News

Miami Street Experiment Prioritizes People

For many years, U.S. 1, a broad and busy boulevard, coursed through the heart of downtown Miami, separating the residential and business district from the city's expansive waterfront park, Bayfront Park. Crossing the eight lanes of Biscayne Boulevard, as it is locally known, was not for the faint of heart.

In January, in an effort to show Miamians what it would be like if the boulevard wasn't a barrier but instead a walkable public space, the Miami Downtown Development Authority conducted an experiment in urban design.

For three weeks, one lane of the boulevard was converted to on-street parking, while another lane was restricted to public transit and bikes. Meanwhile, the 101 existing parking spaces in the median were converted into 75,000 square feet of public green space. In addition to providing areas for residents and visitors to gather, the MDDA hosted movies al fresco, tango and yoga classes, concerts, and other events. A dog park and a playground were installed. Nontraditional crosswalks were painted to complement the overall design.

"The message was: This is what happens when we prioritize people over cars instead of focusing on getting cars in and out as fast as possible, especially in downtowns," says Fabian De La Espriella, AICP, a planner at the MDDA. "The response from the community was great. People asked us, 'why does this have to be removed?'"

Designed as a one-month "urban experiment," the Biscayne Green demonstration project in downtown Miami temporarily re purposed a segment of a major eight-lane boulevard as public space that included a dog park, playground, and interactive elements for both residents and visitors alike to enjoy. Photo courtesy Miami Downtown Development Authority.

Around 20,000 people visited the area for the events, or just to use the free wifi or enjoy a coffee in the shade, he says. The project was funded in part by a $145,000 grant from the Knight Foundation Knight Cities Challenge program.

The experiment yielded other results too: For instance, the Development Authority found that the new lane configurations succeeded in slowing traffic, "but there was no big gridlock," De La Espriella said. "[The flow of traffic] didn't seem all that different from any other day," he said.

Inspiring permanent change

The experiment is now over and the boulevard is back to normal. While the fancy crosswalks are still in place, as are the markings designating one lane for bicycles and buses, drivers seem to be ignoring them. De La Espriella doesn't expect many bikers to use the boulevard now that traffic has resumed its normal speed. But the impact of the event, and the knowledge of what the boulevard could be for Miamians, lingers.

The MDDA is now working to get the Florida Department of Transportation, which controls the boulevard, to permanently eliminate one lane of traffic, while also studying ways to permanently convert the median parking lots into public space. Eventually, they'd like to eliminate two lanes total, just like in the experiment.

If all goes as planned, De La Espriella expects it to take five years to fully reconstruct the thoroughfare, although some pieces of the overall plan — like conversion of one of the median parking lots to a dog park and playground — could be completed and opened to the community sooner.

—Susannah Nesmith

Nesmith is a freelance writer based in Miami.