Fractured Mobilization: Miami's Little Haiti Confronts Mega-Real Estate Speculation

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Abstract: Disenfranchised urban communities worldwide are increasingly vulnerable to land dispossession and cultural erasure as neoliberal regimes unleash intensified financial speculation within polarizing and splintering local/global class and racialized disparities. A dilemma of disenfranchised communities when confronting speculative intrusions where prospective allies have become marginalized or eliminated is whether, and to what degree, to resist such threats contentiously at the risk of zero-sum defeat versus accommodative negotiations seeking to rescue modest benefits while mitigating dislocations. The forms and intensities of community responses can be conceptualized as embedded within multiscalar state-society and local politico-spatial configurations. From that perspective, I address a predominantly Black immigrant district, Miami's Little Haiti, as it confronts mega-real estate speculation within a metropolitan political economy of corporate real estate hegemony and accelerating racialized expulsions. The contentious versus accommodative dilemma and local/supralocal political landscape fractured and neutralized the Haitian collective responses. I conclude by discussing the case's theoretical/comparative implications.

Keywords: financialization/speculation; disenfranchised communities; racialized dispossession; social movements.

Introduction

On March 1, 2021, a press conference was held in Little Haiti (LH n.d.) on the property of the Magic City Innovation District (MC n.d.), whose city-approved special area plan (SAP) comprises an estimated \$1.4 billion, 18-acre complex of middle to upper-middle income residential towers, office towers, restaurant-entertainment locales, a hotel, and assorted businesses. The press conference announced the Magic City group's initial of two \$3-million payments to the Little Haiti Revitalization Trust, whose establishment and funding were bargained between the investors and the City Commission during several years of community divisiveness and tumultuous city planning sessions that culminated in the SAP's approval. Magic City's management and local government officials effusively praised the payment, the Trust, and the real estate venture as addressing Little Haiti's crisis of affordable housing and reversing the fortunes of an immigrant-hub community in the throes of long-term disinvestment and deterioration (Buteau 2021; Flechas 2021).

The acclaim was based on a deceptive public relations campaign (see PZ 2019abc; Viglucci 2019; Gierczyk 2020; Chéry and Morales 2023). To begin with, the Magic City consortium had swapped out any legal obligation to fund low-income and workforce housing for two guaranteed \$3-million payments to the Trust, which the city commissioner who headed the SAP's negotiations originally proposed and intended to head. Other details are no less troubling. For example, the reported additional \$25-million payments are contingent on the fulfillment of construction targets distributed over a 30-year timeline and are not adjusted for inflation. The promised payments, moreover, are not charitable contributions but rather are investor-safe chips bargained for massive zoning concessions. In addition, their amount dwarfs compared to the advertised \$1.4-billion venture and will be challenging to enforce over the extended timeline.

Disinvested, devalued, and exploited urban communities worldwide are becoming more vulnerable to land dispossession and cultural erasure as neoliberal regimes unleash intensified financial speculation within polarizing and splintering local/global class and racialized disparities (Sassen 2014; Levien 2018; Inguane 2019; Harvey 2020; Díaz-Parra 2021; Can 2022; Goldman 2023; Leitner and Sheppard 2023). This paper contributes to research on collective responses to such threats via a dilemma of disenfranchised urban communities when confronting mega-real estate speculation where local/extralocal political economies have marginalized or eliminated prospective allies. That dilemma is whether, and to what degree, to resist such threats contentiously at the risk of zero-sum defeat versus accommodative negotiations seeking to rescue modest benefits while mitigating dislocations. The paper considers the decisions, strategies, scales, and intensities of community responses as grounded in specific multiscalar state-society and local politico-spatial configurations.

The following elaborates that theoretical perspective and applies it to examine Little Haiti's confrontation with the proposed Magic City SAP—which although touted as an "Innovation District" is no more than a mixed-use real estate venture (MC n.d.)—within a metropolitan political economy whose past and present are premised on unbridled real estate speculation and racialized dispossession (see Portes and Stepick 1994; Connolly 2014; Portes and Armony 2018; Bojnansky 2021). The concluding section considers the case study's theoretical/comparative implications.

Theoretical Perspective

Sassen underscores a systemic problem of this century's financialized and speculative world political economy: "the emergence of new logics of *expulsion*" [original italics] (2014: 1; Levien 2018; Harvey 2020; Goldman 2023; Leitner and Sheppard 2023). The era's expulsions, she observes, "amount to a savage sorting" (4) of social, territorial, and ecological inequalities, whose forms vary across particular institutional regimes, economies, and geographies. Among those forms are new varieties of land acquisitions, including a global boom in urban corporate mega-projects (Sassen 2014, 2015). Sassen's concern is that, rooted in the interests and power of transnationalized matrices of speculative capital, affluent classes, and state collaborators, such projects are fundamentally exclusionary. That is, by eroding the socio-spatial foundations of cities as sites of boundary-crossing challenges to powerholders, speculative mega-projects marginalize or exclude subaltern peoples and voices from democratizing urban public realms, as exemplified by the aftermaths of this century's repression, dissipation, and defeat of variegated urban popular insurgencies (see Dikeç and Swyngedouw 2017).

The dislocating spatial and social impacts of urban corporate mega-projects may be direct as well as indirect when they anchor negative externalities of widening transformations. Roy (2019) analyzes those dislocating impacts as "state-instituted violence against racialized bodies and communities," that is, as "racial banishment" (2019: 227). Roy thereby delves below the surface of common understandings of gentrification. In doing so, she conceptualizes gentrification's processes not as displacement but more fundamentally as dispossession, which Roy situates within racialized political economies of capital accumulation, their official repressive actions, and whiteness as a politico-legal construction that underpins the question "who can count as the subject who can claim home and land?" (2017: A3).

Intersections of class and racialization have commonly impeded resistance to racialized dispossession, as resulting political divisions have stymied resistance or enervated mobilizations (e.g. Robinson 1983/2021; Connolly 2014; Tarrow 2022). Among other considerations is the degree to which a community's prospective or mobilized leadership, collaborators, and supporters live within its locality or are scattered elsewhere. So too are the consequences of cooperative bonds versus disconnectedness and competitive or oppositional rivalries among a locality's non-government institutions (Leitner et al. 2008; Nightingale 2012; Gastón 2018; Tarrow 2022). Disinvested and exploited communities, moreover, must weigh their options within a dilemma when confronting today's corporate mega-projects and other speculative threats where neoliberal local/global political economies have marginalized or eliminated prospective allies: that is, whether, and to what extent, communities should resist such threats contentiously at the risk of zero-sum defeat, or pursue accommodative negotiations seeking to rescue modest benefits and minimize dislocations.

Little Haiti in Greater Miami

Class and racialized polarization, clashing ethno-national identities, socio-spatial fragmentation, ecological precarity: those are the past and present underpinnings of Greater Miami's transnationalized political economy (Portes and Stepick 1994; Connolly 2014; Portes and Armony 2018). Bearing a disproportionate share of the economic and social costs are its

diverse Black communities, among them the immigrant hub of Little Haiti (Viglucci et al. 2022).

Little Haiti originated in the mass emigration of Haitians escaping their country's U.S-backed Duvalier dictatorships from the 1950s to 1980s and settling in a deteriorated north-of-downtown area. Decades of impoverishment ensued, juxtaposed with eventual federal civil rights legislation that lured upwardly mobile Haitians to the suburbs while increasingly leaving the working poor behind. By the 2000s, though, the Haitian community's churches, social service organizations, and political leadership—many of whom lived elsewhere in the metropolitan area—launched a campaign that in 2016 secured the district's official designation as "Little Haiti."

But surging financial speculation in the aftermath of 2008's global economic collapse was already taking aim at the district's combination of cheap property and strategic location within Greater Miami, which was riding an accelerated upswing as a regional-global city (see Portes and Armony 2018). Speculation's incremental inroads into Little Haiti would soon cede ground to a blockbuster proposed corporate mixed-use project, based on its investor group's assemblage of a mass of adjacent parcels (see Smiley and Viglucci 2017). The group speciously christened the proposed SAP—containing nothing approximating high-tech innovation and little or nothing affordable to most Little Haiti residents—as the "Magic City Innovation District." Replete with hyper-imaginaries of rescuing Little Haiti from disinvestment and degradation while catapulting the metropolis into high-tech dynamism, the investors' public relations campaign targeted the declared goal of Mayor Francis Suarez—himself a real estate lawyer—to attract high-tech investment to the City of Miami. Announcement of the proposed SAP unleashed impassioned controversy (PZ 2018; Bastien 2019).

Mega-Speculative Politics & Fractured Mobilization

Magic City's management team undertook to secure support for the proposed SAP at three levels: the City of Miami government, Greater Miami's Haitian community, and complementarily diverse interests across the metropolis. The group moved quickly and handily to coopt as its point person District Commissioner Keon Hardemon, a Black American who had supported Little Haiti's recognition as an official municipal district, together with the mayor, the other commissioners, and the Planning Department. The latter, due to the historical hegemony of speculative real estate interests within the city government apparatus and the zoning code's SAP provisions, would be relegated to no more than negotiation over technical building-zoning details (Connolly 2014; Smiley and Viglucci 2017; PZ 2018, 2019abc; Bojnansky 2021). Coopting the metropolitan area's Haitian and other major owners of Little Haiti's properties and businesses likewise posed no challenge, as their property values stood to soar with the SAP's approval and there was the promise of new commercial opportunities via Magic City and its city government partners as well as donations for community programs (PZ 2018, 2019abc). A gamut of smaller local businesses would eventually be variously coopted or politically neutralized as they scrambled to partake in Little Haiti's anticipated prosperity or to avoid dislocation. More broadly there would be individuals and households seeking paths of upward mobility, moving out of Little Haiti or in other ways improvising so as not to lose ground, or simply burdened with the everyday challenges and fears of a disenfranchised Black immigrant community. Other emerging impediments to the political engagement of local residents would be the absence of community forums beyond those orchestrated by the

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management team and its government allies; the limited reach of mobilized social service programs and churches; and obstacles to attending Magic City planning-zoning sessions miles away at City Hall.

With no oppositional threats in clear view, the Magic City consortium and its city government collaborators could seemingly have anticipated a smooth political road to the SAP's approval. There was nevertheless a wildcard: the activist leaders of Little Haiti's social service programs and churches who had successfully campaigned for Little Haiti's official district designation and who could conceivably make the approval process prolonged and costly. Who were these activist leaders and how to forestall such challenges?

A striking characteristic of those leaders is that few of them live in Little Haiti, having typically ridden the decades-long wave of upwardly mobile Haitians to the suburbs. Their activism, then, has been rooted in continuing institution-affiliated commitments to the district as entwined in their shared histories of struggle in Haiti, in the creation of Little Haiti, and in ongoing endeavors to advance Haitian welfare and rights transnationally. Their residential and class-based distances from a working-poor immigrant district, however, would arguably hamper the community's capacity to resist speculative real-estate intrusions (see Leitner et al. 2008; Nightingale 2012; Gastón 2018; Tarrow 2022). In those contexts, leadership's solidarities would now confront the previously mentioned dilemma: to emphasize contention or accommodation in addressing a mega-real estate threat to Little Haiti in the face of powerful corporate speculative interests and their captive government machinery without having potent allies.

A preliminary group of activists came together under Marleine Bastien (executive director of Little Haiti's Family Action Network Movement, FANM), who had spearheaded the movement to obtain Little Haiti's district designation and is acknowledged across political factions as the voice of Little Haiti (PZ 2018, 2019abc; Bastien 2019). Following the establishment of other groups, Father Reginald Jean-Mary (pastor of Notre Dame d'Haiti Catholic Church) encouraged their unification as the Concerned Leaders of Little Haiti (or Ti Ayti Inc., TAI). Bastien split from TAI, however, over the latter's decision to pursue accommodative, organization-centered negotiations with Magic City and the City Commission versus Bastien's commitment to grassroots organizing on behalf of aggressive community benefits and looking beyond Little Haiti—reform of the City of Miami's zoning code (Latortue 2019; Gierczyk 2020; Chéry and Morales 2023). Bastien and FANM joined forces with the Community Justice Project (CJP), a Miami-based organization of social movement lawyers. The split played into the hands of the Magic City group, which, besides its other cooptive undertakings, would incorporate TAI as the venture's pillar of community support by means of donations to neighborhood organizations and programs, the employment of selected TAI members as consultants and community liaisons, and even a multi-million dollar donation for water-sanitation projects in Haiti (PZ 2018, 2019abc). Why the schism and why did the Magic City group focus its cooptive efforts on TAI?

Beyond the commonality that members of both factions typically do not live in Little Haiti, there were differences in social composition between TAI and FANM-CJP with seeming political ramifications. TAI's members are Haitian church and social service heads, community activists, small business interests, and others (Latortue 2019; Gierczyk 2020). Despite important solidarities, their churches and service hubs compete with each other and with counterparts elsewhere for funding, with implications for personal employment stability and

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earnings as well. These circumstances arguably rendered TAI's leadership vulnerable to patronage-based cooptation. Whether or not the promise of obtaining investor and city government monies for their specific programs, personal advancement, and favored causes was influential in rejecting Bastien's grassroots strategy, TAI's top-down accommodative approach hewed to several political understandings: first, that given decades of urban-social policy austerity there was no viable alternative to corporate real estate projects such as Magic City to reverse Little Haiti's continued disinvestment and impoverishment; second, that given the absence of salient divisions within the City Commission the latter's members would undoubtedly approve most of the proposed SAP; third, that contentious bargaining would jeopardize the anticipated large-scale business investment in Little Haiti and its envisioned positive multipliers; and fourth, that TAI'S organization-centered, accommodative strategy was the surest way to maximize community benefits (PZ 2018, 2019abc; Latortue 2019; Gierczyk 2020; Chéry and Morales 2023).

By comparison, Bastien and FANM, in alignment with CJP, wedded themselves to grassroots mobilization which, although tempered by the practicalities of political maneuver within a staunchly pro-real estate, neoliberal local/extralocal conjuncture, contentiously pursued comprehensive community benefits that transcended Little Haiti. Like TAI, FANM-CJP's mobilized activists were typically not residents of Little Haiti. In addition, they were more diverse in racial-ethnic identity than TAI's members and less likely to have longstanding ties to Little Haiti. In addition, they were more diverse in racial-ethnic identity than TAI's members and less likely to have longstanding ties to Little Haiti. Importantly, they were employed by FANM—for which Bastien eschewed Magic City funding and associated government opportunities—as well as CJP, Greater Miami's left-activist organizations, and diverse other entities. Hence, in contrast to TAI, FANM-CJP's leaders and core-activists stayed independent of Magic City and City of Miami patronage. Among FANM-CJP's allies were metropolitan opponents of gentrification, racialized-cultural erasure, and the City of Miami's SAP regulations, along with residents of affluent neighboring districts fearing threats to their quality of life.

The compositional and ideological differences between TAI and FANM-CJP underpinned their fractured mobilization over contentious versus accommodative bargaining, which consequently neutralized Greater Miami's Haitian collective responses to Magic City. FANM-CJP's supporters did not coalesce into a potent contentious force; FANM-CJP's voices, then, were subverted by its schism with TAI and its absence of formidable supra-community allies. TAI's own leverage dissipated via its accession to Magic City's patronage and cooptation, which moreover politically burnished Magic City's public image as an agent for widely shared community development. With neither FANM-CJP, TAI, nor other forces posing meaningful threats to corporate real estate's power within the City of Miami's political machinery, the Magic City consortium and its government partners scored a sweeping victory (PZ 2019c; Viglucci 2019). Recounting the fractured mobilization and deflating outcome, Bastien has since lamented: "They [TAI] said we could not win. We could have won" (Chéry and Morales 2023).

Conclusion

This paper has contributed to research on collective responses to a growing form of urban realestate speculation, corporate mega-projects, by means of a dilemma of disenfranchised communities where local/extralocal political economies have marginalized or eliminated prospective allies. The dilemma is whether, and to what extent, to resist such threats contentiously at the risk of zero-sum defeat versus accommodative negotiations seeking to rescue modest benefits while mitigating dislocations. The paper has conceptualized the decisions, strategies, scales, and intensities of community responses as rooted in specific multiscalar state-society and local politico-spatial configurations.

Little Haiti's fractured and defeated mobilization lays bare the challenges of resisting such speculation in a world of not only polarizing but also fragmenting class and racialized inequalities. It likewise lays bare the racialized dispossession that typically underpins gentrification. Given intense neoliberal and speculative headwinds, the case of Little Haiti suggests a theoretical/comparative agenda of community-collaborative research to chart and pursue grassroots-democratizing visions, strategies, and movements aimed at mitigating and defeating threatened class/racialized dispossessions while building steadfastly toward a local-to-global commons.

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