time Cary saw the place, it had been covered with stucco to protect it from hurricanes. Renamed the “Star Apartments,” it was, in reality, a flophouse. When he went inside, vagrants were lying on floors throughout the building, all in the dark. When he got back to his car, hundreds of fleas began to jump off him and his partner; the fleas soon covered the inside of the city car, which couldn’t be driven for weeks after.

Cary and city codes officers were sure the city’s most historic building would burn to the ground one night. It did not. Instead, The Brown’s Hotel would soon embody SoFi’s comeback.



The SoFi neighborhood encompasses all of Miami Beach south of 5th Street.



The Beth Jacob building went on the National Register of Historic Places in 1980, but both the neighborhood and the congregation’s membership were declining.



By the 1990s, the Brown’s Hotel, Miami Beach’s first, had become the run-down Star Apartments.

“I’m optimistic about Miami Beach,” says Abe Lavender. “It always goes up and down, and it keeps redefining itself.”

Lake Eola/Thornton Park: 2000s

Lake Eola/Thornton Park:

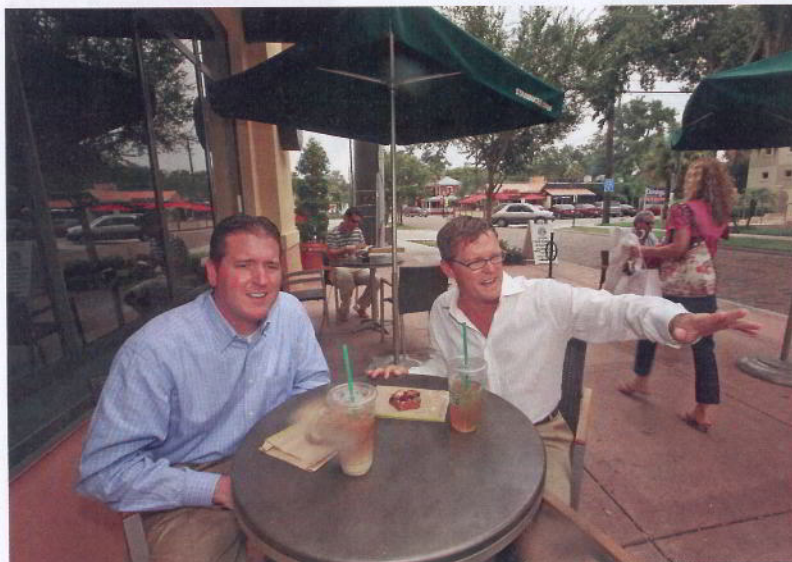
On a recent morning, developer Craig Ustler sips a house blend at the Starbucks on the corner of Central Boulevard and Summerlin Avenue and contemplates the transformation from Lake Eola to hot address. Starbucks is a tenant in Thornton Park Central, a \$31-million, mixed-used project completed by Ustler and Phil Rampy in 2001. Overhead are 56 loft condos. Around the corner are shops like independent bookstore Urban Think. Ustler owns and operates several restaurants now, including Hue and Cityfish in Thornton Park Central. Annual sales at his eateries exceed \$12 million. He and Rampy have pumped nearly \$100 million more into other developments, including Eola South, Osceola Brownstones, 801 North Orange and East on Park. Moms and dads push baby strollers where police cars used to flash their lights. Along with the 20-somethings the developers expected, the neighborhood is drawing a surprise demographic: Empty-nesters moving into the condos.

But despite the many signs of success, the revitalization of Thornton Park is far from perfect, and far from over. Some lots sit empty where developers bulldozed old houses to make way for new projects, then backed out as the economy sagged. The new-urbanist ideal of leaving the car at home — or not having a car at all — clearly hasn't been realized. Parking is a problem, and people seem to drive short distances just to have lunch on Washington Street. Sue Macnamara says families aren't thrilled about the bar scene in the neighborhood; it's crowded and sometimes obnoxious. And there's growing tension over the creep of condo towers from downtown proper into the neighborhood. Most recently, local firm Eola Capital proposed a 20-story tower on property it owns across from Lake Eola's waterfront playground; the company would have to raze five historic homes to build it. "This is where you get tested," says Ustler, who has backed off of his next mixed-use project in favor of building office space, which is still in demand in the neighborhood.

Sara Van Arsdel, the history center director and anthropologist by training,



Residents worry about the creep of condo towers closer to the neighborhoods near Lake Eola.



Craig Ustler (left) and Phil Rampy were early renovators in Thornton Park.

says she feels sure that the neighborhood will pass the test. "Downtown Orlando and particularly Lake Eola and Thornton Park have tremendous providence," Van Arsdel says. The economic downturn means "people will become dependent on their neighborhoods once again, and these are neighborhoods people can depend on."

The latest big tenant moving in nearby at The Paramount on East Lake Avenue? Publix — returning downtown after more than 50 years. 

"It takes much, much longer than anyone realizes," says Craig Ustler. "But these projects have to evolve and become indigenous."