

The Miami Circle: Where preservation meets recreation

It's been 10 years since the county spent \$26.7 million of state money to buy 2.2 acres at the mouth of the Miami River in order to preserve a circle of stone uncovered as the site was cleared for condo construction.



Michael Lewis

Archaeologists had decided the circle was probably a 2,000-year-old Tequesta Indian artifact of unknown purpose and was therefore vital history. They studied the circle beginning in 1998 and, fearful that the elements would erode the find, reburied it under limestone in 2003.

And there it rests, despite a groundbreaking this month on the first phase of a historical use for the site, a passive park. There's no money for the other 99% of the job: some structure to exhibit either the circle or a replica to the public.

Even that first phase's landscaping, riverwalk and stones denoting where the circle is buried are yet to come. But the good news is that cash is at hand for that much.

Frankly, that may be all we'll see for many years. There's no money for more.

The Historical Museum of Southern Florida, which in January 2008 gained a sublease from the Florida Department of State to control the site, will need all the funds it can muster for its share of a new museum on a larger hunk of waterfront land, Bicentennial Park.

With the recession, don't expect government to chip in, either. A private campaign to raise the needed \$2 million to \$3 million for the circle site is unlikely. And the Related Group, which built the Icon towers next door and once had deep pockets, is battling to retain control of its vast condo empire and has nothing to spare.

That means what you see is what you're going to get: a passive park, a chunk of bayfront on the river's south bank in high rise-dominated Brickell that, as Alyce Robertson, executive director of the Downtown Development Authority, says, has a "woeful lack of green space."

So the park is vital. As residents soon fill Brickell's new condo towers – yes, they really will – we'll need all the parkland we can get, even though nearby Brickell Park sits just south of the Icon.

And, as we noted last week in relation to Watson Island, we must preserve every scrap of green for the public along our increasingly high-rise bayfront. A park at a unique juncture on Brickell will serve admirably.

It's unusual for a museum to operate public parks.

On the other hand, who better than the Historical Museum of Southern Florida to recognize the value of public use of the same open land that the Tequestas inhabited two millennia ago? It brings Miami (pardon the phrase) full circle.

Even the museum's long-time journal ties in. Since its first day in 1941 it's been titled simply Tequesta.

Now, as the park prepares to open, yet another master plan is in the works for how to exhibit the circle or its replica. It follows a decade of meetings, studies and plans aplenty and may well lead to more meetings, studies and plans.

There's no timetable for this process to end or phase two of the park to begin.

That's just fine. Take your time – lots of it.

Meanwhile, a uniquely situated bayfront and riverfront site will beckon urban residents to amble, exercise, walk

the dog, toss a ball, spend lunch hour munching a sandwich, sit on the grass with a book, stare at passing ships, snap photos of small children and do everything parks are meant for.

In fact, why not just keep the space open parkland in perpetuity? The museum will still safeguard underground the Tequesta circle – not the case for all such circles. After the public bought this site, condo towers replaced two other circles unearthed on the river's north bank with no public outcry.

And the museum is guaranteeing 24-hour access seven days a week. It plans site tours for children. But mostly, Florida's 41st national landmark will host unplanned, unorganized, uncategorized use by travelers and Miamians who want to spend some time in a beautiful waterfront spot.

Community groups never envisioned this when they urged purchase of the site to avoid a developer destroying the Miami Circle.

But this park use is far better. Besides preserving forever a Tequesta artifact, this community preservation drive meets a major urban need.

This grassroots effort will produce grass.