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In Chicago's revival, a model for Miami?

BY ANDRES VIGLUCCI

Not long ago, this great Midwestern city's downtown -- the place where the American skyscraper was perfected and first proliferated, no less -- found itself staggering on its once sturdy legs, like some punch-drunk boxer.

The splendid architecture was worn, the Loop a dark ghost town after 6, when thousands of daytime workers decamped for the suburbs. Desolation spread: tumbledown warehouses, industrial carcasses, panhandlers, sagging neighborhoods. Some big projects -- office towers, a massive new public library -- did little to arrest the swoon.

Then something remarkable happened. Chicago squared its Broad Shoulders and got back its swagger.

And therein, Miami Mayor Manny Diaz believes, lies a lesson worth emulating for the city he leads, suspended halfway between decline and revival:

In the past decade and a half, the nation's third-largest city has undergone a resurgence under Mayor Richard M. Daley, who has invested hundreds of millions in bold plans, beautification, parks, culture and hard-core infrastructure as a way to attract business, development and -- most important -- the vital throngs of people, people, people who today make Chicago's streets and neighborhoods among the liveliest in the country.

It's the template that Diaz, who often invokes Chicago and the Daley administration as a model, hopes to put in place in Miami. Here, much like Chicago years ago, downtown largely shuts down after dark even amid an unprecedented, but troubled, high-rise condo boom.

This month, Diaz won city and county approval of a \$2.9 billion financing scheme for a package of major projects, including a new bayfront Museum Park, a new home for baseball's Florida Marlins, seed money for a streetcar line, and a seaport tunnel meant to enhance downtown's livability by removing the scourge of speeding semis from its streets.

Getting the long-stalled projects moving, Diaz said, will be critical to downtown's future, cementing the kinds of urban amenities, alluring streets and public confidence that would ensure that those thousands of new condos are, sooner or later, filled.

Diaz, who counts Daley as a friend after several visits, points to Chicago as proof that

assertive public investments, often in the face of public skepticism, pay off.

"It's density, moving people into your urban core," Diaz said in an interview. "See what Chicago looks like today. You see their river and see our river. You see how ours could look. That took time."

"We're just getting started, but someday you will see thousands of people walking down Brickell and Biscayne Boulevard, just as you do on Michigan Avenue."

APPLES AND ORANGES?

But can the Chicago model really be replicated in Miami, with a population of less than 400,000, a fraction of Chicago's 2.8 million, and with far less wealth and resources -- including a truncated public-transit system that pales next to Chicago's famed El trains?

Chicago's vitality is undeniable. Regular corruption scandals and severe climate aside, it may be today the country's most livable major city, some urban experts say.

To be sure, there are pockets of trouble. Long stretches of the fabled, mostly black South Side remain as desolate as anything in Detroit. Gentrification and Daley's tear-downs of dysfunctional public-housing projects have pushed many poor residents to the city's edges, creating new ghettos on Chicago's western and southern flanks.

And even as the city strives to land the 2016 Olympics, its transit system runs deficits that will require a bailout.

But even Daley's critics concede that Chicago has survived the collapse of its meat-processing and manufacturing industries in stellar fashion.

"It's not perfect for everyone, but on the whole, his mayoralty has left the city far more livable than ever before," said Blair Kamin, the Chicago Tribune's Pulitzer Prize-winning architecture critic.

Take, for instance, the city's ongoing demolition of housing projects, including the infamous Cabrini-Green high-rises north of downtown. As the last towers vanish, condos and town homes -- many affordable, others priced at \$850,000 -- rise in their place. Next door, the once unthinkable: a shopping center, with Starbucks and Blockbuster Video.

CRIME ON DECLINE

Even some of the displaced left homeless, like 45-year-old Lee Grant, applaud. "Daley's not giving us a place to stay," Grant said, only to add in the next breath: "It's improved a whole lot around here. There was a lot of trouble, killing, gang-bangers."

That's gone."

Chicago is today a global city, with a humming economy as one of the nation's leading providers of financial and business services.

The Loop sizzles, even on a cold Thursday evening before Christmas. Despite snow and signs everywhere warning of falling ice, downtown was thronged with shoppers, tourists and lingering downtown workers. Bars and restaurants were mobbed. The city's famous orchestra was performing in its Michigan Avenue hall, and the venerable Art Institute of Chicago was busy.

Next to it, skaters packed the ice rink at the 3-year-old Millennium Park. Once controversial, the half-billion-dollar park is now an urban phenomenon, helping to lure millions of visitors with its monumental, interactive sculptures and its Frank Gehry-designed amphitheater.

"You see people on the street, seven days, late into the night. There used to be nothing," said Marlene Myers, 75, a near-lifelong Chicago resident rushing into the city's grand downtown cultural center, where she volunteers. "It's just amazing."

DRAWING PARALLELS

The parallels to Miami can be striking: Like Miami's, Chicago's is a waterfront downtown, split by a river once almost exclusively dedicated to industrial or maritime uses. Since at least the 1920s, a wall of skyscrapers has fronted the water in each. Fill has extended the land mass in each city's downtown, creating new public waterfront.

Daley, mayor since 1989, has encouraged a residential high-rise boom that has filled the Loop's skyline, and the banks of the Chicago River, with cranes and new towers, much as Diaz has in and around downtown Miami and the Miami River.

Where Chicago has Millennium Park, Diaz has pushed for Museum Park, which would replace underused Bicentennial Park with lush lawns and gardens and two new museum buildings.

Where Chicago used a reconstructed Soldier Field to anchor a Museum Campus knit from three existing institutions, Diaz hopes to capitalize on a new Marlins stadium on the site of the Orange Bowl in a different way: by luring commercial or mixed-use development with public incentives.

One large difference, of course, is that Chicago's vision is fully formed, while Miami's is but a blueprint.

How far can Miami mirror Chicago, which enjoys a rich tradition of architecture and planning, from the World's Fair of 1893 to the famed 1909 Plan of Chicago, in which architect Daniel Burnham and downtown power brokers gave shape to the modern

city, and ensured that the lake shore would forever be open?

Can Diaz -- limited by law to two terms, with scarcely two years to go in office -- successfully emulate the accomplishments of Daley, a politician so powerful that critics compare him to an emperor?

Unlike Diaz, Daley directly administers the city, effectively controlling a vast bureaucracy that -- unlike the Miami mayor's portfolio -- includes Chicago's airports, buses and elevated trains, public housing and schools.

"Lots of mayors around the country want to be Daley," said Kamin, the architecture critic. "But Daley's had almost 20 years to learn and refine. In his first couple of terms, Daley stumbled. There were lots of projects that didn't get off the ground. Trying to do all this at once is tough."

When he took office, Daley inherited a city politically paralyzed by the racially tinged "Council Wars" between mostly white city aldermen and black Mayor Harold Washington. Chicago's famed meat-processing industry was disappearing, and the city was losing population. Crime was rampant.

STARTING OUT SMALL

After several false starts, Daley began to focus on small-scale ideas that bore outside results. Most famously, he planted thousands of trees across the city, installed planters along the streets and in them put bright flowers. He made sure that the garbage was picked up on time, the snow cleared.

Then the city began to acquire, and demolish, derelict structures downtown, and made the land available for development. Downtown, with lots of vacant retail space, was rezoned to encourage housing development, said Daley's chief of staff, Lori Healey, formerly the city's planning commissioner.

Daley used a financing mechanism that his administration raised to high -- and controversial -- art: special taxing districts that use a technique called tax increment financing, or TIF, in areas eyed for redevelopment. Increases in property-tax revenue generated by the district are set aside to encourage redevelopment, by building sewers and streets, or subsidizing developers.

TIF money paid for a makeover of LaSalle Street, saving Chicago's version of Wall Street. TIF money paid for rehabs of historic buildings and theaters, creating a thriving Broadwaylike district. TIFs began to sprout all over the city, paying for streetscapes and lights, new transit stations, and aid to small businesses and homeowners.

TIFs provided incentives to lure corporate headquarters, including Boeing from Seattle and United Airlines from the suburbs.

"The mayor's strategy has been simple: You invest in neighborhoods through public facilities -- libraries, police stations, parks, residential -- and it attracts people, retail and development," Healey said.

``But you gotta have tools."

TIF districts now number about 160, and this year they generated \$500 million.

As it has expanded, however, Daley's use of the TIFs has come under fire by some critics, who say the spending is nearly impossible to track and has diverted revenue from the city's general fund while doing little for some poor neighborhoods.

Diaz's ambitious slate of projects relies on a nearly identical strategy: expanding two community redevelopment agencies -- special taxing districts covering Overtown/Park West and the Omni area -- which are expected to generate about \$3 billion over two decades.

Despite questionable CRA spending in the past, Diaz vows that the money will be well spent.

"We can't dwell on past mistakes," he said. ``We now have a canvas that you can paint the way you want to. But you need to kick-start it."