

Local perspectives

MIAMI

BACK TO THE FUTURE FOR BAYFRONT

Many Cubans who came to Miami in the 1960s have wonderful memories of spending Sunday afternoons in Bayfront Park.

It was cheap entertainment for struggling immigrant families. The fish pond and rock garden, the huge old shade trees, the pigeons, the view of Biscayne Bay -- all brought respite for families struggling with loss and assimilation as well as memories of strolling along the famed Malecón in Havana.

They weren't alone, of course. Miamians of all backgrounds used and treasured Bayfront. But in the 1980s, downtown was in a steep decline. The park reflected that as vagrancy increased and the city spent less maintaining what is often referred to as Miami's "front porch."

Part of downtown's renewal was Bayfront Marketplace, which took up a good chunk of the park's north end. And the city decided to redo the park with a design by the famed Isamu Noguchi. The design called for a modernistic approach that had no use for the trees and other park features, like the fish pond.

There's a lesson for every city about the tale of Bayfront Park. The Noguchi makeover was mostly disastrous. Other than the amphitheater, which long hosted ethnic festivals, the park seemed like a sterile, flattened landscape with very little shade.

Now, however, the mistake has been remedied, to the credit of the Bayfront Park Management Trust, a nonprofit group that oversees the park.

It took one consultant to sum up what any former park goer could have said was wrong with the park: It was too hot, too inhospitable.

The consultant was Dan Beiderman, known for his revival of New York City's Bryant Park. Besides installing trees and repairing the fish pond and rock garden, the park now has a playground and even offers free yoga classes.

The park's amphitheater was renovated by Live Nation last year, largely at the promoter's expense.

Bayfront Park is becoming a destination for families and young adults again -- especially those who are moving into the many new high-rises in and around downtown.

For all those who fondly remember Sundays in Bayfront, the park once again beckons with all its charms restored.