

Miami Herald

BUSINESS MONDAY

March 25, 2019

Circulation: 100,564 / UMV: 8,942,385



Moishe Mana's Flagler Street

What does the mogul who owns half of the roadway have up his sleeve, 12?

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| BUSINESS MONDAY

MONDAY MARCH 25 2019
MIAMIHERALD.COM



Moishe
Mana say's
he's ready to

act on Flagler Street

ANDRES VIGLUCCI Miami Herald

■ The entrepreneur and his top lieutenants say they're ready to move on plans to establish a "creative community" centered around art and tech and revive a tired stretch of Flagler Street that years ago was the center of Miami life.

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Four years ago, Moishe Mana, the arts mogul and entrepreneur, began acquiring big chunks of downtown Miami's Flagler Street, raising hopes that the city's original but bedraggled main drag would finally mount a long-postponed comeback.

By the time he was done buying three years later, Mana — already the largest landowner in flourishing Wynwood — had snatched up blocks of shops, commercial spaces and office buildings on or abutting Flagler, some 45 properties in all. The \$350 million spree made him the biggest single landlord in the downtown core.

Since then, amid mounting vacancies and few signs of improvement at his Flagler holdings, sussing out Mana's intentions has become the biggest guessing game in downtown Miami. In online forums, some anonymous critics even complained the hoped-for savior was only dragging the historic street down even more.

Now the wait is over. Maybe. Mana and his top lieutenants say they are ready to move on long-percolating if vaguely defined plans to establish a "creative community" centered around art and tech along the Flagler corridor, chock-a-block with historic buildings and a walkable, human scale that endows it with a singular urban authenticity.

The first specifics: Mana and Miami International University of Art and Design, now housed at the old Omni Mall, have confirmed the school will move into a vacant 13-story office building the entrepreneur owns on South Miami Avenue, two blocks from Flagler. To augment the school's educational

The interior of a historic Art Deco building on Flagler Street in downtown Miami hosted a street-art exhibit sponsored by Juxtapoz magazine and arts mogul Moishe Mana during Miami Art Week 2018. The building is owned by developers Stamboul, who plan to convert it into a food and beverage hall.

programs, Mana has also signed on Studio Enterprise, a Los Angeles-based educational consultant specializing in providing arts students with paid, real-life work experience in their fields.

The university says it hopes to open at 155 South Miami Ave. in summer of 2020. Eugene Lemay, director of Mana's art operations, said interior demolition is under way and construction will start soon. The school will bring in 800 to 1,000 students and occupy six floors in the building, where Mana has already set up his downtown headquarters.

At the same time, Lemay said, five floors at the building, which Mana bought for \$32 million in 2015, will become home to a start-up hub. Up to 70 companies will share accounting, human resources and legal services. Mana and Lemay say they are now lining up companies. Plans also call for a theater and conference room and a rooftop restaurant.

Around the corner, on Southeast First Street, a set of storefronts will become a "gallery row" with a focus on art and fashion, Lemay said. It will consist of five commercial galleries, two restaurants and a "flex-space" for talks and screenings.

In a second phase, Mana and Lemay plan to convert the old Flagler Station, a down-at-the-heels food court with offices upstairs, into a second incubator for high-tech companies, also with shared on-site services. It will be similar to Station F in Paris, an established hub that's billed as a "startup ecosystem under one roof."

On Flagler itself, Mana has already filled his 777 International Mall, a 1940s movie theater long ago converted into shops, with artists. The building provides studio, office and exhibition space at affordable rents for about 40 artists and cultural organizations, including well-known groups like Bas Fisher Invitational, the Borscht film festival and Bookleggers Library.

Mana and Lemay say their goal is to give Miami's fledgling art community the physical center it lacks, a public profile beyond the annual Art Basel-fed Miami Art Week and a measure of long-term stability for artists who have been repeatedly priced out of studios in once-dincey neighborhoods they helped turn around, like Wynwood. The pair have substantial experience, having built unusually comprehensive art facilities in Jersey City, N.J., and Chicago that combine working spaces for artists with exhibition spaces and services.

"In Miami it's all scattered. There is



CARL JUSTE cjuste@miamiherald.com | File

Moishe Mana, who owns several properties in Wynwood and downtown Miami's Flagler Street, at his Wynwood office in 2017.

no center," Lemay said in an interview at the South Miami building. "I'll tell you what's missing. Not enough galleries. Not enough museums. The goal for Mana is a year-round program for art." But, he added, its success will depend on generating enough revenue through rents, programming, events and services to make money. What Mana is running is not a philanthropy and must be carefully plotted out, Lemay stressed.

"You have to curate it. It has to be profitable. It has to be sustainable," Lemay said. "Otherwise it falls apart."

Mana urges patience. Rehabbing buildings, his plan for Flagler, takes longer and is more complicated than tearing down and building new, the typical Miami developer's approach, he said. Lemay cautioned that gradually building out Mana's vision for Flagler could take as long as seven years.

By focusing on art and tech, Mana said, his intention is to give Miami something virtually every economic development expert says it badly needs — a broader and more diverse economic base.

In Wynwood, Mana turned the derelict old free-trade center into a bustling complex for events, art fairs, exhibits and concerts, and he recently completed renovation of an old RC Cola plant as a concert venue. A larger vision for a mammoth trade hub connecting Asia and Latin American has not materialized, a source of frustration for Mana, who blames President Donald Trump and his Chinese trade war for discouraging Asian interest in the venture.

But Mana said he's in no hurry and promises he will persist.

"Changing the DNA of a city is much more than this. Maybe it sounds arrogant. It's a huge responsibility. Maybe I succeed. Maybe I don't," he said in an interview in his Wynwood offices about his Flagler plans. "What we are doing is



Zyscovich Architects

An architectural rendering shows how a remade Flagler Street in downtown Miami will look under a blueprint backed by entrepreneur and arts mogul Moishe Mana. Mana has bought some 45 properties along or abutting Flagler.

a philosophy. It's long-term. It takes an incredible amount of time and energy. Our project is a game-changer. It's part of building an ecosystem. It's not just a building."

"We're losing money every day," he added. "Be patient. It will take some time. I made a lot of sacrifices buying these buildings."

Those convinced Mana bought along Flagler only as a speculator — that is, to hold property until prices rise and then sell out — are flat wrong, he and his lieutenants say. Mana has never flipped a property, they say.

"He's very clever and patient," said Shai Baitel, chief strategist for Mana. "He's not looking to flip."

Once the center of Miami life, Flagler Street was laid out by engineers for magnate Henry Flagler's railroad and dates to the city's birth. The half-mile stretch of Flagler between Biscayne Boulevard and the historic Miami-Dade County Courthouse was once lined with cinemas, cafeterias and fine stores, including the landmark Burdines' department store.

But suburban expansion in the 1960s

“CLEARLY [MOISHE MANA] HAS A VISION FOR WHAT HE WANTS TO ACCOMPLISH. CLEARLY HE IS CAPABLE. WE ARE ALL WAITING TO SEE IF HE CAN EXECUTE.”

Gary Ressler, Miami Downtown Development Authority board member who helps manage his family's downtown properties, including the DuPont.

drove down its fortunes down and cut-rate electronics, shoe and luggage shops targeting bargain-hunting tourists moved in, along with a funky mix of mom-and-pop businesses. The few restaurants catered to a business lunch trade, but the street shut down after

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dark. Landlords collected rents but put little money back into their properties, many of which fell into disrepair.

Numerous efforts to kick the street back to life have sputtered.

An elaborate new cultural complex in the early '80s didn't do it. Neither did a fancy companion office

tower, nor restoration and new management at the street's jewel, the Olympia Theater (formerly known as the Gusman).

A poorly executed street makeover 15 years ago failed to reverse Flagler's declining fortunes. A second streetscape plan that was supposed to fix the problems of cracking, buckling sidewalks and street flooding that the previous project left behind instead stalled out two years ago after the city fired the con-

tractor for nonperformance.

Mana intends to leave his mark on the street itself. He pushed for a significantly more elaborate street redo and persuaded the Downtown Development Authority and local merchants to back it. Mana paid for a redesign that will turn Flagler into a curbside street that can be closed for festivals and other special events, similar to the facelift of Miracle Mile and the adjacent Giralda Avenue in Coral Gables. Instead of asphalt, the street will be covered in more durable and appealing pavers, the DDA said.

Mana also lobbied the city and Miami-Dade County for additional funding. What started as a \$13 million project is now budgeted at \$25 million. The city is working on a contract award, said DDA director Alyce Robertson.

Though it's delayed the street improvement significantly, it's a much improved plan thanks to Mana's persistence, Flagler property and business owners say.

"Mana put a lot on the line to raise additional funds when he saw the opportunity," said Brian Alonso, a member of the DDA's Flagler Street task force. "He went out and he worked the county and he worked the city, and he raised additional funds to make it an even better street."

Mana's moves on Flagler come as the rest of the street may finally be showing actual signs of life.

The DDA and property owners persuaded the city to expand bar-opening hours and reduce the mandatory separation between locales serving alcohol about 18 months ago. Since the rule change, seven new bars have opened on Flagler and surrounding blocks, the DDA says.

The Lost Boy Dry Goods bar on the ground floor of

the 1937 DuPont building, a historic Art Deco skyscraper on Flagler, shows televised soccer matches and packs in a young crowd at night. Around the corner, Mama Tried, by the owners of South Beach's stalwart Purdy Lounge, draws an after-hours crowd. And more bars are on the way, including a lounge by a partner in the Beach's Broken Shaker, known for its artisanal cocktails, also in the DuPont.

Brick-and-mortar retail has been tumbling on Flagler, as it has everywhere else. Macy's closed two years ago, leaving its Art Deco landmark, the former Burdines', vacant. But more dining spots are moving in. The chef-owner of Blue Collar and Mignonette is planning a dining spot in the district.

Developers Stamboul, who converted a historic but abandoned neo-classical 1925 bank building downtown into the plush Langford Hotel, plan to put a craft brewery in the ornately Classical 1912 old post office building, and a food and beverage hall in the 1936 Art Deco building on Flagler that formerly housed a Walgreens and the upscale La Epoca department store, which closed.

Since 2017, by the DDA's count, more than 20 restaurants have opened in the old downtown, catering in large part to an after-business clientele and the thousands of new residents moving into recently completed condos and apartments buildings. The agency says the central business district's residential population, once virtually zero, today stands at nearly 14,000, markedly improving Flagler Street's prospects.

Property owners also credit a fresh crop of managers and business owners who believe the street's future is in part as a cafe



PEDRO PORTAL Miami Herald File | March 6, 2015

Crowds on Flagler Street at the Olympia Theater in 2015. Numerous efforts to kick the street back to life have sputtered — including restoration and new management at the theater, formerly known as the Gusman.

and entertainment district. So many longtime Flagler Street landlords have sold that the number of property owners has fallen by half, to 200, making it easier to agree on marketing strategies and take action, they say.

"We have the greatest diamond in the rough in all of Miami right here," said Gary Ressler, an outspoken young DDA board member who helps manage his family's downtown properties, including the DuPont. "I don't think any one of us are waiting to run our business based on infrastructure, or on what Moisha Mana will or will not do."

"As it stands now, you have a group of very active property owners working diligently, and succeeding, on a common strategy."

The property owners have formed a new Business Improvement District that will funnel additional fees into improvements, and Mana's Miami director, Dylan Finger, sits on the board, Ressler noted. He also credits Mana for backing the improved street makeover plan, and said he's looking forward to whatever Mana comes up with for Flagler Street — something he stresses few

in the district have been privy too.

"Listen, Moisha is a visionary. Clearly he has a vision for what he wants to accomplish. Clearly he is capable," Ressler said. "We are all waiting to see if he can execute. I've seen his engagement and his passion. At the end of the day, we will be waiting to see how he rolls it out."

But one of Mana's Flagler Street tenants is not happy. Charles Zaine, owner of the Area Code 305 sneaker store, said business has plummeted since the Macy's down the block shuttered. One of his competitors, a Footlocker store, closed, and his store lost its Athlete's Foot franchise. He's down to five employees from a dozen.

He's thankful Mana has reduced his rent, but he needs a further drop to survive. Otherwise, he said, Mana has been indifferent to his commercial tenants' plight and has done little else to help. Like other Mana tenants, he's on a month-to-month lease and uncertain he'll be there next month, Zaine said.

"This is looking like a ghost city," Zaine said.

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“Right now, we’re losing our butt.

“Mana doesn’t care about the people. The people who work for him are nice. But they don’t do nothing. Nobody really knows what’s going on. He should work with us. I would like to see them do something to attract people. This downtown, it’s ugly. It’s terrible.”

Down the block, though, noted Miami artist Naomi Fisher has nothing but praise for what Mana and Lemay are doing.

Last summer, she moved the nonprofit Bas Fisher Invitational art group she runs into the ground floor of Mana’s 777 building. Bas Fisher, which undertakes experimental art projects and runs occasional artist-led Weird Miami tours, had to move twice to make way for development. The group previously had affordable developer-provided digs in the Miami Design District and Miami Worldcenter.

Being close together has fostered a sense of camaraderie and a sharing of ideas and work among the artists and artistic entrepreneurs in the building that’s rare in Miami, she said.

“Mana has really become for us the headquarters. It’s been really great,” Fisher said by phone from Mexico, where she is working on a new video piece. “There are so many other wonderful people around. Working as an artist can be very isolating. It’s really become a good place for exchange of information and ideas.

“We’ve been experimenting with how to function in a real-estate landscape where things change so fast and it’s hard for artists to have stability.

Miami in general has so much potential to be an art capital, but it’s always at risk because there is not enough infrastructure. Mana has stepped in to provide that, which is really exciting. We need more people to step in as well.”

Lemay, a respected artist in his own right who is reputed to be the one who executes Mana’s high-flying vision, says the entrepreneur has already shown how to build an “arts ecosystem” from virtual scratch at his sprawling Mana Contemporary art center in Jersey City, N.J. Housed in a set of elegantly reclaimed industrial buildings, the center, which Lemay manages, provides commercial services, such as art storage, crating and restoration in combination with exhibition spaces, studios and offices for artists and arts groups, an art school and a foundry. It’s now adding apartments for artists.

Mana has already expanded his art empire to Chicago, and says Miami is next.

Lemay, who is now spending most of his time in Miami to help Mana expand his operations here, said he believes the Mana Contemporary model can work on Flagler and in Wynwood even though the local art community is a younger phenomenon and nowhere near as developed as it is in New York and Chicago. It just has its own start-up character.

“There is a viable community,” Lemay said. “It’s different from New York and Chicago. Here, it’s really about young artists, a lot of them from Latin America, and more experimental art.

“There are a lot of immigrants. A lot of realness. I like it.”

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