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**Spatial Politics in Metropolitan Miami, 1980-1992:  
Cuban American Crisis, Community Development, and  
Empowerment**

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Institute for the  
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Societal Issues

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In this paper I examine the urban history of Cuban American empowerment in metropolitan Miami from 1980 to 1992 through the concept of “spatial politics” – the use of space by urban communities to claim government control. By combining archival research, GIS mappings, visual documentation, and interviews with retired metropolitan planners and community development specialists, I consider how Cuban Americans engaged in performative, discursive, electoral, planning-oriented, and allied activities over three stages – crisis, community development, and empowerment – which resulted in the transformation of Miami’s political status quo. Metropolitan planners contributed to this spatial politics by producing demographic data that facilitated the development of a Cuban American community development system, which in turn engaged public policy, economic development and housing. These provisions led to the concentration of ethnic bloc voting and the election of Cuban American leadership at the municipal and county level. This untold urban history, situated in the aftermath of the Mariel Boatlift, demonstrates that urban historians need to analyze how urban space is contested, produced and managed by immigrants in order to fully understand how immigrant incorporation and empowerment operates in American cities. Spatial politics is a conceptual tool to aid in this understanding.

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We were given a Coca Cola and a red apple, I recall having them in my hands and looking at them asking my mom what is this? She looked at me and said we are free... we are free.

Ivonne Cuesta Reflections of a Marielita<sup>1</sup>

Will the last American leaving Miami, please bring the Flag?

South Florida Bumper Sticker

A place belongs forever to whoever claims it hardest, remembers it most obsessively, wrenches it from itself, shapes it, renders it, loves it so radically that he remakes it in his own image.

Joan Didion<sup>2</sup>

### ***The Municipios de Cuba en El Extranjero in El City of Miami Archives***

From early 2000 to the summer of 2001, I worked on a research project focused on developing an architectural guide for metropolitan Miami.<sup>3</sup> My task consisted of driving to all of Miami's then 34 municipalities and visiting each of their building departments to collect plans, building permits, and certificates of occupancy. These data were used to certify a list of structures to be included in the guide. Their selection had been carefully debated and decided upon by some of Miami's most recognized architects, historians and community development specialists to develop a collection of exemplary buildings representative of the city's urban heritage.

One of my main sites of data collection was the City of Miami Building Department. For months, I visited the fourth floor of "El City of Miami," as the building is colloquially known by Miami's Spanish speaking residents who regularly visit its premises for permits, queries and other business. There, I spent hours in the microfilm office with Lidia and Francisco, two Cuban

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<sup>1</sup> From: <http://www.authorstream.com/Presentation/aSGuest46840-405254-katie-mariel-boatlift-bo-Entertainment-ppt-powerpoint/>

<sup>2</sup> This quote is from Didion's book *The White Album Essays* (1979).

<sup>3</sup> Miami currently has two architectural guides which were published in 2010: Nepomechie's *Building Paradise: An Architectural Guide to the Magic City* (Nepomechie 2010), and Shulman's *Miami Architecture: A Guide featuring Downtown, the Beaches, and Coconut Grove* (Shulman 2010). I conducted my research for the guide by Shulman.



American archivists assigned to assist patrons.<sup>4</sup> Over dozens of visits we became friendly and I found out about their personal histories. Both were Marielitos, and had experienced a momentous period in Miami's history during the Mariel Boatlift of 1980. In the twenty years since, they had settled, bought homes, and become proud American citizens.

During my visits, I also witnessed Lidia and Francisco carrying out a parallel "archiving" activity. Between patron searches, emergency requests from planning and building officials, rush requests from developers, and my own never ending idiosyncratic search for plans, they organized the weekly activities of the *Municipios de Cuba en El Extranjero*, a civic organization composed of Cuban expatriates.<sup>5</sup> Circumnavigating their daily routines and interruptions, they carefully compiled lists of members and the locations of meetings. They arranged schedules, made and answered phone calls, always logging the information in a notebook that never left the microfilm office of El City of Miami. Unhindered by the workload brought by the pace of frenetic urban development – permits, reviews, submissions and complaints – Lidia and Francisco discreetly carried out their alternative archive. They were an essential node in a vast social network of Cuban Exiliados, who lived throughout Miami, practiced their Cuban heritage, and combined nostalgia with an undeterred political fervor.<sup>6</sup> Lidia and Francisco were key actors in the organization of public demonstrations for the US embargo against Cuba and get-out-the-vote campaigns for Cuban American candidates during hotly contested municipal and county elections.

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<sup>4</sup> Lidia and Francisco are pseudonyms.

<sup>5</sup> "Municipios de Cuba en el Extranjero," meaning "Foreign Cuban Municipalities" is a grassroots organization bringing together a diverse set of Cuban American opposition groups in Miami. Their activities range from public demonstrations in Miami's public space to pageants and fairs celebrating Cuban heritage and history. Their contact information is listed in the section of "Neighborhood Resources" for the Flagami section in the city of Miami:

<http://www.miamigov.com/nets/pages/Flagami/Your%20community.asp>. For more information see:

<http://www.municipiosdecuba.com/>.

<sup>6</sup> "El Exilio" refers to the Cuban Exile Community. This term particularly refers to the exodus of political refugees after Fidel Castro's Revolution in 1959. The largest concentration of Cuban exiles can be found in Metropolitan Miami. For an authoritative account on the Cuban Exodus and the Cuban Exiled Community see Grenier and Stepick 1992.

Lidia and Francisco allowed me to see a facet of Miami's urbanism that did not exist on a designated list of architectural exemplars produced by experts or found in the El City of Miami archives. The "municipalities" they planned were not on the map of Dade County; they were comprised of social spaces found in the residencies, businesses, cafés and sidewalks dispersed along Miami's ethnic enclave of Little Havana and the Calle Ocho Corridor. The social network they recorded reached into the suburbs of Dade County. Most importantly, their story and the political meaning of the alternate archive could not be understood by modes of architectural selection, research and detection. The parallel planning of the Municipios de Cuba was a form of political agency associated with the use of urban space, which is absent in the way most scholars understand Miami and its urban history.

### **Cuban American Spatial Politics in Metropolitan Miami**

My goal in this paper is to elucidate an unchartered urban history based on the Cuban immigrant experience of people like Lidia and Francisco during a crucial period of Miami's history – from 1980 to 1992 – when the Cuban American community claimed political power in the face of crisis, adversity and political turmoil. The record of Miami's urban history is a story detached from both the people who inhabit its metropolitan spaces and the practices of residents who actively transform the city's politics and social life. However, I contend that the incorporation of Miami's Cuban American community needs to be understood in relation to the production, management and political contestation of urban space. Scholars need to recognize the role played by immigrants engaged in spatial politics in its record of urban history.

I define spatial politics as the practice urban communities engage in to gain control of local government by using urban space. Spatial politics takes place at multiple scales: the street,

neighborhood, municipal, and metropolitan level, and is comprised of five interlinked practices – performative, planning-oriented, discursive, electoral, and allied – that reconfigure the political status quo. *Performative* practices occur in public spaces and transform individual action into collective claims. *Planning-oriented* practices use urban planning methods and knowledge to facilitate a political agenda. *Discursive* practices are used to develop frames that envision and promote an alternative political order. *Electoral* practices mobilize voters according to residential concentration. *Allied* practices are used to form political alliances to reconfigure urban territory.

In the first part of this paper I summarize my data collection methods and review the urban history and urban studies literature on Miami to situate my contribution. In the second part, I delineate the history of spatial politics involving Cuban Americans in Miami. There are three stages to this history: *crisis*, *community development* and empowerment. In the first stage, crisis, I analyze how the refugee influx of the Mariel Boatlift led to the humanitarian actions of Cuban American residents in retention camps located in Miami's most urban spaces. By confronting the presence of Marielitos, Cuban Americans and Cuban refugees forged a common bond based on ethnic solidarity and communal stigmatization. In the second stage, community development, I consider the establishment of a Cuban American community development system in Miami, which deployed demographic data produced by metropolitan planners to facilitate economic, educational and housing provisions. These provisions were concentrated in the ethnic enclave of little Havana and enabled the mobilization of voting blocs for Cuban American political candidates. In the last stage, empowerment, I consider how a "successful immigration" discourse forged around the economic and cultural contributions of Cuban Americans was used to energize political action in Miami's 1985 municipal elections and the *Meek v. Metropolitan Dade County* lawsuit. The lawsuit was set in motion by an ethnic coalition of Hispanics and African American

plaintiffs who sought the reconfiguration of Miami's county commission districts into new territories of control. Its outcome provided the political context needed to attain a majority of minority elected officials in 1992.

During a 12-year period of intense social change – 1980 to 1992 – Miami's Cuban American community transformed itself from an ethnic minority into a grassroots social movement that elected Cuban American municipal and county leaders and reconfigured Miami's political status quo. Throughout this period, urban planners considered their work neutral, devoid of political consequences and legitimized by the pursuit of the “public good.” Yet their activities – the collection, recording and interpretation of demographic data – were used to justify the social service needs of Cuban Americans, which in turn fueled a shift in Cuban American political representation. The account of this un-recorded history demonstrates that the Mariel Boatlift provided the catalyst for the empowerment of Cuban Americans in Miami through the exercise of spatial politics.

## **Methods**

The analysis of spatial politics requires a combination of methods combining qualitative interviews, archival research, GIS mapping, and visual representation. A key characteristic in writing this history is the tension between the ethnographic memory of Lidia and Francisco, and the professional narrative that emerged from my interviews with Dade County metropolitan planners who were active during the time of the Mariel Boatlift, and whose labor was subsequently impacted by the demographic, social and political changes that took place during the decade of the 1980's.

From Summer 2008 to Spring 2011, I interviewed six metropolitan planners, two of whom were retired, and one community development specialist who heads a municipal community development corporation in Miami. Four of the eleven interviewees were active during the time of the Mariel Boatlift and two of the interviewees began working for the Dade County Department of Planning and Zoning (DP&Z) in the early 1990's. I conducted a total of 11 interviews ranging from 45 minutes to two hours. The interviews took place at the DP&Z, the Opa-Locka Community Development Corporation, and in the residences of retired planners, in cafés, in downtown Miami, and over the phone.<sup>7</sup>

I supplemented these interviews with supporting documents based on primary sources from the DP&Z and Dade County government archives. Additional information regarding the specific events, locations and actions of individuals during the Mariel Crisis came from journalistic reports published in the Miami Herald, refugee commission reports, and academic articles. The information pertaining to Cuban American community development is derived from the Miami Herald as well as primary sources, such as pamphlets, reports, and conference summaries from the Cuban National Council and its affiliated nonprofits during the 1980's and 1990's. Demographic data from the DP&Z was used to trace population increases from 1960 to 2010 and to mark the relationship between Hispanic populations in Dade County from 1980 through 1990 and the location of refugee camps and housing provisions. The location of refugee encampments was derived from the visual analysis of historical photographs found at the University of Miami Visual Archives and the South Florida Historical Museum. The maps demonstrating CODECO properties and Hispanic concentration in 1990 was produced by combining GIS data from the DP&Z and an original diagram of property addresses found in newspaper articles. The synthesis of official planning and government documents, newspaper

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<sup>7</sup> For more information on the Dade County Department of Planning and Zoning see: <http://www.miamidade.gov/planzone/>.

reports, secondary sources, GIS data, and photographs provides the clues to understand Cuban American spatial politics.

### **Literature Review: A-spatial Miami**

The writing of Miami's urban history represents a fairly recent endeavor. Starting in the early 1980's, urban history became an important field for both planners and architects due to the need for historic preservation of the built environment (Dade County 1982). Miami's emergent importance as an international banking city in the late 70's brought a construction boom to the city and, consequently, the demolition of historic structures. During the same time, the national success of the Miami Beach historic preservation movement made the preservation of the built environment a central topic in architecture, urban development and planning. With the exception of urban historian Raymond Mohl (2003) and Marvin Dunn (1997), whose extensive works document the history of African Americans in Miami, these histories of Miami focus on buildings and infrastructure, comprising an architectural critique in the form of monographs (Culot and Lejeune 1992, Lejeune and Shulman 2001, Shulman 2010, Stuart and Stack 2008). They do not address the intersection of race, ethnicity and urban space, nor the spatial consequences of Cuban immigration, incorporation and empowerment in Miami.

During the early 1990's, a decade after the Mariel Boatlift, a small academic canon focusing on the study of Cuban American incorporation emerged. In books like *City on the Edge* (Portes and Stepick 1993) and *Miami Now* (Grenier and Stepick 1992) the Cuban "success story" of cultural adaptation and political and economic empowerment was explored and the notion of "reverse-acculturation" was developed. Miami is presented as a "laboratory of bi-cultural, bilingual living"; a place where native-born residents assimilate to newly arrived immigrants by

adopting Hispanic customs and the Spanish language. In these books, Miami's Cubans challenge normative theories of cultural assimilation with an immigrant business elite and alternate social structures, hierarchies, civic institutions and cultural life that erode the Anglo mainstream. In Miami, parallel social systems – Hispanic and Anglo – co-exist in the same urban space (Portes and Stepick 1993). Reverse acculturation is further considered at a micro-political scale in Stepick et al.'s (2003) *This Land is Our Land: Immigrants and Power in Miami*. This study considers everyday inter-personal encounters at the work place, service industry and schools, where the process of trans-culturation and segmented assimilation carried out by immigrants is permeated with cultural tension, negotiation and lack of closure. While these books aim to illustrate how Cuban immigrants and the Cuban American community obtained political power after the Mariel Boatlift, they do not explain how “reverse acculturation,” “bi-culturalism” or “trans-culturation” were practiced in the urban spaces of Miami to gain political control. Instead, Miami remains a-spatial as political mobilizations, conflicts over infrastructure, and competition for community development assets during a crucial period in the city's history remain unexamined.

The study of Miami's race and ethnic relations offers an example of scholarship in which urban space has started to matter. In Sheila Croucher's (1997) *Imagining Miami: Ethnic Politics in a Postmodern World* competing narratives of power along ethnic lines – Whites, Hispanics and Blacks – are examined to discern the ethnic discourses that shape public perceptions among Miami's diverse urban communities. Croucher offers an in-depth discourse analysis of the frames, statements and perceptions that form individual opinions and provoke collective action. Nevertheless, Miami's ethnic communities are treated as territories bound by discursive statements rather than actual groups that occupy the city or compete for its resources. Croucher's

analysis challenges limited conceptions of race and ethnic affiliation, but her analysis originates from statements drawn from in-depth interviews and claims that appear in the periodical and popular literature on Miami without a true consideration of how urban space is produced and contested (Croucher 1997: 201). A similar oversight can be found in Jan Nijman's (2007) *Local Exiles and Cosmopolitans: A Theoretical Argument about Race in Miami*. Nijman, an urban geographer, abandons the classic ethnic triad of "White, Hispanic and Black" and proposed instead the triad of "Locals, Exiles and Cosmopolitans." While the element of trans-national mobility is injected into Nijman's conceptualization of Miami's ethnic mix, Nijman disregards the mechanisms that enable or foreclose the capacity to practice that mobility – community development, urban planning, and real estate markets. Nijman's scholarship addresses Miami's urban space through the forces of economic capital that make Miami a node in the network of global cities (Nijman 1997) in order to carve out a model of paradigmatic urbanism (Nijman 2000). While his writings describe Miami as a site where trans-national influences and increased mobility have produced a new type of urban identity based on transience, his verdict on Miami's civic sphere is dire. For Nijman, transience results in an under-valued civil society where social capital is fragmented and political culture disregards the social contract (Nijman 2011). Reacting to this position, my historical analysis demonstrates that the experience of immigration actually provides the grounds for political claims-making through the process of spatial politics.

A turn towards a deeper understanding about how immigrants shape Miami's urbanism is brought forth in George Yudice's *The Expediency of Culture* (2003) and *Images of Latino-polis* (2005). Yudice, a scholar of cultural industries, focuses on cultural production and urban identity. He addresses the relationship between race and urban development by borrowing a concept from Latin America racial history: "racial democracy." He continues by unpacking Miami's "global



city” claim (Sassen and Portes 1993) to consider how ethnic conflicts play out through urban development mechanisms. For Yudice, the city’s cultural industries (print, media, music and film) render a collective identity in the city’s public spaces and gentrified districts. The consumption of cultural commodities – music, Hispanic language entertainment and television – make Miami a *Latinopolis*: a simulacrum of racial democracy, whereby the Creole becomes the dominant figure, albeit one whose agency is measured by degrees of white miscegenation, excluding populations of African descent (both African and Haitian-Americans). Yudice then addresses how collective identity based on the notion of a racial democracy deploys visions of urban revitalization that gentrify African American neighborhoods. While he does not delve deeply into the urban development processes that produce urban spaces – planning, real estate speculation and community development – he touches upon the branding mechanisms that drive urban revitalization. Culture becomes a factor in the displacement, increased poverty and lack of adequate infrastructure for Miami’s residents (Yudice 2003, 2005).

While the analysis of Cuban American incorporation, the discourses of race and ethnicity, the forces of transience and mobility, and the investigation of cultural production have predominated in urban analyses of Miami, the link between demographic change, urban planning, community development and Cuban American empowerment has remained absent. In the following section, I uncover these links through a history of Cuban American spatial politics based on three phases: crisis, community development and empowerment.

## **Crisis: The Mariel Boatlift**

1980 marked a pivotal moment in Miami's urban history, when the city was transformed from a playground tourist destination and home to an entrepreneurial Cuban American community to a "Paradise Lost" (Kelly 1981). Over the span of a single year, Miamians experienced a violent drug trafficking crime wave, the arrival of 125,000 Cuban and 40,000 Haitian refugees, and subsequent urban riots resulting from the acquittal of white police officers in the shooting death of Arthur McDuffie.<sup>8 9</sup>

The humanitarian crisis of the Mariel Boatlift<sup>10</sup>, in particular, established the public perception of an urban crisis resulting from the overwhelming arrival of Cuban refugees. Characteristically different from the urban riots sparked by local police brutality, and drug violence due to drug-trafficking, the boatlift began as an international crisis that brought an influx of political refugees requiring safety, shelter and support. This factor provided the backdrop for the first component of Cuban American spatial politics: individual actions of Cuban American residents in behalf of Cuban refugees. Such performances of individual humanitarian action took place across Miami's urban spaces and forged collective claims based on ethnic affiliation, solidarity, and communal stigmatization. At the same time, the growing presence of refugees on the streets of Miami surprised local leaders and placed great pressure on the allocation of county resources and the distribution of public services. The influx of refugees also

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<sup>8</sup> According to Alejandro Portes and Alex Stepick (1993) the Haitian exodus to Miami contributed to the perception that Miami had become a "Third World" city. They argue that Haitians had a very different experience arriving in Miami because they didn't have an established ethnic community to sponsor them. Since their continued arrival from the late 1970's, the Haitian American community has grown and become politically strong. In 2001, Josef Celestin became the first Haitian American mayor of a sizable city in the US, the municipality of North Miami (Canedy 2001).

<sup>9</sup> The McDuffie beating led to Miami's most "violent racial spasm in the history of the city" (Dunn 1997: 267). For more of the McDuffie riots and the history of African Americans in Miami see Dunn (1997).

<sup>10</sup> Following a break-in and a massive take over of the Peruvian embassy in March of 1980, Fidel Castro ordered the opening of El Mariel, a port near Havana, to allow Cuban citizens to leave by using the port as a staging ground. Over a period of 4 months, vessels from south Florida and Cuba transported thousands of people across the Florida straits into the US mainland. Miami's local Cuban American leadership faced the stark choice of standing next to their fellow compatriots or remaining inactive (Portes and Stepick 1993).

made irrelevant the demographic statistics metropolitan planners had gathered for the 1980 Census.

While the number of Cuban refugees caught the city's political leaders and residents by surprise, their influx was not without precedent. Since the onset of the 1959 Cuban Revolution, a continued refugee flow had persisted unabated for two decades.<sup>11</sup> Traditionally, the treatment of Cuban immigrants had been characterized by a federal policy providing special entry visas based on their political status as citizens fleeing a communist nation. In Dade County, these measures had been complemented by policy measures aimed at integrating the new arrivals into the American mainstream. During the 1960's some of these measures were trailblazing. Once such case, the 1963 bilingual education program at Coral Gables Elementary School, was the first program of its kind to be instituted in an American public school system. In the 1970's, language provisions continued to be institutionalized at the county level with the 1973 Dade County Bilingual Ordinance, recognizing Spanish and English as official languages of Dade County (Logan 1967, Portes and Schaufli 1994). These types of provisions provided an economic benefit to Cubans and other Hispanics by facilitating job acquisition, training and retention, and by establishing an atmosphere of multicultural awareness in the city. Beyond the provision of language, welfare support and a fast-track path to American citizenship were also given to Cuban refugees.

The Mariel crisis, however, represented an unprecedented break from the established model of immigration. When it began, the boatlift was dominated by scenes of Cuban American residents launching and chartering boats from Miami and Key West to pick up relatives and fleeing Cubans at the port of Mariel. This portrait of cross-border solidarity based on common

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<sup>11</sup> During the decades of the 1960's and 70's this process had been exemplified by the Pedro Pan airlifts, as well as the continued re-settlement of refugees in Miami's growing Cuban American ethnic enclaves and other hosting urban destinations throughout the US. For more information see Shell-Weiss (2009).

ethnic ties changed to scenes of refugees arriving to South Florida en masse. In the second phase of the crisis, the lack of coordination among municipal and county leaders grew without a solution for over four months, as the Carter Administration contradicted itself over how to handle the crisis and Fidel Castro took advantage of the confusion to challenge the US government and score a domestic political victory. From May to September 1980, a geopolitical conflict between the US and Cuba played out on Miami's streets as Miami's leaders, the Cuban American community and the US government became involved in the largest humanitarian immigrant crisis to hit a major US metropolitan area.

*Marielitos*, as the Cuban refugees came to be known, placed massive burdens on the city's social services, public infrastructure, municipal budgets and security.<sup>12</sup> As their numbers grew over the span of the six-month crisis, social differences between the members of Miami's Cuban American community and the newly arrived refugees became apparent. Cuban Americans had settled in Miami for twenty years, built businesses and established the Cuban American "moral community" (Portes and Stepick 1993).<sup>13</sup> *Marielitos* presented a starkly different portrait from the elite and middle class Cuban residents who had migrated to Miami since the Cuban revolution in 1959. In contrast to an exemplary immigrant community in Miami representative of successful assimilation, *Marielitos* were impoverished Cuban citizens who did not have higher education degrees, did not come from urban centers and also represented a racial mix (Skop 2001).<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> From April 1980 to October 1980 the population of Dade County increased 15% (Shell-Weiss 2009).

<sup>13</sup> Alejandro Portes and Alex Stepick describe Miami's "moral community" in relation to the right-wing ideology that has come to dominate anti-Castro sentiments in the minds and actions of Miami's Cuban exiles. According to him: "Little Havana is no mere immigrant neighborhood, not even a lively business hub, but a moral community with its own distinct outlook of the World. To be a Miami Cuban, it does not suffice to have escaped from the island; one must also espouse points of view repeated ceaselessly by editorialists in Miami's Spanish radio and press – the same voices that take care of denouncing any member of the community who strays too far from the fold" (Portes and Stepick 1993: 139).

<sup>14</sup> For a complete analysis of the racial and class characteristics of *Marielitos* see Skop (2001).

When the Mariel Boatlift occurred, Cuban Americans had also started to enjoy political gains. The city of Miami had elected the first Puerto Rican mayor with the support of Cuban Americans and the first city commissioner of Cuban descent.<sup>15</sup> While the County commission still did not include any Hispanics, Cuban Americans were present in middle management positions within public administration bureaucracies and in private practice across different manufacturing and services sectors. It would be from these mid-level positions of power that Cuban Americans mobilized, with the aid of local immigrant networks, to improvise a community response that turned their individual actions into collective claims.

In an interview published by the *El Nuevo Herald* with then Assistant City Manager Cesar Odio, Odio recalls how at the onset of the boatlift, INS federal officials contacted him seeking assistance in dealing with the influx of refugees. A Cuban immigrant who arrived to Miami in the 1960's himself, Odio circumnavigated the official protocols of city administration to set up several informal arrival centers in the heart of Miami's Little Havana. These sites became locations where Cuban American family members could meet or inquire about refugees who could potentially be family members or friends. While Odio's strategy took care of the initial waves of refugees, the number of arrivals rapidly overwhelmed the community centers within weeks, driving Odio and other city staff to improvise additional locations in the midst of municipal, county, and federal paralysis. During this period, the immediate reaction from Odio and individuals of Cuban descent enabled the first response to the crisis.

The actions of Odio and other Cuban American staff in County government set the groundwork for the City of Miami and Dade County to form a countywide crisis committee in charge of coordinating encampment efforts (Chardy 2010). As locations in Little Havana proved unable to manage the influx of refugees, the committee set up processing sites along Calle Ocho,

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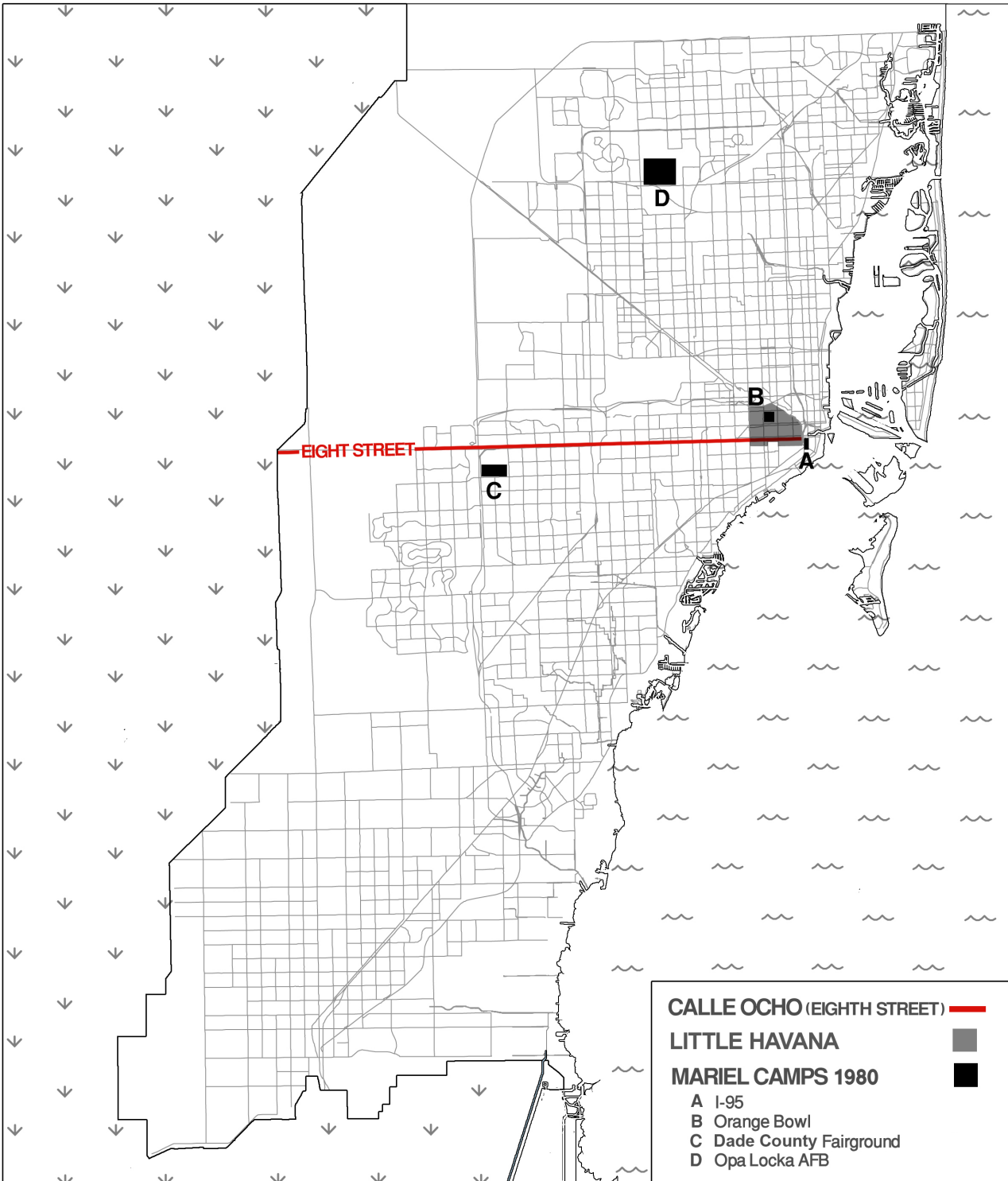
<sup>15</sup> Maurice Ferre became Miami's first elected hispanic Mayor in 1973. Ferre was the first Puerto Rican Mayor in the US.

Miami's historic east west corridor (Figure 1). Marielitos started their new lives at the Key West Naval Air Station (Figure 2), where their names were registered and essential provisions such as immediate food and shelter were administered. Afterwards, they were placed in buses and driven up I-95 to be distributed across metropolitan Dade County. During the height of the crisis tent cities were set up in some of Miami's most recognizable spaces: underneath the I-95 expressway (Figure 3), the Orange Bowl (Figure 4), Tamiami Park (Figure 5), and the Opa-Locka Air Force Base. These sites continued to function as release centers, but started to include the volunteer participation of up to 1,500 Cuban Americans who volunteered as translators, INS fingerprint assistants, record keepers and interviewers.<sup>16</sup> At one point, the processing center at Tamiami Park processed over 1,500 refugees in 18 days. Housed in these locations, Marielitos were either released to family members or transferred to encampments in other states.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> According to Dade County official documents, "The Orange Bowl was opened by the City of Miami in the second week of June. Those staying in the Orange Bowl were certified for food stamp assistance by the HRS food stamp division. But because the stadium was the home of the Miami Dolphins, the City of Miami decided to establish the temporary facility below I-95. Up to 800 Cubans were housed in the I-95 tent city at one time, and more than 4,000 lived there during the two months it was open. The tent city underneath I-95 remained open until September 30, 1980 (Unzueta 1981).

<sup>17</sup> Additional camps were opened in Eglin Air Force Base in Northwest Florida, at Indian Town Gap in Pennsylvania, at Fort McCoy in Wisconsin, and at Fort Chaffe in Arkansas (Unzueta 1981).



**Figure 1** Mariel Refugee Encampments in Metropolitan Miami. The Area in gray represents the ethnic enclave of Little Havana. (Source: Author)

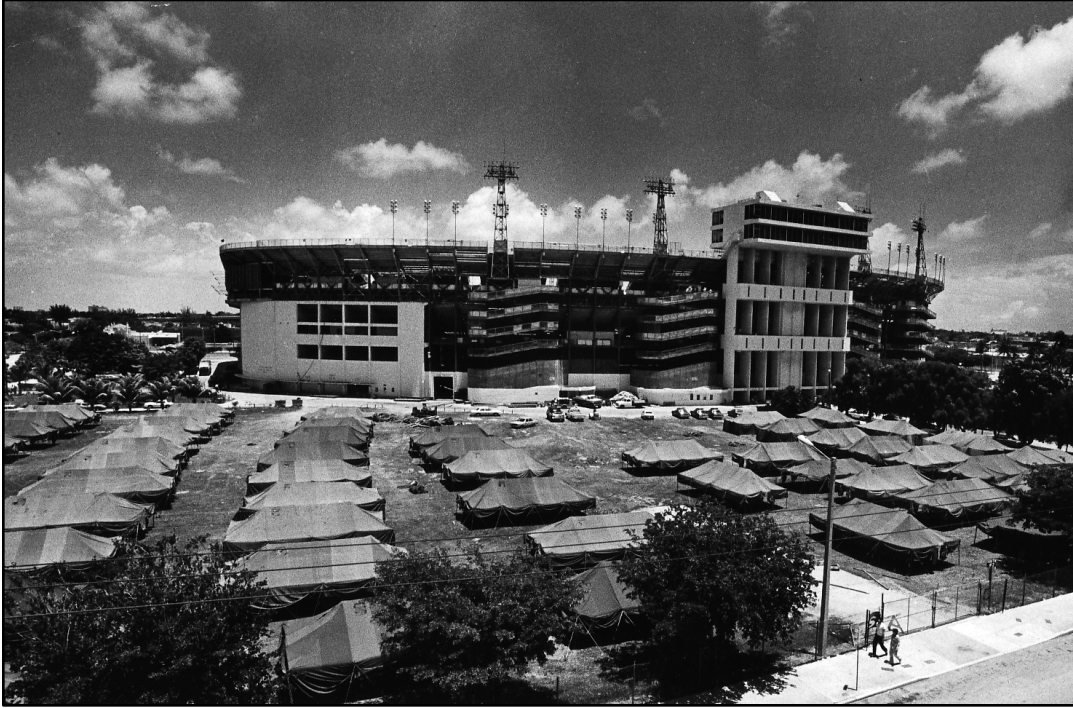


**Figure 2** INS Processing center in Key West (Source: South Florida Historical Museum).



**Figure 3** Tent city underneath I-95 (Source: South Florida Historical Museum).





**Figure 4** Tent City in Miami's Orange Bowl (Source: South Florida Historical Museum)



**Figure 5** Cuban Americans waiting for refugees outside the Dade County Fairgrounds. (Source: University of Miami Digital Archives).

## **Metropolitan Planning and the Crisis of Demographic Data**

The experience of metropolitan planners during the Mariel Boatlift represents an untold story of Miami's urban history. While Cuban Americans improvised a response to the crisis, the planning practitioners proved to be equally affected. In my interviews with metropolitan planners active during this period, the sudden population increase meant that the data gathered in the 1980 census – collected until April 1980, a month before the crisis – became obsolete. Peter O'Donnell<sup>18</sup>, Chief of the Research Planning Division DP&Z at the time of the boatlift, explains:

Two weeks after census data of 1980 came out, it all became theoretical because suddenly we had 125,000 Cubans in the city. The first attempt to accurately count minority populations was completely thrown into disarray. Nobody had any hard numbers; we had to obtain them from federal documents. We needed raw data to report on their numbers... where they were in different communities in the city. We needed these figures for welfare agencies and for the demographic unit's annual estimates. We needed to know their backgrounds, occasions and age, flesh out what was happening.

Metropolitan planners were responsible for providing accurate population data to community development corporations as well as municipal planning departments seeking community development funding. Population estimates were used to validate poverty rates, employment rates, housing shortages, as well as the future allocation of Community Development Block Grants, HUD Grants and other funding sources. The distribution of these funds was carried out through a geographic calculus based on the boundaries and demographic composition of census precinct data across Dade County. An unanticipated influx of Cubans dramatically increased the number of Hispanics in the metropolitan region, preventing a complete picture needed to inform the allocation of public funding.

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<sup>18</sup> Peter O'Donnell is a pseudonym for an informant who asked for anonymity. I carried out 4 four interviews with him between 2009 and 2011. Each interview, ranging from one to two hours in different periods from 2009 to 2011.

Planners were aware that *Marielitos* were having a strong impact on the city's provisions of basic services. Early counts and interviews at the processing sites suggested that more than 50% of all Cuban resettlements were placed in families in the Miami Area, instead of resettlement camps (Research Division MDC 1983). During the first weeks of the boatlift, 62,235 Cuban refugees were released directly to their relatives living in Miami (Skop 2001). A year after the crisis, Miami's social security, driver's license and food stamp offices were overwhelmed by people requesting services (Unzueta 1981).

To confront the inadequacy of demographic data, metropolitan planners collaborated with the National Census Bureau. An executive order issued by President Carter in December 1980 mandated the collaboration between the National Census Bureau and "affected states, counties, or local units of general purpose government" which had been subject to the immigration flows of Cuban and Haitian refugees.<sup>19</sup> Under this measure, planners started to obtain fresh data in early 1981 by tracking the habitat trajectories, living patterns and transitory flows of *Marielitos*. These data came from different sources. Initially data was derived from the records of the Cuban/Haitian Task Force, with additional data sets collected from the Immigration and Naturalization Service.<sup>20</sup> These data were combined with local food stamp records in different precincts across the county and intra-county school enrollment data to determine the movement and settlement patterns of refugees.<sup>21</sup> The picture that emerged provided compelling evidence about the social service repercussions of the *Mariel* crisis.

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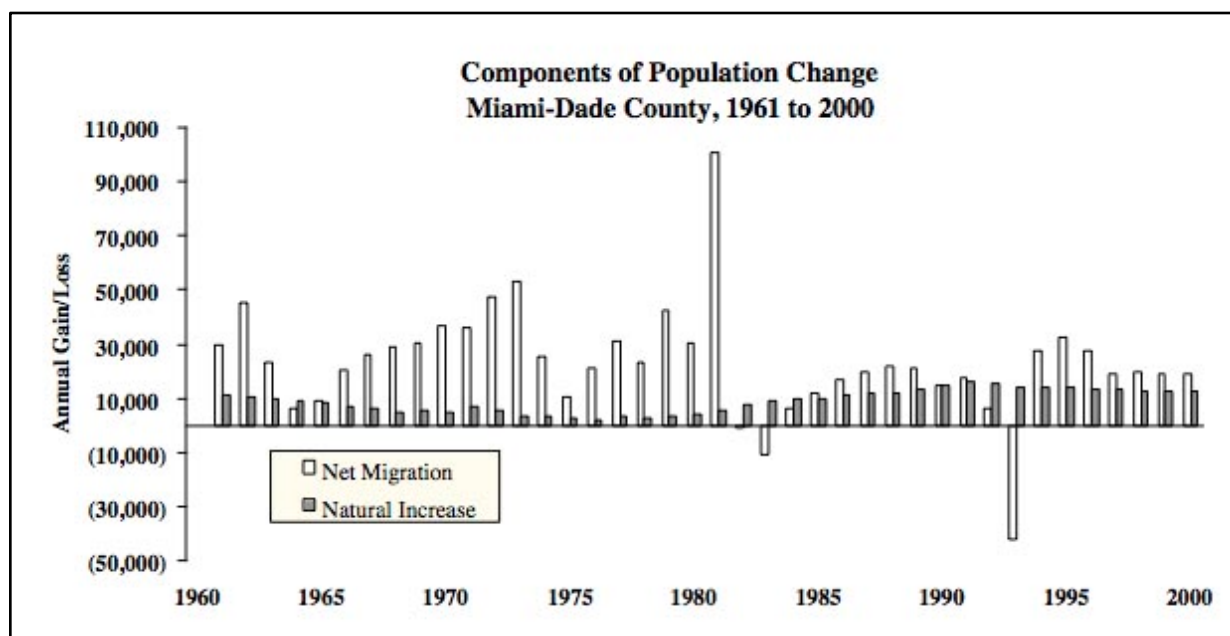
<sup>19</sup> White House Executive Order Census Statistics on Legal Immigrants, December 16, 1980.

<sup>20</sup> The Cuban/Haitian Task Force (CHTF) was set up on July 15 1980, two months after the beginning of the crisis to assist Miami's local government officials. Originally comprised of several federal agencies under the leadership of FEMA, the CHTF reported to President Carter. For more on the CHTF see Bolton (1994).

<sup>21</sup> According to Dade County official planning documents, in the aftermath of the Boatlift a total of 36,500 food stamp units (each equivalent to one household) were being administered to Cuban refugees. This number contrasts with 6,500 units administered to Haitian refugees during the same time.

Up to 100,000 Cuban refugees were estimated to have settled in the Miami area by early 1983, 75% of which comprised family groups as opposed to unrelated individuals. One important factor that stood out for planners was that up to 50% of the families that arrived were headed by women, a statistic that indicated future economic challenges for this portion of the population. An analysis of elementary school enrollment of refugee children also provided clues to the locations of immigrant settlement. These concentrations were largely located in unincorporated Dade County (40%), followed by the municipality of Miami (32%), the municipality of Hialeah (26%), and the City of Miami Beach (3%). Housing shortages for Hispanics also became evident after the crisis. According to County documents, Dade County's rental housing market had less than 0.5% vacancy before the arrival of refugees. Following the Mariel Boatlift, overcrowding indexes in Hispanic communities increased, pushing rental prices up and diminishing housing opportunities for new arrivals (Unzueta 1981). The demographic impact of the boatlift was also felt in the Dade County public school system. Planners were able to determine that up to 14,000 new children registered to attend classes in grades K-12 in the year after Mariel.

The data collected throughout the 1980's also emphasized the importance of the demographic category of "Hispanic" in Dade County. Historically, Cuban immigration coincided with institutionalization of metropolitan planning in the early 1960's. Metropolitan planners from this era were aware of immigration to South Florida and factored this into their urban growth projections. However, they never anticipated an immigrant influx of such



**Figure 6** Population Increase in Miami-Dade County, 1961-2000. Grey bars represent the “natural” increase in the resident population. White bars represent the increase in population as a result of migration. The downward bars in 1983 and 1993 represents population flight from Dade County following the Mariel Boatlift and Hurricane Andrew. (Planning Research Section, Department of Planning and Zoning, page 4, 2003).

magnitude over a short period of time (Figure 6). The presence of “non-white” residents of Latin American descent had been evident in Miami since the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, nevertheless it was not until the 1960’s that the number of “non-whites” of Latin American decent started to become a visible minority.<sup>22</sup> The Mariel Boatlift contributed to transforming the category “Hispanic” into the symbol of a political community, which would in turn be used to mobilize political power.

### Community Development: The CNC and CODEC

The second stage of Cuban American spatial politics concerns the ways in which data collected by metropolitan planners, along with planning mechanisms and knowledge, were used

<sup>22</sup> According to a 2003 report on the demographic profile of Dade County from 1960 to 2000, “In 1960, only about 5 percent of the population was Hispanic and 80 percent was non-hispanic White. By 1970 Hispanics were still less than a quarter of the population, but in 1980 they were more than a third” (Demographic Profile, Miami Dade County FL, 1960 – 2000, p. 9, [http://www.miamidade.gov/planzone/Library/Census/demographic\\_profile.pdf](http://www.miamidade.gov/planzone/Library/Census/demographic_profile.pdf)).

to promote a Cuban American political agenda. Specifically, planning data, mechanisms and knowledge were used to create a Cuban American community development system that offered social services provisions, programs, and urban development projects. The provision of these services encouraged the residential concentration of Cuban Americans, creating a powerful Cuban American voting bloc.

The demographic data produced by metropolitan planners in the aftermath of the Mariel Boatlift re-enforced the need for services and programs to assist in the care and integration of Miami's new arrivals. This challenge was met by a not-for-profit system established through the Cuban National Council (CNC) and its local community development subsidiary the Corporacion de Desarrollo Comunitario (CODEC). Both institutions became part of the burgeoning sphere of Miami's Cuban American civil society in the decade of the 1980's. During this period, Cuban American residents emerged in the wake of the Mariel Boatlift to take care of their own. They mobilized on behalf of Cuban American interests and formulated a cohesive discourse based on the positive ethnic contributions Cuban Americans make to Miami. This community development system was made up of Cuban American leaders who pursued a comprehensive effort to engage public policy debates locally, nationally, and internationally, provide economic aid, and embark upon an urban development agenda based on affordable housing for Hispanics (Verdecia 1988b).<sup>23</sup> Both organizations targeted all Hispanics in Dade County. The network established by the CNC and CODEC, included Cuban American political leaders, entrepreneurs, public servants and academics that specialized in immigration and Cuban American issues.

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<sup>23</sup> "Help Hispanics Adapt," *The Miami Herald*, Final Edition, Editorial, 31 January, 1988, 2F.

### **CNC: Public Policy and Discourse**

The Cuban National Council (CNC) began as a small non-profit organization in 1972 in Washington, DC, called the Cuban National Planning Council (CNPC).<sup>24</sup> Originally established to promote the understanding of the Cuban American community through research, education and leadership, the CNPC was instrumental in laying the seeds for policy proposals and debates focused on the assimilation of Cuban immigrants during the 1970's. This mission was localized in Miami in 1981, when the organization shifted its operations to Dade County and changed its name to the Cuban National Council. While the original mission of the CNPC remained the same, the CNC developed an intense focus on the basic needs of Marielitos in addition to poor populations within Miami's existing Cuban American community – mainly the young and the elderly (Diaz 1981, 1990, 1992a, Gutierrez 1984). This mission is evident in the inventory of service programs offered by the CNC since the early part of the 1980's, including drop-out prevention workshops, job training, and education programs.<sup>25</sup> The CNC has been highly successful in pursuing its agenda, and received federal, state and local funding for its efforts during the 1980's and early 1990's (Goldfarb 1989, Verdecia 1988a, 1988b, Tananarive 1991).

The CNC was also instrumental in developing policy documents, reports and events aimed at underlining the contributions of Cuban Americans in Miami (Del Campillo 1986, 1987, 1988b, Shaw 1986). This work was carried out through public workshops that framed the need for tolerance and diversity, and through conferences covering issues such as bilingualism, the Hispanic job market, and immigration rights (Verdecia 1988a). Alliances with local African American, Jewish and Haitian American civic groups were sought to involve a diverse coalition

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<sup>24</sup> For more information on the legacy of the CNC, see their website: <http://www.cnc.org/>.

<sup>25</sup> "Cuban Council's Classes Target High School Dropouts," *The Miami Herald*, Neighbors Section, Final Edition, 31 August, 1989, p. 6.

in these events. Participants also included academic experts from the University Miami, Florida International University, the Miami Chamber of Commerce, and other local government and private institutions of prominence. The CNC also sponsored conferences on the need for freedom of speech, posing such questions as: “Should a communist be allowed to come to Miami to speak in favor of Fidel Castro?” (Del Campillo 1986, 1987, Santiago 1986). These events brought together Cuban American community leaders and the public to discuss how freedom of speech controversies were portrayed in Miami Herald news coverage and to educate the audience about the historic and legal perspectives of freedom of speech debates.

On the national stage, members of the CNC joined representatives of Mexican American organizations such as La Raza on conference panels. Together they participated in national Hispanic committees set up by President Reagan to pursue a common agenda of citizenship rights for Hispanic non-citizens. Similarly, the CNC also became involved in US policy toward Cuba by attempting to influence policy debates on democratization in Latin America. This work included briefs and reports prepared for the first summit of the Americas, which was held in Miami in 1994, underscoring Miami’s strategic importance in the Western hemisphere as a bridge between North and South America and as a key destination for Hispanic businesses (Stack 1994a, Stack 1994b).

The policy discourse engineered by the CNC was part of a larger agenda developed by Cuban American businesses and interest groups to promote a positive message of Cuban assimilation (Del Campillo 1988b, Strategy Research Corporation 1988, Boswell 1985). The CNC produced reports disclaiming the notion that Miami was politically divided or fragmented due to the presence of Cuban Americans. Instead these reports framed Cuban American political mobilizations, economic activities and cultural life as positive signs of assimilation (Diaz 1991,



1992b). This discourse sought to address the perception of Cuban Americans as an ideologically-driven moral community, by re-framing their positions as moderate.

### **CODEC: Economic and Urban Development**

Prior to the 1980's, Miami did not have an institution dedicated to the housing needs of Hispanics (Boyd 1986). In 1981, the CNC initiated CODEC, a non-profit aimed at securing low-income housing for Hispanics. During the first half of the 1980's, CODEC bought and developed prime real estate to build an inventory of low rental and affordable apartment units in Miami's little Havana. The funds for public housing came from Dade County taxpayers and were channeled into construction projects and the provision of mortgage subsidies for low-income Hispanic residents.<sup>26</sup> In 1985, CODEC established two for-profit agencies that assisted with housing acquisition and loan management for poor Hispanics. Miami Business Development Corporation Inc. was charged with administering HUD programs and providing mortgage aid to poor Hispanic clients (Barkin 1985). In a similar fashion, Peninsula Housing Development functioned as the construction company in charge of the design, construction management, and building administration of new CODEC properties.<sup>27</sup>

According to the CNC website, over the span of 30 years CODEC has built a total of 1,900 housing units, including 150 condominiums for working families in Florida and across the US.<sup>28</sup> The units in Miami were built in Little Havana, the epicenter of Miami's Cuban American community (Figure 7), where a need for public housing was necessary given the concentration of poor Hispanic residents (Wallace 1987, Figueroa 1987). The location of CODEC's projects

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<sup>26</sup> "What The Surtax Does," *The Miami Herald*, Final Edition, Local Section, 21 October, 1987, p. 1B.

<sup>27</sup> "Florida Growth Surges," *The Miami Herald*, Final Edition, Home and Design, 11 October, 1987, 2H.

<sup>28</sup> <http://www.cnc.org/elderly.php>

emphasizes the spatial relationship between housing built by the Cuban American community development system and the settlement patterns of Cuban immigrants in Little Havana. This co-location would not have been possible without the demographic data that was developed by metropolitan planners during the 1980's.

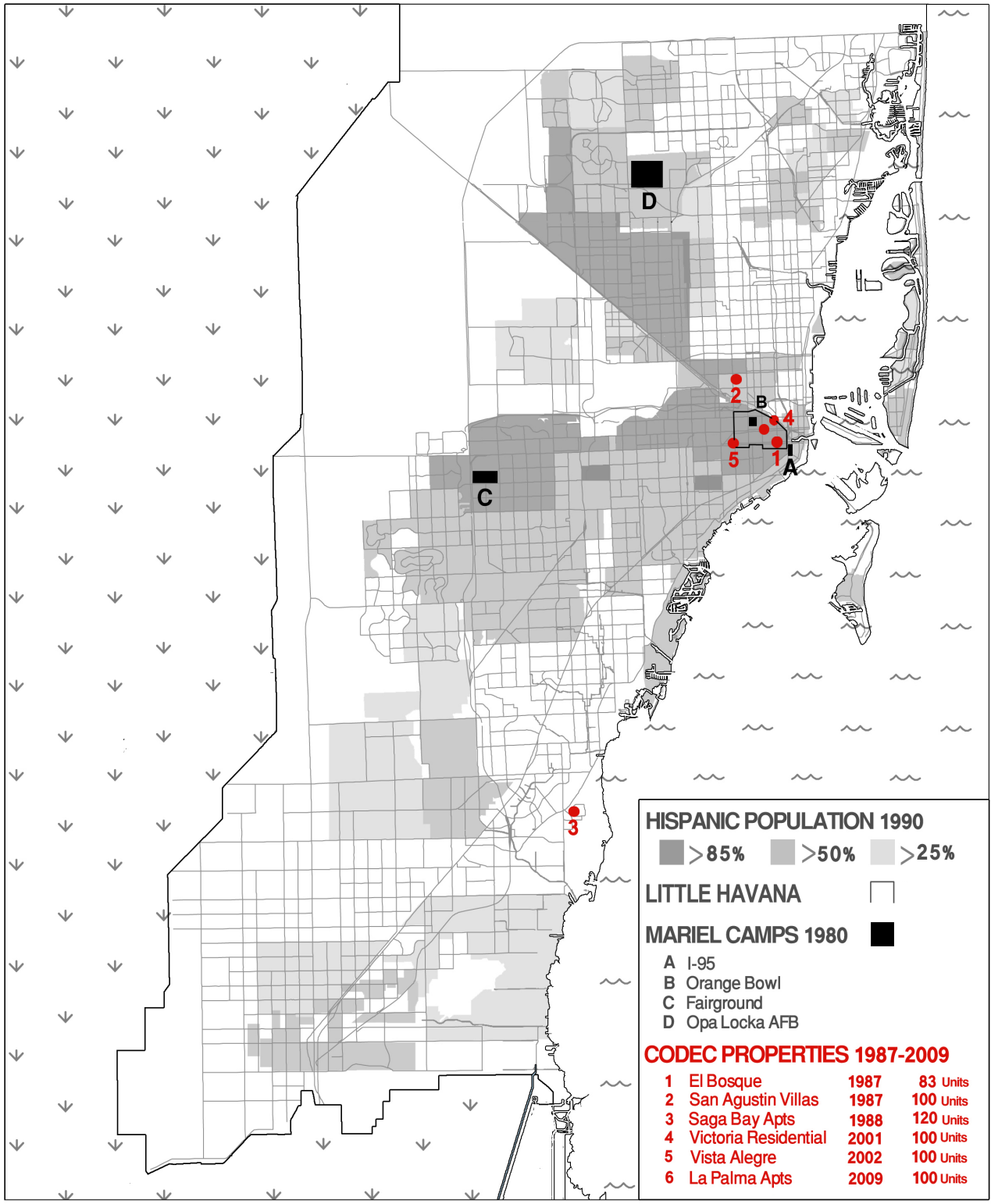


Figure 7 Concentration of CODEC Properties, 1987-2009. (Source DP&Z & Author).

### **Metropolitan Planning and Bloc Voting: Ethnic Interests v. the Public Good**

The work of Dade County metropolitan planners contributed to the incorporation of Cuban Americans through the production, calibration and sharing of demographic data with Cuban American organizations. Demographic data became a key factor in the accumulation of not-for-profit capital. During the 1980's metropolitan planners supplied demographic data. This data was used to support CNC funding proposals and was prominently featured in CNC pamphlets, reports and policy briefs. As the demographic effects of the Mariel Boatlift continued to be studied by metropolitan planners throughout the 1980's to evaluate the presence, age, and origin of Hispanics in Dade County, these assessments were shared with the CNC who used them to generate further policy recommendations and validate the construction of public housing. Planners' projections of Miami's Hispanic population provided the evidence required to determine housing needs according to census tracts, thus influencing the allocation of community development block grants and other funding sources.

Metropolitan planners facilitated data in order to fulfill the "public good" imperative that guided their work; however, there was also a political consequence that followed. Dade County planners envisioned their data would be used as the basis for the equitable allocation of public funds. While the Cuban American community development system deployed this data to care for Miami's most needy Hispanic residents, these service provisions also allowed Cuban Americans to build a political base at the neighborhood scale that could be mobilized into political action. The location of CODECO-sponsored housing contributed to the settlement patterns and residential concentration of Cuban Americans. This in turn created a powerful voting bloc that could be tapped by local politicians during the 1980's.

### **Empowerment: Municipal Elections and County Re-districting**

The last stage of Cuban American spatial politics involves the mobilization of voters, the formation of a discourse that envisioned an alternative political order in Miami, and the composition of urban alliances that effectively reconfigured the distribution of political power in Dade County. As with the other stages of Cuban American spatial politics, metropolitan planners became involved in a process that had the transformation of the political status quo as its ultimate goal.

As explained above, the Cuban American community development system was instrumental not only in developing a policy and urban development agenda, but also in producing documents, organizing conferences and forming coalitions throughout the 1980's that placed the contributions of Cuban Americans in a moderate and positive light. These measures were part of a discursive frame that originated in the context of a political backlash against Cuban Americans after the Mariel Crisis.

In December 1980, only a few months after the end of the Mariel Boatlift, a wave of xenophobia swept through metropolitan Miami. The presence of Marielitos on the city's streets mobilized a public repudiation against refugees and Cuban Americans in the form of an English-only referendum that abolished the 1973 Dade County bilingual ordinance. The effort was pushed by Anglo native groups that came together under the name of Citizens for Dade County United. The measure also sought to prevent the use of public funds to "promote a culture other than the culture of the United States" (Portes and Schauffler 1993: 645). The effort challenged the use of public funds for the education, placement, and job training of newly arrived *Marielitos* and members of the Cuban American community. The referendum passed and Cuban American residents found themselves caught up in the stigmatization originating from the Mariel crisis.

In response, Cuban Americans organized a counter mobilization over the following years that led to the consolidation of their political power in the city of Miami. According to Portes and Stepick, the combined outcome of the Mariel Boatlift and the English-only referendum “transformed Cubans into a self-conscious ethnic group that organized effectively for local political competition” (Portes and Stepick 1993: 37). The first signs of Cuban American political empowerment came in 1985 when Xavier Suarez became Miami’s first Cuban American mayor. Suarez obtained 56.3% of the vote in the City of Miami by “luring enough black voters to accompany his dominance in the Hispanic community” (Sewell 1985). By 1985, the Cuban American voting bloc comprised 40% of registered voters in the city of Miami with Blacks at 29.8% and whites at 30.1%. Cuban Americans had not only claimed the political leadership of the city but had also done so by reaching across ethnic lines (Sewell 1985).

The rise of the Cuban American community would be transformative for ethnic politics in Dade County. Following Suarez’s victory, Cuban American leaders galvanized around a discourse of successful assimilation stating that Miami had become an important hub of tourism, business and finance as a result of Cuban American economic and cultural contributions (Portes and Stepick 1993) (Figure 8). This discourse emerged from efforts organized by CNC (e.g., its programs and policy reports).

# City of Miami, Florida



XAVIER L. SUAREZ  
MAYOR

P O BOX 330708  
MIAMI, FLORIDA 33233-0708  
305-579-6010

October 7, 1988

Dear Readers:

The City of Miami has been enriched socially, economically, and politically by the Hispanic Community.

We are becoming an international capital for business, tourism, and cultural arts.

Many people tend to forget that this is still a young community, characterized by renewal, vitality and diversity. There is a large, rapidly growing young Hispanic-American segment, which is bilingual, dual-cultural, and well-educated. They not only speak the language of the State and Nation, but are the best spokespersons for South Florida's Hispanic community. They bring their ideas to business and give their culture to this place, making it a fascinating City to live, work, visit and admire.

The 1989 South Florida Latin Market Study will provide much information about this dynamic community. It illustrates for us the past contributions of our Hispanic communities, and its potential for the future. I would like to thank Strategy Research Corporation and the Sponsors of this event, for making this study possible.

Very truly yours,

Xavier L. Suarez

XLS/lew

Figure 8 Mayor Xavier Suarez's letter endorsing the 1989 South Florida Latin Market study.

Suarez's rise to power marked the beginning of a wave of electoral victories that brought more Hispanics to power in Miami. Grenier writes, "At the dawn of the 1980's only four Hispanics held elective office in the Miami area. In 1990 over forty Hispanics held elective office, including seven mayoralties as well as majorities on the city commissions of Miami, Hialeah, West Miami and Sweetwater" (Grenier and Stepick 1992: 177). As Miami entered the decade of the 1990's, urban power was concentrated in the hands of Hispanics. Beyond municipal leadership, Cuban-American political empowerment led to a parallel political battle that played out in county government.

### ***Metropolitan Planning and Redistricting: Ethnic Territorialization and Alliances***

In 1986, the *Meek v. Metropolitan Dade County*<sup>29</sup> lawsuit set in motion a series of verdicts and appeals that eventually established electoral power for minority Black and Hispanic residents in Dade County by redrawing district lines from nine all around seats to 13 district specific seats. Once again ethnic minorities coalesced their interests in order to challenge the status quo. This time however, the challenge would occur at the metropolitan scale through Dade County governance.

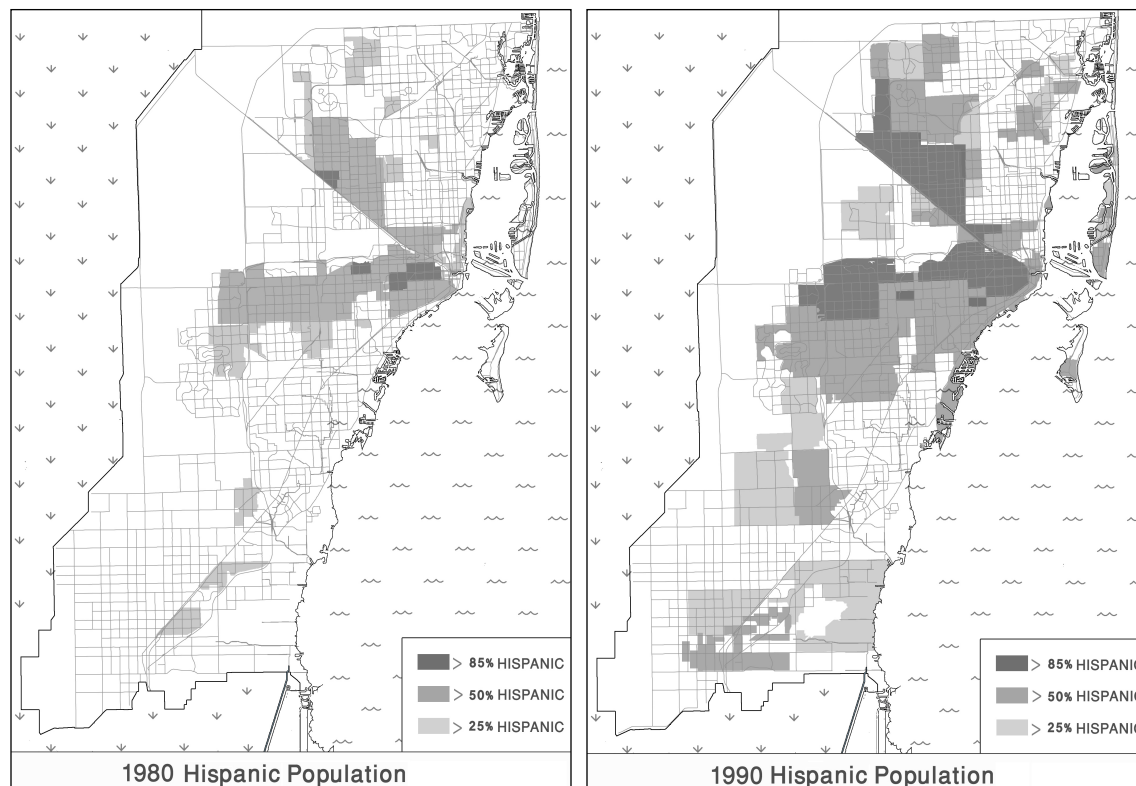
Historically, Miami's county commission districts had not functioned in favor of ethnic minorities. The pre-Meek nine-district arrangement called for a countywide selection process that diluted the concentrated vote of Hispanic and African American blocs in specific areas of the city. The plaintiffs, who included recently elected mayor Xavier Suarez, ex-mayor Maurice Ferre and a coalition of African Americans and Hispanic activists, claimed that the system was in violation of Section 2 of the Federal Voting Rights Act of 1965. The newly formed ethnic coalition argued for political representation given the new demographic composition of Dade

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<sup>29</sup> *Meek v. Metropolitan Dade County*, No. 89-5146 [<http://openjurist.org/908/f2d/1540>].



County. Hispanics had increased their population size and location dramatically throughout the metropolitan area from 1980 to 1990 (Figures 9 & 10). By 1992 Hispanics and Blacks made up 70% of the county population, yet they had inadequate representation in county governance. A change in the number of commission districts, as well as a new reconfiguration based on ethnic concentrations and numbers was needed.



**Figure 9** Hispanic Population in Miami and Dade County, 1980

**Figure 10** Hispanic Population in Miami and Dade County, 1990 (Source DP&Z & Author)

In 1991 the plaintiffs prevailed, and in the subsequent County Commission election in 1992 the number and composition of Dade County commission districts was transformed from a white majority to an ethnic majority composed of Black and Hispanic leaders. The result was a dramatically altered re-distribution of power in the city based on strategic political alliances between Hispanic and African American ethnic groups seeking to end white domination.

The effects of demographic change and the new political alliances formed in the aftermath of Suarez's mayoral victory thrust planners into a political process that remade the political geography of the county in response to shifting racial and ethnic lines. According to the metropolitan planners I interviewed, the Meek decision set in motion an intense period of territorial claims-making where political power at the county level became a matter of block-by-block vote allocation in the new political district maps that planners helped to draw.

In an interview I conducted with Walter Thomas<sup>30</sup>, a prominent African American politician during this period in Miami's urban history, Thomas provided a closer view into the interests and expediencies that led to the formation of the Hispanic/Black coalition. According to Thomas, the coalition was based on a mutual interest in changing the balance of urban power countywide.<sup>31</sup> This time, however, coalition building did not happen at the ballot, as it did during the City of Miami municipal elections; it occurred behind closed doors and in front of a judge. While dispersed through different locations in Miami, both Black and Hispanic leaders understood that by joining forces they would be able to change the nature of power in the region by carving out new territories of control. Walter Thomas explains:

This was a joint suit on paper. You had Hispanics joining the lawsuit, but that wasn't because we needed to file together. We had self-interest in creating these single member districts where you could run and win. It was convenient for them [Cuban Americans] since they did not have representation, so they had to join. On paper it is coalition building, you have two groups that changed the make-up of the political landscape, local and state. They had the numbers but they did not have the evidence of how the vote was diluted. We had actual case studies from elections that demonstrated that was the case. You had two minority groups that essentially were facing the

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<sup>30</sup> Walter Thomas is a pseudonym for an informant. I carried out two interviews with him, each 1 hour long in 2010.

<sup>31</sup> As noted in a previous section, a similar approach of Hispanic/Black coalitions had taken place before for the election of Xavier Suarez, who won with the support of the city of Miami's black electorate

same types of hurdles if the system did not change and recognized that they will benefit from them.

But they joined the suit out of self-interest.

Thomas suggests that the coalition between Blacks and Hispanics did not necessarily reflect close ties of mutual support. Rather, behind it lay the expediency of achieving goals of political empowerment that were particular to each respective ethnic community. This pragmatic coalition continued to signal an emerging political dynamic in Miami – strategic alliances between ethnic groups arising out of a context of immigration.

The coalition emerged in part from a dispute over planning practice in metropolitan Miami. The interests that drove African Americans to collaborate with Hispanics not only arose from a context of political and economic disenfranchisement, which was endemic to the African American experience in Miami. It was also sparked by what African American leaders saw then as a failure of metropolitan planning and centralized county government. One such case, the construction of Joe Robbie Stadium in 1993 prevented the birth of Destiny, the first ever African American municipality in Dade County. Wayne Huizenga, former owner of the Miami Dolphins, funded a campaign to prevent the incorporation, due to concerns that the newly formed municipality would tax the stadium. Metropolitan planners joined the effort by producing planning reports against the pro-incorporation position of local African American community leaders, arguing that residents comprised “recipient communities” who obtained services without paying sufficient taxes (Husock 1998). In this sense, Meek originated from a conflict over who decided where, when and how urban development occurred in Miami. In order to control the future of urban development, new ethnic coalitions had to be formed to reconfigure the structure and composition of city governance. The result was not only the delineation of zones where new

decision-making over urban development growth would be deployed, but also the emergence of new political territories in the form of new commission seats.

Following the Meek decision, the redrawing of district borders took place before the actual onset of county commission elections scheduled for 1992. Once the verdict was established, the Dade County elections department contacted the metropolitan planning department to begin translating the legal decision into the creation of new districts. The elections department required the new map because they were in charge of drawing the voting precincts. To establish the new lines, the elections department had to coordinate their work with the planning research division to assess the potential repercussions of shifting boundaries according to demographic data.

Into this process of combining politics and territory entered the interested parties of the lawsuit. While the Dade County elections department and the planning department provided the information needed to translate Meek's legal implications into a political reality, it was politicians running for county office who literally (re)created their constituencies by re-drawing Dade County's electoral map. An ad-hoc subcommittee comprised of the plaintiffs and local community leaders who were involved in the lawsuit led the process of re-districting. Together they formed a working group that consulted with metropolitan planners to decide on the configuration of new districts based on fresh demographic data and recommendations supplied by planners (Figure 11). Throughout this process metropolitan planners sought to provide accurate information for scenarios where ethnic concentrations would be balanced in different zones to prevent divisions in class and race that would further fragment the electoral vote. Planners already perceived Dade County to be a socially fragmented metropolis where different ethnic populations not only lived in seclusion along municipal lines, but also in ethnic enclaves

that spanned from the urban core to suburbia. Nevertheless their recommendations were many times set aside to the expediencies of ensuring ethnic political power. Peter O'Donnell explains:

The working group would touch bases with us [metropolitan planners]: What about this alignment? What about that alignment? What would it mean in terms of the shift of population percentages, etc. The committee would send us a draft alignment. We would give them the recommendation. Our work was turned into "if's": What if I did this X percent more Hispanic in that neighborhood? What if that group was not included in the Black commissioners' new district? But the decisions were made by them and by the judge. It was like a school desegregation issue. In many cases it was an ad hoc decision of the players who were involved from those areas, their municipalities, their representatives and their consultants.

The redistricting imperative resulting from the *Meek v. Metropolitan Dade County* lawsuit thrust planners into a situation that challenged the neutrality of their profession. Once again, metropolitan planners saw their role as neutral – they were to promote the public interest of all in Dade County. Nevertheless, the winners of the legal suit – including potential future commissioners – sought a political advantage. According to O'Donnell, these parties were strategic in drawing the district lines since they were already politically active in zones where their names and activities carried recognition and were part of neighborhood politics.

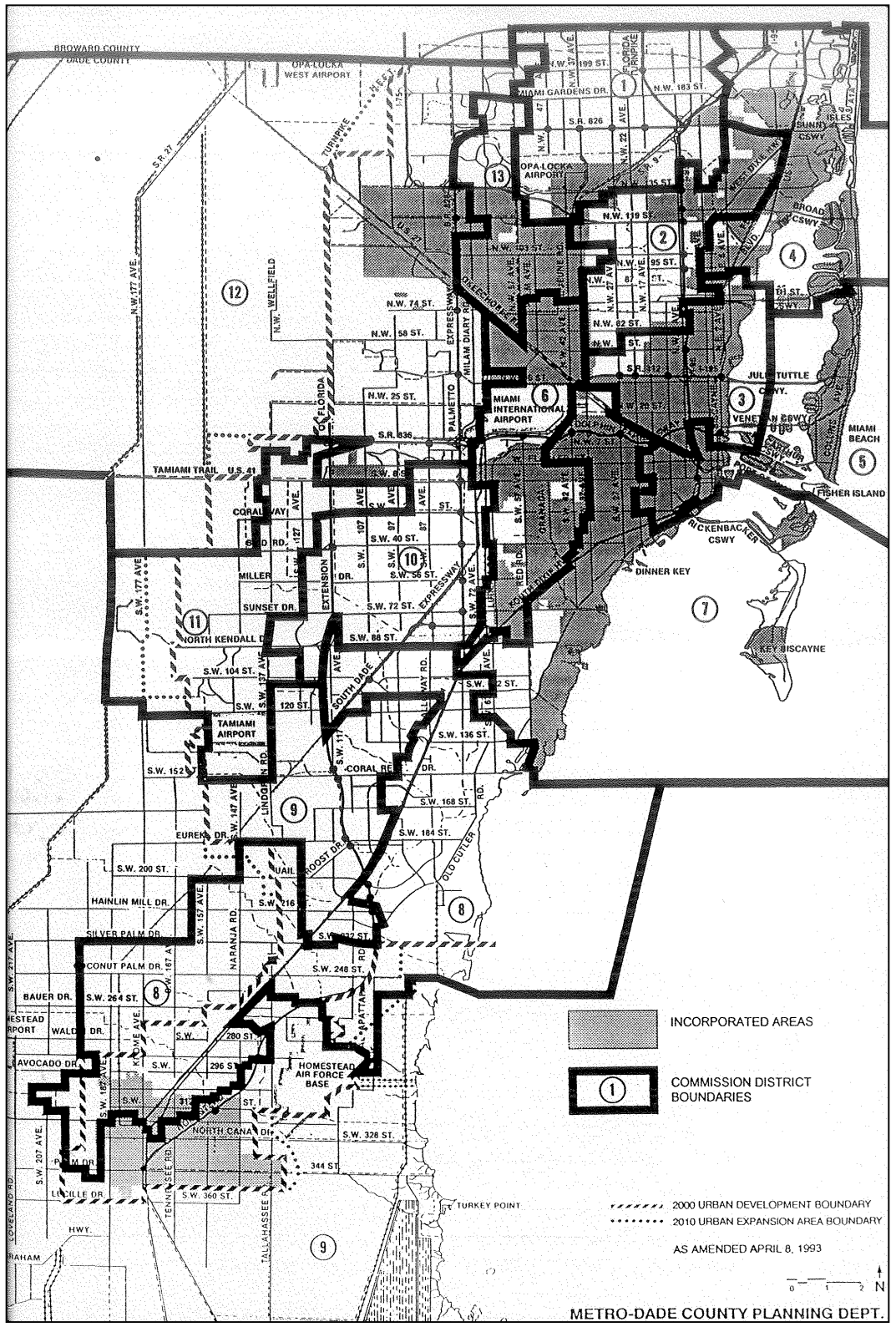


Figure 11 The Political Reconfiguration of Dade County. (1993) (Source: Research Division MDC 1994).

Decisions over boundaries would not only be based on a block-by-block case depending on ethnic composition and numbers, they would also be based on concentrating the numbers of Hispanics and Blacks to ensure proper political representation and the best possible voting outcome for minorities. O'Donnell states,

We weren't real happy with the federal judge, there wasn't much of any consultation. We had a good reputation for giving facts, and folks [planners] were not very partisan at all. We made a decision within the department that this would be a political nightmare because there would be pressure from other groups, and our work of doing good planning would be compromised. It was a political game that they were playing so it would not be too productive.

While metropolitan planners were involved in the process, they did not consider the redistricting decision favorably and sought to minimize the involvement of the Department of Planning and Zoning. For them, the decision presented a highly contested political issue with potentially conflictive consequences that would tarnish the neutrality of their work. However, during this period in Miami's urban history, the neutral façade of metropolitan planning was trumped by Cuban American spatial politics.

In 1992, Dade County government elected a new set of leaders of Hispanic and African American origin. The majority of white commissioners that had traditionally characterized county government officially ended, and the political status quo of Miami was transformed into a new reality defined by ethnic power. One of the first symbolic measures carried out by the new board of commissioners was the rebuttal of the "English only" ordinance. Although symbolic, this act crystallized the empowerment of Miami's Cuban American community (San Martin 1993).

## Conclusion

The decade of the 1980's was a challenging period for metropolitan planners as they faced new realities brought forth by the effects of immigration and the political empowerment of new immigrant communities. Planners dealt with the management of a refugee crisis, the formation of a community development system addressing ethnic needs, the rise of new ethnic leadership in municipalities, and the realignment of Miami's political map resulting from new ethnic coalitions and redistricting. Miami offers a case where urban planners faced a series of events that challenged their practice and embedded values with a new socio-political reality. Planners deployed their data gathering, evaluation and assessment techniques to assist with securing community development funding, infrastructure investments, and resource allocation. This funding, however, was transformed into infrastructure that resulted in relocating and concentrating groups of voters, whose mobilization led to the reconfiguration of Miami's political geography.

During the 1980's, people like Lidia and Francisco were part of a process of political empowerment that led to dramatic change in the political status quo throughout metropolitan Miami. I have used the concept of spatial politics to explore how immigrants like Francisco and Lidia use urban space as a tool of community building, recognition and representation. While this process remains ignored in urban histories of American cities, I argue that this history can be found in the peripheral spaces and unexcavated places of the city and told through the voices of residents who hold the key to unlock immigrant narratives. The history of immigrant lives in US cities requires not only the search for alternative sources of information, but also the formulation of new concepts that articulate social change through the eyes of the actors involved.



The concept of spatial politics that I develop in this paper advances our understanding of the processes of urban political change and the role played by people, planning, and space in bringing about this change, in three ways. First, spatial politics considers not only how urban space is transformed by politics, but also how space is used to transform politics. Second, spatial politics recognizes that political transformation has scalar qualities. It ranges from the scale of the street in individual performances bound by collective interests to mandates in legal documents and official representations that define a neighborhood, rule a municipality, or govern a metropolitan territory. Third, spatial politics do not function in a determined or linear manner. Instead, there are multiple trajectories and actions that overlap over a long period of time. The history of spatial politics is not linear, heroic or based on great figures. It occurs in discreet, incremental and commonplace ways, much like the archiving activities of Lidia and Francisco at El City of Miami.

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