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Place-Making In The North End Of West Palm Beach: A Case Study

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There is a colorful and evocative term used by scholars and planners in the real estate arena: “place-making.” This is the practice of creating a place with a rich identity where previously there was none. The North End of West Palm Beach is suddenly turning into one of the hottest submarkets in the country for new development and place-making. For years, the area north of downtown that includes Old Northwood, Northwood Village, and the areas around Flagler Drive felt underinvested and mostly

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overlooked. Now, it's turning into a connected set of neighborhoods with new housing, hospitality, restaurants, and—most importantly—public spaces that give people a reason to spend time there.

I recently attended an event organized by the Urban Land Institute (“ULI”), the biggest real estate think tank in the world, in which developers, public space experts, and city partners all said the same thing in different ways: the North End of West Palm Beach isn't rising because of one or two projects. It's rising because multiple initiatives are stacking on top of each other—public investment plus private investment, new and renovated parks plus streets, restaurants plus residences, and a shared push to make the area feel active and safe. It is a case study that will be watched with interest by real estate developers and scholars for the coming decade.

One of the clearest examples of the transformation that is taking place in this submarket is the Nora District, a billion-dollar project to create a *place-with-a-place*, led by NDT Development. What started as a smaller purchase of industrial buildings in a run-down part of town by the railroad tracks turned into a long-term bet: assembling over 100 parcels, going through major rezoning, and partnering with the city and the CRA to rebuild old infrastructure. The point wasn't just to build buildings—it was to build a *place*. Streetscapes, a “Main Street” feel, a hip vibe, and a hospitality backbone including a hotel, upscale restaurants, condos, and

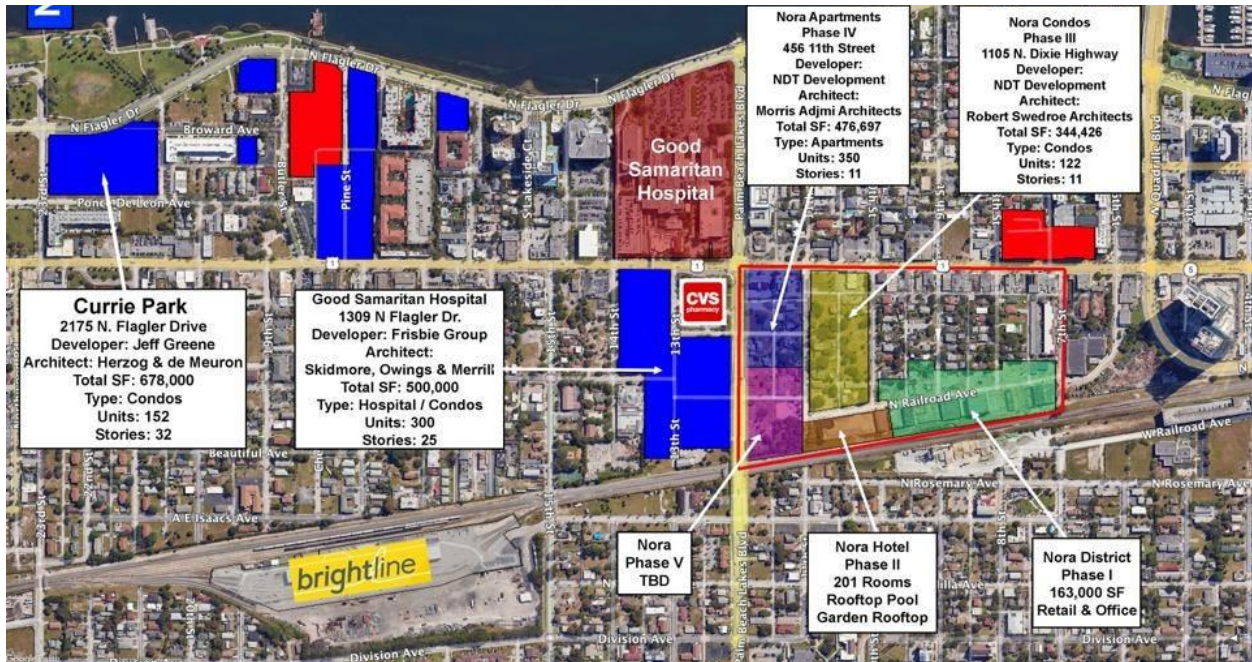
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trendy apartments, are all part of the strategy to bring daily life north of downtown. A key aspect of this strategy is walkability. Residents of Nora District will be steps away from trendy watering holes, shops, gourmet restaurants, dairy-free ice cream, gluten-free sandwiches and acai bowls, outdoor seating at cafes, and other amenities sought by discerning residents.

Ned Grace of NDT Development told me that the Nora District project encompasses much more than what can currently be seen under development, and although the project is large, they have been putting a lot of thought into keeping the development at a residential *scale*. Grace also notes that NDT's capital partner, Wheelock, has the rare long-term vision needed to get a one-of-a-kind project like this completed.

Related Ross, whom I mentioned in [my prior contribution](#) to Forbes, is also leaning into the idea that *the North End is next*. Their team talked about how North Flagler has the potential to follow the same path South Flagler already went through—where early buyers got in at lower prices and the market later surged. But the bigger message wasn't pricing. It was conviction: if you believe the neighborhood is going to transform, you invest early, and you help create the reasons people will want to live there long-term.



Then there's the Rybovich Marina site, where Integra Investments is working on a mixed-use waterfront community next to one of the largest superyacht marinas in the world. That project isn't just about adding residences. It's about building an "anchor" for the North End with a public boardwalk, a central gathering space, and ground-floor retail that makes the waterfront feel open and inviting. A big theme here was designing for real life: hundreds of people can be living and working on the boats during season, so the site plan has to respect that while still welcoming the broader community.

A big reason the waterfront conversation matters is that West Palm Beach hasn't always "worn the water" the way other coastal towns do. You can see the water from the road, but for a long time, there weren't enough places where people could sit, gather, and enjoy it. That's why the early success of spots like La Marina stands out—people were clearly craving a place that feels like the waterfront belongs to them, not just to whoever has a view.

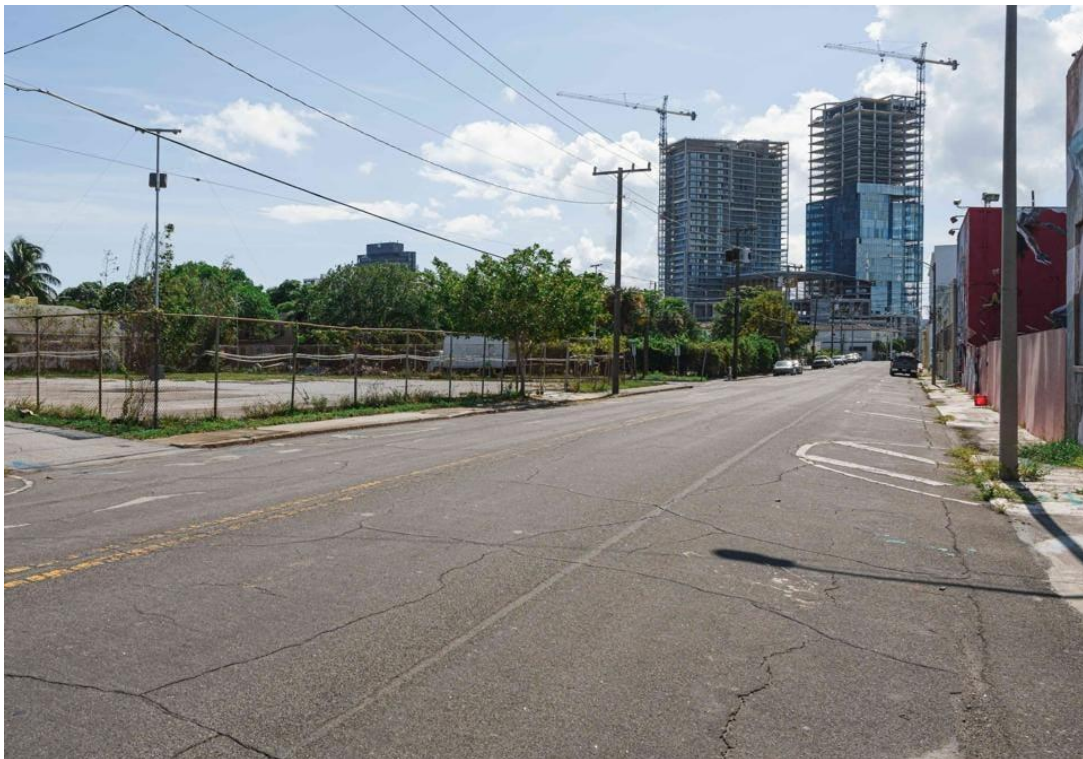
But the project that keeps coming up as the true catalyst is Currie Park. It's 13 acres on the water, and for years it was described as beautiful but underused—tennis courts getting the most action, while the rest felt empty or uncomfortable. The redevelopment, now under way, is to turn it into a *destination* park, the kind of place that stays active even when the weather isn't perfect, and the kind of place that changes how people feel about an entire neighborhood.

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The most interesting part of the Currie Park discussion came from a public space operator (Dan Biederman, with Redevelopment Ventures) with decades of experience running parks with private management techniques. The message was simple: a park isn't "fixed" when the construction ends. A park becomes great when it's programmed, cared for, and consistently busy. They even offered a practical way to judge safety: if you look around and women feel comfortable staying there, the space is doing its job. That's the standard they're aiming for—an active park where people naturally want to be.

To make that happen, Currie Park needs more than nice landscaping. It needs an operating budget—about \$3 million a year—covering security, sanitation, horticulture, programming, and repairs. And the vision is ambitious: build a park that can fund itself over time through earned income like food and beverage, sponsorships, rentals, and other legal revenue streams. The goal is to take pressure off the city's general park budget, so the city can invest elsewhere while Currie Park becomes a high-performing public asset.

What stood out was how seriously the development community is treating the park's success. Some developers are required to contribute money through a height



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bonus structure, but those payments often wouldn't be due until their buildings receive certificates of occupancy—years after the park opens. In this case, at least one major developer chose to pay early to avoid any funding gap. The logic was straightforward: if the park opens without strong programming and security on day one, everyone loses. If it opens activated and well-run, it lifts every surrounding project.

This is where the CRA conversation becomes real. People often hear “CRA dollars”



and assume it's just public money handed to private developers. The developers on this panel pushed back with their version of the math: if public investment helps fund infrastructure that makes private projects possible, the return can be massive—new streets, upgraded utilities, functioning public spaces, and ultimately a much larger tax base. Just as important, it creates a city that works better for residents, not just a collection of new buildings.

Of course, the North End isn't *all* upside. The challenges are real, and many of them are basic: old infrastructure, complicated coordination across agencies, and key connections that still don't feel safe or modern. The Palm Beach Lakes Boulevard bridge came up as a perfect example—an entry point that should be a strength, but still feels uncomfortable for pedestrians and cyclists. It is a 61-year-old structure that is going to receive \$1 million in federal funding. The improvement will create 10-foot

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multi-use paths, safer shoulders, a wider median, and stronger barriers aimed at improving safety for drivers, cyclists, and pedestrians. This serves as an example: when growth is moving fast, the public side often-times has to catch up, and that takes coordination and time.

Another challenge is perception. When an area has been underinvested for a long time, long-time Floridians don't always see the vision as clearly as the people building it (just look at CityPlace!). That creates a communication burden: developers have to explain the story again and again until it becomes visible in real life. The good news is that this is already shifting. Once people can have dinner in a new district, see construction moving, or watch a park plan become real, the conversation changes from "It's never going to happen" or "oh, not another tower" to "Okay, I see how this makes a lot of sense."

The opportunity, though, is bigger than a few projects in the same area. Multiple speakers described West Palm Beach as a city of *emerging neighborhoods*—smaller pockets with their own vibe that add up to a stronger whole. Miami has had decades to build that patchwork of places; West Palm is still early in that process, which means the North End can help define what the city becomes next.

The speakers drew a clear comparison between Miami's long-established patchwork of distinct neighborhoods and West Palm Beach's historically more limited set of defined "districts." In Miami, the city's identity is built on a large number of recognizable pockets—places like *Brickell, Downtown, the Arts & Entertainment area, Wynwood, Edgewater, the Design District, the Arts & Entertainment District, Coral Gables, and Coconut Grove*. Each of these areas has its own vibe, its own anchors, and its own reason for people to visit, live, or invest.

By contrast, West Palm Beach has not traditionally had the same breadth of neighborhood "pockets" that have emerged over time in larger, more mature markets. West Palm is smaller, and while it has strong assets, it hasn't historically been known for a deep lineup of differentiated districts that collectively create a richer city experience.

The key point, though, was that West Palm is now entering that evolution. Speakers at the conference described the North End as part of a "path of growth" where multiple projects and public investments are combining to form new, distinct nodes—places with their own identity and draw. In that framing,

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Currie Park becomes a central, catalytic public space, while surrounding areas like Nora, the Rybovich waterfront area, and Northwood Village function as emerging district “pockets” that can each develop a recognizable character. Rather than relying on a single downtown core, West Palm is starting to build the kind of district-based ecosystem that makes cities feel more complete: neighborhoods that people can walk or bike between, each offering its own mix of amenities, public spaces, and experiences.

The broader implication of the comparison was that West Palm’s North End isn’t just experiencing isolated development—it’s beginning to develop the layered neighborhood structure that cities like Miami already have, where multiple districts reinforce each other and make the whole city more vibrant and livable.