

Little Havana home to art, music and Cuban nostalgia

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On Sunday, hundreds of thousands of people are expected to pack the heart of historic Little Havana — colorful Calle Ocho — for an annual festival of music, food and culture that has become the largest celebration of its kind in the United States.

Yet the 25-year effort to turn the domino-clacking, rooster-roaming enclave into a cultural destination year-round is a dream only partly realized. The parties, the daily busloads of tourists cruising by art galleries and domino park and the official “Latin Quarter” designation by the city of Miami in 1984 — to conjure a New Orleans-like flair and keep new architecture Spanish-style — have yet to bring the sustained vitality that residents and business people want.

“It’s getting there, but it’s not there yet,” says Leslie Pantín, who founded the Little Havana Kiwanis in 1975 and dreamed up the Calle Ocho Festival and Carnaval Miami celebrations.

The signs of progress: Lured by the area’s Bohemian charm and location near downtown and Brickell Avenue, artists and professionals have moved in and restored original Miami bungalows. The Tower Theater, an Art Deco jewel, has undergone a \$3 million renovation. And a new generation of Cuban exiles is opening new businesses in the same area in which household names like El Dorado and López Optical got their start before the downturn of the early 1980s.

“The renovation and programming at the Tower Theater, the new businesses like CubaOcho and the more upscale galleries are creating a synergy,” Pantín says,

But every month, another festive occasion, the last-Friday Viernes Culturales, started in 2000, draws a large, diverse crowd to a stretch of Southwest Eighth Street from 13th to 17th avenues lined with art galleries, Cuban nostalgia stores, music venues and restaurants.

THE SIGHTS AND SOUNDS

As the sun descends in a spectacle of pink and purple, art vendors set up easels and tables along a *placita* off Calle Ocho flanked by the Tower and Domino Park. The vendors’ colorful artwork and decorative wares — painted demitasse sets, cigar boxes, refrigerator magnets — evoke a lost Cuba of palm-studded serenity, fighting cocks and rumba dancers.

At a nearby corner, men carrying drums and *claves*, rhythm-marking sticks, break into an impromptu jam session. The aroma of garlicky *sofrito*, the base of Cuban cuisine, hangs in the air. Passersby swing their hips, shimmy through a few notes and move on as if the

night were one long conga line.

“This is ground zero for Little Havana,” says historian Paul George as he begins a walking tour of the area. George, who grew up here, lives in a 1921 Dade County pine-and-stucco bungalow his parents owned for three decades.

The reopened Tower, operated by Miami Dade College and under the direction of Orlando Rojas, a former Cuban movie director who defected in 2003, shows off-beat, independent cinema year-round and hosts art events and conferences. The theater is also a venue for the Miami International Film Festival, which runs through Sunday.

Along with the high-brow films, patrons enjoy the folklore of an area that hangs onto its Cuban identity despite the influx of immigrants from throughout Latin America.

On a recent Friday night, John Rasmussen, a film-production teacher who moved to Miami seven years ago from Nebraska, waits for the German film *The White Ribbon* to start.

“I like the movies they show here,” he says.

And, Rasmussen notes, the neighborhood can surprise.

“There was a punk-rock show here last Saturday,” Rasmussen says of a performance by Destroyio at The Art of Freedom, an art gallery-lounge-café at 1388 SW Eighth St. that sports a Celia Cruz mural and a wall painting outside of George Washington, Lady Liberty and the American flag.

A CENTER FOR THE ARTS

The art scene — bolstered by Viernes Culturales, collectors of Cuban art and tourism — has expanded beyond the staple plump-rooster sculptures and royal blue Yemayá portraits of earlier years.

A handful of modern and contemporary art galleries has opened in the past several years, albeit with mixed reviews. Some closed, but Maxoly Gallery and Cremata Gallery remain; Leal Gallery, Imago Gallery and Obrapía Fine Arts are new. Zu Galería Fine Arts, which promotes itself with a blog on the Internet and Facebook, hosts poetry readings. *Who We Are*, a curated installation project by the artist collective W-10 aimed at challenging the influence of mass media on everyday life, is on view at the official Viernes Culturales headquarters at 742 SW 16th Ave.

The contemporary spaces coexist with the folklore and culture that make Little Havana unique. Molina Fine Art, which specializes in paintings of saints popular in the Catholic and *Santería* religions, recently held a *toque de santo*, a drumming performance around the effigy of Eleguá, the *orisha* said to clear the path.

Gallery owners and local artists say they've been affected by the recession but remain committed to the area.

"We're still here, and we're surviving," says Enaida Unzueta, who sells at Unzueta Gallery the whimsical acrylic-and-pastel paintings of her brother, Ramón, who lives in Spain's Islas Canarias.

"Some days are good, some are bad," says Agustín Gáinza, whose quaint studio and art gallery has been around for nine years. "Today, a curator from Paris who was in town saw my work and some first-time visitors to Calle Ocho from Georgia also came by. None of that would happen if I were home and not here."

CHARACTER AND ALLURE

But the newest kids on the Calle Ocho block are colorful hybrid businesses that combine under one roof different facets of Cuban culture.

The CubaOcho complex, 1465 SW Eighth St., is art gallery, research center, bar and nightclub. It features Friday night jazz, and saxophonist Carlos Averhoff, a former member of the famous Irakere in Cuba, often plays there with his group. Pianist Roberto Lozano and singer Grace de España recently performed tangos and *coplas*, and "bolero queens" Vicky Roig and Renee Barrios also have been featured.

Landscapes of old-fashioned country scenes fill the main room. One wall is covered with bookshelves holding an enviable collections of Cuba's most popular pre-1959 magazines and historic tomes.

"I've bought and collected them for years, and now I want to share them with people so that they can learn about the history of Cuba," says CubaOcho President Roberto Ramos. "This is a center for investigation and promotion of Cuban culture, and it's also a place where people can have fun and experience the music."

The 45-year-old entrepreneur, a former karate champion who fled Cuba on a boat in 1992, is part of a new generation steering the area's fortunes and betting on its potential to attract more patrons.

Fabio Díaz, co-owner of the area nightclub Hoy Como Ayer, opened in 2006 Kimbara Cumbara, a café-theater on 1668 SW Eighth St., named after the famous Celia Cruz tune but with a twist on the first syllables.

Pedro Jaime and partner Octavio Gallardo opened El Nuevo Siglo, 1305 SW Eighth St., in 1998 and seven years ago began a complete renovation to shape the space into a market-bakery-café-counter-wine store with a trendy design of rich woods and modern seating.

“There’s nothing like it,” says Jaime, an industrial engineer from eastern Pinar del Río who arrived in Miami 14 years ago with the dream of starting a business. He worked long hours at various area restaurants, including the famous Versailles, learned all he could and saved the money to start El Nuevo Siglo.

Nuevo Siglo attracts the suited crowd from the Brickell business district for lunch, as well as residents shopping for last-minute groceries and baked goods or stopping by after work for a glass of wine and the art of conversation.

Tourists also come from as far away as Italy, Germany and Australia, Jaime says.

“They come with a piece of paper with instructions on how to get here that someone back home gave them,” he says. “It’s all word-of-mouth.”

El Nuevo Siglo, The New Century, is across from Cuban Memorial Boulevard, its torch lighted in honor of the veterans of the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion, the site of scores of anti-Castro demonstrations. Next door is a store that sells statues of saints and *orishas*, and farther down are shops that specialize in cigars, guayaberas and T-shirts that blare “*Cubanita*” in rhinestones and promise to deliver the formula for “How to Keep Your Cuban Wife Happy.” One bit of advice: “Call her *mami*.”

“I chose to live in this area for its Bohemian character,” says artist Luis Pardini, who moved here from New York 11 years ago and renovated a 1924 house at 10th Street and 18th Avenue which he believes was the first owned by a Jewish family. “Truly, the area has improved, and during the real-estate boom we saw our share of projects, but the bad economy has impacted us, too.”

“Still,” he adds, “I believe good things will come.”

A WALK THROUGH TIME

George, the historian who has seen the area’s fortunes rise and fall, conducts free tours at 7 p.m. during *Viernes Culturales*.

He mentions that the Mehrtens (he was a judge), who lived in a lovely two-story house being renovated by new Cuban-American owners, taught English to the children exiled in the 1960s *Pedro Pan* exodus.

He points out that the bustling fruit and juice stand *Los pinareños* was once Bahamian-owned. He strolls by the hot-pink “Pepto Bismol” house with the For Sale sign and the colonial-revival house of Miami’s first mayor — John D. Reiley — now a church.

He reminds people that Cubans settled in the area before 1959 when exiles from the Batista regime also sought refuge here.

“The rest,” George says, “is what they call history.”