

Manamania

Written By Erik Bojnansky, Senior Writer

DECEMBER 2015

DEVELOPER MOISHE MANA PLANS A CITY WITHIN A CITY IN WYNWOOD -- FOUR TIMES LARGER THAN THE AVENTURA MALL

Things have been very busy inside the white walls of the Mana Wynwood complex.

Here, within what was once the Wynwood Free Trade Zone building, developer Moishe Mana and a team of staffers, consultants, architects, and architecture students have been

hammering out the formation of what they hope will be a new realm that will foster creativity, international trade, and affordable living in Miami's rapidly gentrifying Wynwood neighborhood.

The aspiration of this new neighborhood is to forge a nexus of international trade within Wynwood, reverse the trend of artists and galleries departing to cheaper locations (see "[Art Goes Uptown](#)") and, at the same time, attract more creative businesses and individuals to the area.

"You build it, they will come," Mana tells the *BT* in a 30-second interview before being whisked away on other matters. "It's so close to downtown. We are here. We build it. They come here. You know?"

Born in Israel, Mana was in the moving business in New York, reportedly dodging bullets from disgruntled Mafia henchmen, when in the late 1990s he started transforming old buildings into storage spaces, studios, art centers, and galleries.



The so-called Beauty Building, on NW 5th Avenue, is scheduled to break ground in January.

Today his moving company, Moishe's Moving, operates in ten U.S. cities, including New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, San Francisco, Philadelphia, and Miami. He's involved in storage (including the storage of artworks and wine), media production, fashion, and real estate.



Mana Wynwood will be a kind of mini metropolis, complete with high-rises and open spaces. Zyscovich Architects

Mana also builds art and production centers, like the 35-acre Mana Contemporary in Jersey City, the 500,000-square-foot Mana Contemporary in Chicago, and Milk Studios in New York's Meatpacking district.

Then there's Miami. In just two years, Mana has invested more than \$83 million, buying 31 properties on or near Flagler Street in downtown Miami. For the past five years, he has been assembling more than 30 acres of territory within or near Miami's Wynwood neighborhood. Mana is now the biggest property owner there, and he's kicked into high-gear his plans to build on 24 of his 30 acres.

On December 3, renderings and models of buildings designed by 28 architecture students from Florida International University will be presented to the public at the Mana Wynwood complex, 318 NW 23rd Street. The designs, which will be unveiled in the midst of other Miami Art Week events held at the complex, are concepts of the kind of residential developments, offices, retail, hotels, art centers, and convention spaces that *could* be built between roughly NW 2nd Avenue and I-95, and from NW 22nd Street to NW 24th Street.

Those concepts include a twin-tower, Asia-Latino free-trade building with a Metrorail station, a convention center that resembles stacked abstract blocks, boxy art studios, and a green pedestrian walkway. The student designs are based on guidelines created by architect and urban planner Bernard Zyscovich. Referred to as the Mana Wynwood Special Area Plan, or Mana Wynwood SAP, it outlines the development of more than 9 million square feet over the course of several years in an area now consisting of a few discount wholesalers, warehouses, vacant parcels,

a soccer field, a gym, the defunct RC Cola bottling plant, and the Mana Wynwood complex.

The City of Miami's Planning & Zoning Board is scheduled to hear the Mana Wynwood SAP on December 16, says Zyscovich. The SAP will then come before the Miami City Commission, sometime in January, for approval, he adds.

"It'll be a city inside of a city," explains Eugene Lemay, a top executive at Mana Contemporary, who has known and worked with Mana for 30 years. "First the city has retail, hotels, apartments -- and the anchor of the city is going to be the arts."

At 9 million square feet, the proposed Mana Wynwood project really is big enough to be called an internal city. To put it in perspective, the high-rise complex known as Brickell City Centre, now under construction, encompasses 5.4 million square feet. The Pentagon is 6.5 million square feet.

"It'll be four times larger than Aventura Mall, which receives 28 million visitors a year," says Jonathan Gerszberg, vice president of investments at the commercial realty firm Marcus & Millichap. "That's how massive this project is."

The buildings of the Mana Wynwood SAP won't be low to the ground, either.

Just two months ago, the City of Miami declared Wynwood to be a "neighborhood revitalization district," where the maximum height is eight stories, or ten stories if the structure is built west of NW 5th Avenue, under certain conditions.

The Mana Wynwood SAP design guidelines, on the other hand, call for buildings between 8 and 24 stories. Under the city's Miami 21 zoning code, a ground floor can be up to 25 feet tall. Each story above that ground floor can be up to 14 feet in height. So an eight-story building can stretch to 125 feet, while a 24-story building can be up to 347 feet tall.

A city board has already given the blessing for one Mana building. On November 25, the Urban Development Review Board approved the 244,000-square-foot, nine-story structure at 2337 NW 5th Ave. Informally called the Beauty Building, or Building One, it is designed by the husband-and-wife architecture team of Gustavo Berenblum and Claudia Busch, and will house the headquarters of beauty conglomerate Luxury Brand Partners, a 50-room hotel, a 300-seat auditorium, classrooms, a LBP

salon, and a restaurant. Construction is slated to begin in January, says Dylan Finger, managing director of Mana Wynwood.

(Another Mana building slated for construction and also designed by Berenblum and Busch is the 49,000-square-foot Puerto Rican Community Center and Chamber of Commerce. Estimated to cost \$7.4 million, it will be built by Mana at NW 2nd Avenue and 21st Street, once the site is decontaminated of petroleum waste, part of a land-swap agreement with Miami-Dade County.)

The board's approval of the Beauty Building didn't come without some apprehension. David Polinsky, developer of the six-floor 250 Wynwood loft at 250 NW 24th St., told the board that the Beauty Building and the looming Mana Wynwood SAP defied the intent of the neighborhood revitalization district, which took stakeholders two years to craft.

"We volunteered to go a maximum of eight stories, to preserve the character of the neighborhood," said Polinsky, a board member of the Wynwood Business Improvement District (BID), according to *Miami Today*.



Mana's Wynwood development would rise above the neighborhood and back up against I-95. Zyscovich Architects

As of deadline, Joe Furst, chairman of the Wynwood BID and manager of Goldman Properties, Wynwood's second-largest landowner, tells the *BT* that

the BID would withhold judgment until after Mana's envisioned project is presented to the board. That was scheduled to take place November 30, and an official position is expected to be determined in early December.

"I can absolutely guarantee you, we'll be a heard party," Furst promises.

Finger insists that Mana wants to get along with other property owners. "We're neighbors and we're friends with a lot of them," he says.

It's probably best to have Mana as a friend, because he can be tenacious.

Described as a “short man brimming with energy” in a June 2013 profile by the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz*, Mana, whom the paper pegged at age 54, and his four siblings were raised in Hatikva, a working-class neighborhood of Tel Aviv. His Iraqi-born Jewish parents made a living as real estate brokers. Fluent in Arabic, Mana served in the Israeli Defense Forces’ Intelligence Corps. Following his military service, he attended law school for a year at Tel Aviv University, dropped out, and with \$800 in his pocket, took a one-way flight to New York City.

Mana has stated that his frustration with Israel’s Palestinian policy was the reason he left for New York in 1983. “My concept was that it was a country with no future, and I was not about to tie my future to it,” he told *Haaretz*. “So I left, and in retrospect I was right. I made my life here [in the U.S.], but that doesn’t mean I don’t care. On the contrary: I love Israel and want to repay it.”

Once in Manhattan, Mana sold clothing items from a sidewalk kiosk before partnering with a contractor who restored dilapidated buildings. When the contractor couldn’t pay him, he loaned Mana his van. That’s when Mana started his delivery business, *A Man With a Van*. After the contractor took back the van, an incident that Mana told *Haaretz* he still resents, he scraped together the funds to buy a new van and started Moishe’s Moving. By 1990 his new company operated a fleet of 40 trucks and employed 100 movers.



Moishe Mana: “It’s so close to downtown. We are here. We build it. They come here. You know?” Courtesy of netteandme.blogspot.com

But his competitive rates incurred the wrath of the Mafia, which controlled the unions and the moving sector in New York back then, says Mana.

“First came the threats and then the shots,” he told *Haaretz*. “Motorcyclists would go by our offices on the Upper East Side and shoot at

the upper part of the window, where the salespeople were. Or they would drive by a Moishe's truck and shoot out the windshield."

Mana even claimed to receive a phone call from mobster John Gotti. "I told him to come and shoot me now," he recounted in a July 2014 *New York Times* article.

It's a period that Eugene Lemay prefers not to talk about. Born in Michigan to Lebanese parents who converted to Judaism, Lemay made the aliyah to Israel when he was 11. He met Mana in New York and worked for his moving company. "We've been together since then," he says.

By the late 1990s, Mana was transitioning into other things, like storage and production, eventually owning up to 17 companies. In 1998 he started the film studio Milk Studios in New York. By 2011, at Mana's insistence, Lemay began turning an old tobacco factory into a storage facility for fine art. One thing led to another, and eventually Mana Contemporary Jersey City was born.

"It's the largest art center in the world," Lemay proclaims. "Two million square feet. Seven buildings. It's a *big* complex."

It's a facility that serves as a base of operations for 200 artists, with eight exhibition spaces, dance studios, fabrication facilities, and other amenities. "It's a community of artists, collectors, museum people, gallery people, and we all share resources," Lemay explains. "We're kind of an incubator for artists."

Daniel Pelosi, a broker associate at Weichert Realtors in Jersey City, says Mana Contemporary had a tremendous effect on Journal Square, an area of Jersey City that, like Wynwood, was once an industrial hub. "It's really revitalized and brought positive growth to a once underutilized and somewhat neglected area," Pelosi says.

Lemay says Mana hopes to do the same thing with a Mana Contemporary art center in Wynwood, but with a Miami/South Florida accent.

Mana Wynwood in fact would be a very different project from what Mana has done so far, says Dylan Finger, who developed hotels, residences, and storage facilities in South Florida prior to joining Mana a year ago. Mana's previous projects, including Mana Contemporary, were "adaptive reuse," Finger explains.

In the case of Wynwood, it would be all new construction. The former RC Cola bottling plant, the old Wynwood Free Trade Zone building, and warehouses would all be ripped down and replaced with new structures.

Zyscovich's plan gives a glimpse of how the new community would spring into existence.

West of NW 5th Avenue, covering approximately eight acres, is the area dedicated to commerce and trade, where buildings up to 24 stories can be built. It's here, on the west side, that Zyscovich envisions a place where South American business people can connect with their Asian counterparts.

How would Mana make that happen? "That's still in programming mode," Finger admits. "We don't have a lot of details on that. It's something that has to be well thought out, which we're doing."

The rest of the SAP, the "east side," would be dedicated to arts and culture.

Coursing through both sections would be more than three acres of open space. That parkland, Zyscovich tells the *BT*, would be created by tearing down warehouses. It would also be the centerpiece of a place designed to marry commerce and culture.

"Our idea is that we want to generate a kind of international and domestic zone where we have a lot of trade and jobs that comes from new tech and the shared economy that is surrounding a large central plaza," Zyscovich says.

Each zone would have its very own population. The Wynwood SAP allows for the construction of 2500 apartments and 600 hotel rooms.

Unlike most projects being developed east of I-95 in Miami-Dade County, high-income individuals won't be the target demographic for residential projects built in either Wynwood or Flagler, says Finger. Mana wants to attract young creative types overflowing with bright ideas.

"They can't afford to live there right now," Finger adds. "So we're trying to solve the problem of bringing young people in, and our target is \$1000 a month."

With higher land and construction costs, how can Mana build an apartment building with affordable rents? That's another problem they're trying to solve, Finger says. "On the constructability side, we're figuring out the cost per square foot and how we can make it affordable," he explains, "so that a kid can pay \$1000 a month for a 400- or 300-square-foot apartment."

In an effort to generate fresh ideas, Finger is reaching out to area colleges. In January a design studio with students from UM is slated to

convene in the Mana Wynwood complex to come up with ways to build affordable “micro” apartments.

Since August, the 28 FIU architecture students, led by architecture professors Claudia Busch (who designed the Beauty Building) and Alfredo Andia, have been working on a wide variety of projects within the proposed SAP, many of which will be in display this month.

As far as Andia is concerned, the future Mana Wynwood community is all about nurturing the “creative class” of artists, techies, and entrepreneurs who currently frequent Wynwood. Key to that effort are buildings with lots of residences in them, what Andia calls “density.” Otherwise, the new neighborhood will wither. “You need to have a certain amount of density, and a certain amount of excitement,” he says, “and you can’t create excitement without density.”

Busch says her students have come up with some creative notions to channel that density. “They’re always thinking different,” she says admiringly. “You can think out of the box when you work with students. It allows you to investigate possibilities that you can’t do in the professional environment.”

While Busch’s plans for the Beauty Building are already at Miami City Hall, the same good fortune doesn’t necessarily await plans crafted by the FIU students. “We create visions. We don’t define what it will really be. They will define it,” she says of Moishe Mana and his team.

Feedback: letters@biscaynetimes.com