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Walking tour explores Upper Eastside's past

BY CLAUDIA BOYD-BARRETT

When Antolin Carbonell was growing up in what is now Miami's Upper Eastside, he couldn't wait to leave the quiet neighborhood where young people were an oddity.

"It was a place I wanted to get away from," recalls the retired architect, who moved with his family from Cuba to a house on Northeast 86th Street in the 1960s. "It was full of grouchy old people who didn't like anyone who spoke a foreign language."

When Carbonell moved back to the area to be close to his parents in the 1980s, he saw something different: a place of untold stories and an eclectic mix of architecture. He began to piece together the puzzle of the place where he grew up, sifting through property and census records and his own memories.

Now, as the neighborhood slowly shakes itself from a crime-infested slumber into a fledgling art, business and residential district, Carbonell is ready to inspire others with his self-taught historical knowledge. This month, he is starting an historical tour of the MiMo Biscayne Boulevard Historic District and Belle Meade neighborhood.

"There's a big story to tell here," said Carbonell, as he walked along Biscayne Boulevard during a practice run of his tour on a recent Saturday. "No one has put it all together in one big piece, and that's what I'm trying to do."

The tour starts at the Vagabond Motel at 7301 Biscayne Blvd. and runs south toward Northeast 72nd Terrace before dipping into the secluded Belle Meade residential neighborhood. Carbonell has also enlisted John Bachay, a member of the MiMo district, to help with the tour. The two men stop by motels, apartment buildings and homes, pointing out the best examples of Art Deco, Miami Modern or MiMo and Mediterranean revival-style architecture.

Carbonell tells the story of the area's journey from an uninhabitable mangrove wilderness to a citrus plantation, to a thriving collection of small businesses and hotels that sprung up alongside the establishment of Biscayne Boulevard, the race track in Hialeah and the American Legion's arrival in what is now Legion's Park in the 1920s.

The kitschy motels that line Biscayne Boulevard began to arrive in the 1950s, says Carbonell, catering to travelers who would rent rooms for months-long vacations in the sun. The neighborhood was also the site of the first Playboy Club franchise, established on what is now Advanced Discount Auto Parts, on the corner of 77nd Street in 1963.

"In the '60s it was the coolest thing," says Carbonell, who said the club was an elite restaurant serviced by scantily clad waitresses. But it ended up bringing trouble to the area, spearheading three decades of decline, he said.

'You've got men with money whose needs are not going to be addressed on the premises. You've got the motels. Prostitutes said 'Hey, we got a business.' "

The situation was worsened by the completion of Interstate 95 around the same time, says Bachay, because people no longer had to use Biscayne Boulevard to get to Miami.

"The hotels started adaptive reuse, which would have been drugs and prostitution," Bachay said.

All was not lost, however, and starting in the 1980s people began buying up homes in the Belle Mead area and doing them up, Carbonell said. Slowly, housing prices started to go up and concerned homeowners associations got to work on improving their notorious section of Biscayne Boulevard.

Today, the area is in the throes of a revival, with the establishment of the MiMo Biscayne Boulevard historic district in June 2006. Boutique stores and trendy restaurants have set up businesses along the street, attracting young professionals and families to live in the neighborhood.

Bachay and Carbonell want the tours to be part of that movement.

"I hope it'll add to the rebirth of the area and get rid of people's misconceptions," Bachay said. "I have a lot of hope. I think it's really going to take off."