

Along Calle Ocho, in the Little Havana neighborhood of Miami.

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Assignment America: Little Havana

The neighborhood has shaped thousands of Cuban immigrants or their children into success stories, from Marco Rubio to the rapper Pitbull. But a reporter who grew up there fears its demise.

By LIZETTE ALVAREZ DECEMBER 23, 2015

Articles in this series are exploring changes in American politics, culture and technology, drawing on the reporting and personal experiences of New York Times journalists around the country.

No matter where in the world I have lived, no matter how long I have been away or how brief my visit back, Little Havana has always been the one place where the present takes me back to the past.

In the working-class center of Calle Ocho, I stop by the counter of El Exquisito for my sugar-soaked cafecito and media noche sandwich.

I linger at Domino Park to watch the old Cuban men slap fichas on the table and talk trash about their opponents. Then at night, I head to CubaOcho, for hours of frenzied improv by musicians jamming on bongos and trumpets.

Each time, a kind of cultural despojo — a cleansing — occurs as the sights, sounds and scents of the neighborhood never fail to snap me back to my childhood “Florida room,” where relatives swapped verbal postcards of a free Cuba frozen in time.

For me, the firstborn American in my Cuban family, Little Havana was my Havana.

With its Mission and Art Deco buildings nestled near the core of this sprawling metropolis of shopping malls, suburbs and condos, it remains a touchstone: the heart of the Cuban exile experience. A year after Cuba and the United States announced plans to restore diplomatic relations, it is still both a spectacle of Cubanidad and a genuine ethnic enclave that has shaped thousands of Cuban immigrants or their children into American success stories, from Marco Rubio, now a contender for the Republican nomination for president, to teachers, lawyers, doctors, and even Mr. 305, the rapper Pitbull.

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“I call it the Cuban Plymouth Rock,” said Arva Moore Parks, a historian who lived in Little Havana as a child, when it was a Jewish neighborhood still stocked with Southerners. “It’s an extraordinary piece of history, not just Miami history but American history.”

But the city has never done much to protect or preserve Little Havana. In recent years, crime, drugs and poverty have spiked again. Many buildings have grown decrepit.

And if you look east and skyward, you can catch a glimpse of what's coming, at least in ambition, if not scale: the glitzy, glass towers of Brickell and downtown Miami. The new expensive condos are mostly packed with a younger, richer, international crowd, and Little Havana, only minutes away, is the next frontier.

Real estate developers who once looked askance at East Little Havana as too run-down and overly restrictive in its zoning are surveying the scruffy houses and apartment buildings here. A few new buildings are already going up, and just as interest in Cuba's Havana intensifies, [as I saw](#) during Pope Francis' visit, interest here is swelling.

"Little Havana is at a crossroads," Mayor Tomás Regalado of Miami told me. "For 40 years, it was abandoned. But now the stars are aligning."



A room in the Tower Hotel in Little Havana, which is under renovation.
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Seeking to balance new development with preservation, the city is working on a new master plan that could relax zoning a bit in some areas and protect others.

But in Little Havana and beyond, skepticism is common. Residents fret that the area, the last remaining urban neighborhood in Miami where people can walk out of their houses, shop in stores and mingle on sidewalks, is headed for extinction. And it's not hard to understand why they're concerned: Little Havana is poor. Its vulnerable. And the United States has few successful models for preserving the starting line of American dreams.

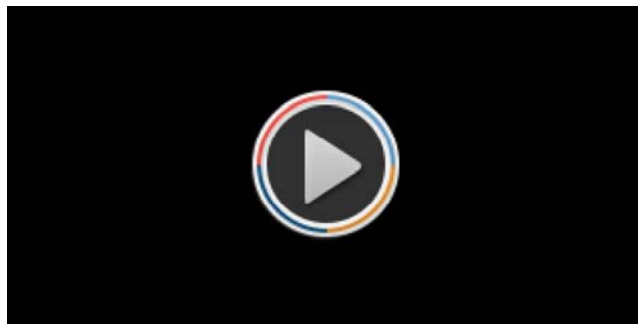
The Lower East Side of Manhattan, the capital of Jewish America at the turn of the 20th century, has largely become just another gentrified playground. Other immigrant enclaves, from New York's Chinatown to San Francisco's Mission District, are struggling in their own ways to resist the economic and cultural forces threatening their authenticity and the landmarks of their struggles.

Can Little Havana, of all places, really buck that trend?

From Picadillo to Fritangas

Little Havana is, and remains, a temporary refuge for new people trying to reinvent themselves, but it didn't seem that way to Carlos Encenat, 65, a retired teacher, when he arrived here in 1961. His first memory of Little Havana was the sign he saw in a window: "No pets. No kids. No Cubans."

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When my family settled here that same year, they moved into a boardinghouse just off the Miami River. My mother, a cigarette in hand, ordered my sister to stuff her

clothes into the refrigerator. It was the only safe haven from marauding cockroaches.



The author outside her childhood home in Little Havana.
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Like today, small apartments were overstuffed with people. My family eventually moved a little farther west in Little Havana, into a duplex with a flamingo carved into the portico.

Twelve relatives squashed into its two bedrooms and the living room. When the landlord knocked, my brother, Frank, and sister, Mariana, and all the other children scrambled under beds and into closets. It was a hard life, but it had its charms.

“You could smell people making picadillo at night — the Cuban cooking, the sofrito,” Mr. Encenat told me. “It was incredible.”

They were all part of the wave of professionals who arrived here in the early 1960s after escaping Castro’s Communist cloak. Leaving behind comfortable homes and wealth, they worked as secretaries (if they spoke English, like my mom), maids, factory workers, taxi drivers — anything to pay the rent. And they brought their language, culture, can-do spirit and stubborn resilience.

The place beckoned then for the same reasons as today: It was cheap; landlords were not too picky; decent jobs in downtown Miami and Miami Beach were within easy reach.

But Little Havana was also about moving up and moving on. Those who could get out almost always did, like my family, which moved to a two-bedroom house on the outer edge of Coral Gables in 1963.

Central and South Americans swapped up when they could, too, making room for their compatriots and replacing many of the Cuban establishments I remember.



Pedro Bello at his cigar shop on Calle Ocho.
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Gone are most of the Cuban boticas, where the pharmacists eagerly doled out prescription-free antibiotics to Cuban customers. Gone, too, are the long trail of Cuban restaurants, like Casablanca and Ayestarán, that snaked up or just off Eighth and Flagler Streets, where we gorged on boniato (a Cuban sweet potato) and tasajo (beef stewed with citrus). A few barber shops remain, but none have the charm of Nenito and the Cuban special: a shave and a robust anti-Castro tirade.

They've been replaced by Nicaraguan and Honduran restaurants offering heaping portions of fritangas and baleadas, shoehorned between pawn shops and check

cashing joints. More than half the neighborhood's residents are now Central and South Americans.

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In many ways, it's tougher for them. Those who fled the strife of revolution, civil war and the drug war in Central America were not all welcomed and granted legal status, as is the case for Cuban immigrants who reach American shores. Many are poorer and less educated than their Cuban counterparts, too.

The changes were inevitable. After all, Little Havana was once a Jewish neighborhood with synagogues. Greeks lived here, too, which is why a Greek Orthodox cathedral sits nearby. History dictates that one group of immigrants replaces the next; I get it. But for me this transition is filled with melancholy. Memories fade, then disappear.

Calle Ocho

Or they are recast and mingled with the new.

At the hub of Calle Ocho, around 10th Avenue, a refreshing kind of second-generation Cuban cool has settled. I step inside the popular Azucar ice cream parlor, where the owner, Suzy Battle, has fused her grandmother's homemade ice cream recipes with Cuban flavors, like guava, and galleticas Maria, which she lovingly calls Abuela Maria after her grandmother, and which I lovingly savor.



The Ball and Chain on Calle Ocho, where Billie Holiday and Count Basie once played.
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The owner of the 1930s building that houses Azucar is another grandchild of Cuban exiles, Bill Fuller. He and his partners are scooping up properties. They are hoping to buff up and preserve the kind of low-scale architecture that commands you to slow down and linger — the buildings with porches, stoops and charm. But, like Ms. Battle, he is trying to fuse the past with the present, and has plans for a hotel, restaurants and art galleries (some exist already).

In the evenings, people pour into Ball and Chain, a 1930s-era jazz club. Chet Baker played there. So did Billie Holiday and Count Basie, until the Count shut down the place in 1957 with a lawsuit accusing the owner of stiffing him. Now, the club looking as it did then, a Miami crowd — not necessarily locals or tourists — sips “pastelito daiquiris” and listens to live Latin music. By day, the club’s drummers sit on the sidewalk slapping their congas.

The block’s anchor is the graceful Art Deco Tower Theater, where my brother and his friends escaped the heat watching Saturday morning cartoons and learning English from James Bond and John Wayne. Now run by Miami-Dade College, it’s where my friends and I go for the latest French, Cuban or German films — another sign of both our evolving tastes and the neighborhood’s own changes.

But these experiences are rare. Most of Little Havana (not unlike Havana itself) is still caught between kitsch and decay, and those trying to redefine the neighborhood must wrestle with both.

Tourists come in droves now, drawn to the cigars, rum, music and guayaberas. They step off the double-decker bus and wander into the new tourist center. They watch the old men playing dominoes, like Rene Janeiro, 92, a legendary Little League coach who also made a few attempts by boat to overthrow Fidel Castro.

This fishbowl version of Little Havana never seemed plausible to the locals who grew up here. “Before you didn’t, quote, go to Little Havana — nobody did,” said Mr. Encenat, who lived not far from Flagler Street and attended local schools. “You just stopped by for some congri” — rice and beans.



Tourists on Calle Ocho, across the street from the Art Deco Tower Theater.
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Rene Janeiro, 92, at Domino Park in Little Havana.
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In the logic of Florida, tourists are a boon. They create buzz and build fortunes. They motivate politicians to pay attention. But beyond the three core blocks in the neighborhood, there is not much for visitors to do. They return to the tour bus and to South Beach, which leaves me wondering: How much do we really want Little Havana to be “discovered?”

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The question is often answered before it is asked. “We are not looking to build Epcot here,” says Mr. Fuller, whose grandparents lived in the middle-class Shenandoah section of Little Havana. But cookie-cutter growth could be worse. “Why would anyone come to Little Havana if it looks like their hometown in Nebraska?”

City officials seem to have an ideal in mind. This year, they granted historical preservation protection to several blocks of residential buildings near the Miami River. City leaders also say they are studying cities like Charleston, S.C., Portland, Ore., and Seattle to champion more mixed-use residential buildings and for a way to co-mingle wealthier residents with low-income renters. This has long been a challenge in Florida, where few laws exist to facilitate that.

But impatient residents are already eager for change, any change at all. They complain that the city has done far too little to make the neighborhood livable.

“There are a lot of drug dealers,” said Ruvenia Rodriguez, 41, a mother of five who moved here from Honduras. “Too many men deal drugs. They drink beer. Dogs are barking. We can’t walk the sidewalks with the children.”

In the next breath, she scolded one of her daughters for walking down the street alone.

Developers are still treading lightly, said Jose Fernandez, a real estate investor who lives in Little Havana not far from where he grew up. And they will continue to do so, he added, until the city grapples with the code violations, the dumping of trash and the crime. He should know. He invested in South Beach early on, when he had to fight back the rampant crack dealers.

After Miami Beach finally listened to preservationists, beefed up its codes — like requiring owners to paint — and aggressively enforced the rules, the big investors began to flock. Then they took over. Now South Beach is unrecognizable — it’s crowded and expensive, hard to find parking and flooded with tourists.

“South Beach has become something it wasn’t meant to be,” Francisco J. Garcia, the city planning director, said. “I’d like to do something better here in making it more authentic and livable.”

It’s a noble, admirable goal, one I cherish. But to some degree, my Havana — like the real Havana — is already not what it was, any more than those of us who call it home. Immigrants change in America. So do their communities.

Lizette Alvarez has been a reporter for The New York Times since 1995, covering New York, politics, northern Europe, veterans issues and many other topics. She has been based in Florida since 2011 and lives in Miami.