

December 3, 2009

## Urbanista!

By Andres Viglucci

### Best local urban plan of 2009? Downtown Development Authority's new master plan gets AIA Miami's nod

Amid a torrent of ambitious urban designs and master plans approved in the past year, it's a so-far unheralded document that won the AIA's urban plan of the year award – the [DDA's clear, sensible and achievable 15-year plan](#) to gradually improve the public realm in downtown Miami.

The plan was guided to completion by DDA manager of urban planning and transportation Javier Betancourt (here picking up the award from AIA chapter president Natividad Soto), who's been at



the agency barely a year. The plan's chief virtue may be that Betancourt built on multiple existing plans and considerable strengths – Museum Park, the Burle Marx paving design for Biscayne Boulevard, the waterfront -- instead of attempting to reinvent downtown.

Inevitably, perhaps, some aspects of the plan are mainly aspirational: Attracting new businesses and national retailers, attracting global institutions and a big international event.

But its best parts focus on the nitty-gritty: New plazas and urban focal points, plus connecting all the disparate pieces already in place, or soon to be, into a cohesive whole, including enhancement of Brickell Avenue, Flagler Street, South Miami Avenue and Biscayne Boulevard into the cyclist- and pedestrian-friendly gems they should be – goals that may seem obvious but somehow have eluded past leaders.

Also in the document are some news nuggets, including plans to roll out a rubber-tire trolley service and install tall-ship berths at the deep-water slip just north of the AA Arena.

Long maligned for misplaced priorities and muffed chances, the DDA -- a quasi independent city agency that's supposed to improve downtown Miami – appears on the way to a comeback under director Alyce Robertson. Hiring Betancourt – former principal planner for Coral Gables' planning department -- appears to have been a savvy move. It won't hurt that he also has political experience, as a one-time aide to former US Sen. Bob Graham, D-Fla.

Naturally, the true test for the DDA will be actually implementing the plan.