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Miami's Little River neighborhood stages an economic revival. Next, homes, offices planned

BY REBECCA SAN JUAN

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Little River is transforming with new businesses, as developers and investors enter the old Miami neighborhood. Above: Eclectic items are on display for sale at the thrift store Sir Thrifty inside The Citadel marketplace. CARL JUSTE cjuste@miamiherald.com



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Just beyond Little Haiti sitting along the riverbank, one of Miami's oldest neighborhoods is experiencing a commercial revival. Developers are enthralled by evolving Little River and want to play a role in its new chapter.

Since February, there have been [46 new retail and restaurant leases](#), the acquisition of seven warehouses for [\\$17 million](#), the sale of an office-retail building for [\\$15 million](#) and plans for a [\\$30 million headquarters](#) for the nonprofit Oolite Arts.

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Even more economic revival is on the way in Little River at the hands of at least four developers: Coral Gables' Calta Group, Chicago's AJ Capital Partners working with Little River-based MVW Partners plus Urban Atlantic Group. All plan office and residential developments in the community.

The surge of retail and restaurant openings has changed Little River's reputation, from a second-rate option to Wynwood, to a prized neighborhood along the Little River with its own merits, said Alfredo Riascos, principal and broker at Gridline Properties. He's shopped around for investment deals there as far back as 2010.

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"People were being pushed out of Wynwood," Riascos said. "What has now changed is that people accepted that Little River has its own identity, own food options, coffee. It is starting to get its own identity. It's important for neighborhoods to have their own identity and DNA. Replication doesn't work."

Little River's location always made it a desirable location, said Paul George, History Miami Museum's resident historian. Little River is loosely bordered by Northwest 86th Street in El Portal to the north, Biscayne Boulevard to the east, Northwest 74th Street in Little Haiti to the south and Interstate 95 to the west.

Native Americans used the area's access to the river to travel around Miami and fish. By the 1840s, settlers moved in, obtaining acres of free land through the Armed Occupation Act. The area underwent another transformation with the incorporation of [Lemon City](#) in the late 1890s, which later became nearby Little Haiti.



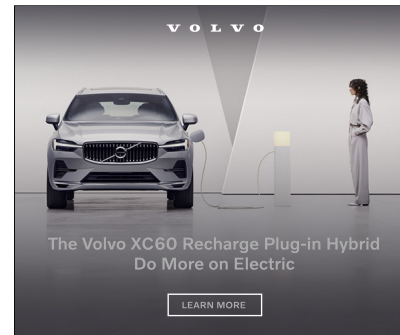
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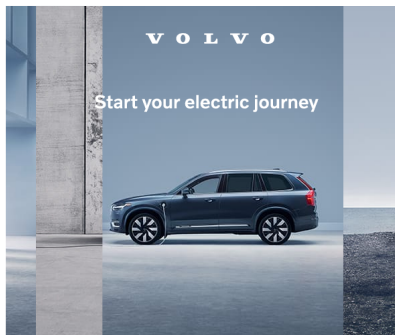
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“Everything changed in the 1920s with the real estate boom. You start to see the advent of a community,” George said. “It became a working-class community.”

Miami-area developer Avra Jain's [entrance in Little River](#) as an investor a dozen years ago helped mark a change in direction for the neighborhood with deep agricultural roots. Jain has a knack for reinventing older, broken down places while preserving the bones.

“It gave it legitimacy that this area was ready for change,” George said of Jain, [who now is enlivening Hialeah with an arts and entertainment venue](#). Years later, George would see a retail boom in Little River, preceded by rising rents in Wynwood.



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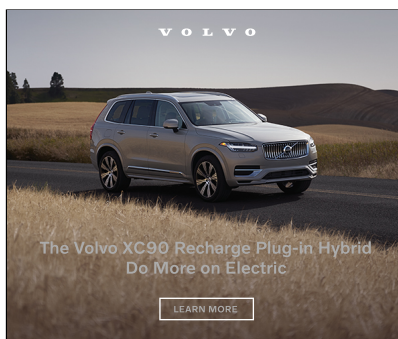
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Plant the Future was among those businesses established early in Wynwood's rebirth that would eventually relocate to Little River. In 2008, the Argentine native Paloma Teppa and her Israeli husband opened their shop in Wynwood, offering plant arrangements and moss art. Wynwood was then a “ghost town,” Teppa said. She worked with other women business operators to spread the word about the artsy and small business community.

Commercial property rent increases soon followed the growing popularity. In 2020, Teppa decided to leave Wynwood and move into Little River, where she and her husband bought and converted an old gas station at 8484 NE Second Ave. into an expansive store.

“For us it was challenging (in the beginning). Little River was nothing. We had the experience as with Wynwood,” Teppa said. “Now, we have blocks of businesses. Our

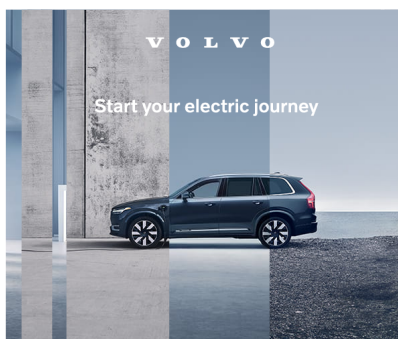
business is growing very fast. We are very happy.”



Plant the Future offers a place where people can gather, said Paloma Teppa. Teppa co-owns the Little River-based botanical art gallery and Biophilic design studio with her husband, Tato Gomez

The move to Little River from nearby city neighborhoods continues. Sir Thrifty owner Nassie Shahoulian opened his shop in October after closing his first location in Edgewater. The thrift store sits in the food hall and marketplace The Citadel, selling merchandise donated by locals and from the vintage finds Shahoulian acquires during morning bargain-shopping sprees.

“I had visited the Citadel before and there’s such a wonderful energy in the space. We need to be in comfortable environments and creative so to speak. We liked what the Citadel was doing, the staff and the diversity with the staff,” Shahoulian said. “We are happy to be part of the family here.”



Other businesses are close to opening, including Hagerty Garage + Social. James Machinist, vice president of the luxury car storage operation and members club, said he plans to debut his Miami location this summer in a former Little River warehouse. It will fit up to 250 cars and motorcycles. At the company's Delray Beach, Chicago and New York's Westchester locations, members pay \$650 a month to store a car or motorcycle. Machinist wanted to expand to Miami to follow the yearslong wealth migration that's shifted into overdrive during the pandemic.

After seeing automobile dealerships Ferrari of Miami and Braman Miami in Edgewater, Machinist said nearby Little River is an ideal spot for his business. The neighborhood is close to Miami Beach and Brickell, pockets of wealth and prospective clients, he said.

"We have a 10 o'clock rule. Would you feel comfortable going at 10 o'clock (in Little River) and the answer is 'yes,'" Machinist said. "We've seen transformation."





The Citadel offers a unique gathering place and social scene for Little River residents and visitors with diverse shopping and dining options. Carl Juste cjuste@miamiherald.com

Seeing the commercial bustle, developers want to add offices and new homes to Little River.

Gaetano Caltagirone plans to build homes in the neighborhood for area workers. He's been following the ongoing transformation for the past seven years, and became keenly interested after the success of The Citadel marketplace. His firm, Calta Group, wants to build a 12-story housing development with about 150 apartments. He hopes to close on a site by the end of this year.

"If you were to buy something in Wynwood to build 100 units, you would pay around \$10 million whereas in Little River you could do something for \$4 million. There's a huge difference," he said. "That allows you to get your rent at a lower price."



Gaetano Caltagirone is co-founder of the Calta Group development company. He intends to build an apartment building in Little River. Caltagirone is pictured in the outdoor center Ebb & Flow Miami in Little River, home to Frudeco Bakery, La Santa Taqueria and Hachidori Ramen Bar. Carl Juste cjuste@miamiherald.com

Others see room for market-rate apartment rentals and new office space. MVW Partners co-founding principal Matthew Vander Werff said he and his wife, co-founding principal Ashley Abess, intend to move forward with two projects this year — 10-story apartment and an eight-story office buildings. After starting to buy in the area in 2014, his firm now owns about 20 acres in Little River.

“We had just moved into the Miami Shores area. We fell in love with these neighborhoods on the Upper East Side. We realized the areas needed a town center. Design District was a luxury project. It would be interesting if we find some area to buy some critical mass and do our own neighborhood thing,” Vander Werff said. “It just seemed so obvious at the time.”

MVW Partners is collaborating with AJ Capital to develop the real estate projects, now in the planning phases.

Little River entertainment pioneer Urban Atlantic Group — the firm that opened the The Citadel in 2019 — will also step into the residential space after adding a few more retail and restaurant projects.

Its principal Nick Hamann said by email, “We have a slightly larger portfolio that includes more food & beverage and service-oriented businesses that complement the other businesses as part of the Citadel. Once we blend in the entertainment part of

the operations, we'll likely move on to adding some residential density in a compatible and respectful manner to the neighborhood."

Longtime players and newcomers all see the long-term growth potential of the vibrant neighborhood.

"If we're in a baseball game, we're only in the third inning," Riascos of Gridline Properties said of the Little River revival. "There's still problems that need to be fixed. There's many areas that need improvement. There's going to be huge growth from the commercial and residential developments."

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Rebecca San Juan writes about the real estate industry, covering news about industrial, commercial, office projects, construction contracts and the intersection of real estate and law for industry professionals. She studied at Mount Holyoke College and is proud to be reporting on her hometown.

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