

July 10, 2026

WGM Weekender: Interview Joe Furst of Nora District, Downtown Culture in West Palm Beach

+ One of the Most Important Cultural projects in the United States is Hitting it's Stride





Good Company Interview with Joe Furst on building the Nora District, Wynwood, and Bringing Downtown Culture to West Palm Beach

I don't hand out the "most important cultural project in Florida" label lightly. But that's what Joe Furst is building in West Palm Beach, and after walking the Nora District with him and sitting down for an hour after, I'm more convinced than I was before I got there.

The Wynwood Pedigree

Furst is Miami born and raised. Ransom School. Hamilton College. A law degree he never wanted, used as a ticket into Goldman Properties, where he spent ten years under Tony Goldman building Wynwood from a wholesale garment district into the arts neighborhood the world came to copy. He signed leases at \$4 a square foot to wholesalers who'd never heard of a gallery. He helped capitalize Panther Coffee and put Zach the Baker into business. He watched the first Wynwood Walls go up in 2009 and turn street art into museum art overnight. That's not resume padding. That's the actual blueprint for how a neighborhood gets built from nothing, and Furst was in the room writing it, landlord as content curator, four walls as a platform, everything else as programming around it.

He'll also tell you Wynwood got away from itself. Peak Wynwood, KYU, Zach the Baker, Panther Coffee, the Walls before they became a photo backdrop instead of a gallery, ran roughly 2013 to 2015. Then the Business Improvement District pushed an upzoning overlay, land speculation took over, and a wave of investors with no relationship to the original vision started building whatever they wanted i.e. Frida Kahlo apartments. Goldman owned less than 20% of the neighborhood the whole time. Everyone assumed Goldman controlled it. They didn't. That's the lesson he carried out the door in 2018 when he left with no plan at all, no big idea, no next thing lined up, just ten years of pattern recognition and a law degree he still wasn't using.



How Nora Happened

Six months after he left, a call came about two buildings under contract on a forgotten street in West Palm Beach called North Royal Avenue. Furst's partner Richard Born described the first time he saw it as walking onto a movie set, vacant, bizarre, frozen in time, like someone could flip a switch and the whole block would come alive. Furst flipped the switch. Working with partners at NDT and Wheelock Street Capital, he systematically assembled over 90 parcels through the middle of Covid, when West Palm was still a tertiary market that nobody outside of Related and Steve Ross was paying attention to.

What he did next is the part that separates Nora from every other "up and coming neighborhood" story you've heard.

Wynwood, like Williamsburg, like most urban renewal, got built one building at a time, spaced out over years, because capital and risk force you to phase everything. Furst and Wheelock didn't do that. They delivered all 13 buildings and 160,000 square feet of Main Street retail on North Royal Avenue in a single phase, fully spec, with no pre-leasing locked in before construction. Less than three years from signed contract to a complete, cohesive neighborhood core. That's not a real estate deal. That's a bet made with total conviction, and it paid off before anyone else in West Palm believed it would.

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What's There Now Tells You Everything

IGK. A Stephen Starr restaurant. BD Hotels — the same group behind the Bowery, the Greenwich, and the Chelsea Hotel — opening their first Florida property in Nora, not Miami. Furst's read on why is simple and correct: those operators only overlap with Related's City Place tenants on paper. In practice, the brands that wanted Main Street, human scale, and adaptive reuse never seriously considered Miami Beach or downtown Miami for this. They considered Nora. Furst's tagline for the district says the rest of it plainly: **taste is not for sale.**



The Bigger Picture

Furst doesn't think West Palm is competing with Miami, and he's right not to. My framing is, if Miami is New York, Fort Lauderdale is Hoboken, and a city that size needs another release valve. West Palm, sitting next to the money and power of Palm Beach proper, is closer to Washington D.C. Related did the hardest, least glamorous part of that transformation, schools, hospitals, the actual infrastructure of a functioning city. Furst built the part that gives it a soul: a Main Street you'd actually want to walk down, at human scale, with the bones of a real place instead of a shopping center wearing a downtown costume. At full build-out Nora is over 2 million square feet, a regional destination, not a few blocks of retail. The name itself is a nod to the street underneath it: Nora is short for North Railroad Avenue, and the district runs from 7th Street up to Palm Beach Lakes Boulevard, bordered by the Florida East Coast Railway. The whole redevelopment is now pegged at roughly \$1 billion, the largest thing West Palm Beach has taken on since CityPlace opened more than two decades ago.



The Bowery Hotel Palm Beach?

The Nora Hotel opens this fall and is the signature piece of the master plan, the first vertical development to go up: a 201-key boutique property, five stories, roughly 203,000 square feet, built by Moss with interiors from New York's Gachot Studios. It's BD Hotels' first ground-up new-construction project outside New York, and the design leans into Mediterranean and Spanish Colonial Revival lines — a direct nod to Addison Mizner, the architect who defined Palm Beach a century ago. Pastis anchors the ground floor. A second Starr-run restaurant and lounge sits on the rooftop alongside a pool, two bars, cabanas, and a garden dining area, with a spa and gym at street level. Richard Born has said outright that success for him looks like The Nora Hotel becoming a cultural and community center the way his New York properties have — not just a place to sleep, a place the neighborhood organizes itself around.

The Retail Line Up, A Gen Z Special



Warby Parker's first West Palm Beach location. Le Labo. Luce, a new jewelry concept from the family behind Kravit Jewelers in New York. H&H Bagels and Van Leeuwen Ice Cream, both by way of New York. Juliana's Pizza, Patsy Grimaldi's coal-fired Brooklyn institution. Loco Taqueria & Oyster Bar out of Boston. A 350-unit apartment building is planned on top of all of it. None of these are brands chasing a hot market — they're brands with a specific point of view about what a Main Street should feel like, and Nora is the only place in the region currently offering that feeling at this scale.

I asked him directly about the neighborhoods to the north and west of Nora, lower income areas, and the easy, lazy narrative that gets attached to any redevelopment near them. His answer was the right one, and he didn't dodge it: Nora didn't displace anyone. The land itself was underutilized and sparsely populated, roughly one person per acre in that stretch of downtown before any of this happened. There was no residential community there to push out. The hotel alone carries an employee roster of over 300 people. That's not gentrification dressed up in nicer language. That's an economic engine landing on ground nobody else was using, with real jobs attached to it.

The Mr. Miami take: Furst is the only person alive who's built this exact neighborhood twice, once in Wynwood, where he learned what happens when you don't control the second act, and once in West Palm, where he made sure he did. One phase instead of ten. One vision instead of ninety competing ones. A Main Street delivered whole instead of piecemeal, with the discipline to say no to pre-leasing and just build the thing on conviction. West Palm isn't Miami's little brother and it isn't Fort Lauderdale's neighbor, it's the other place Florida needed, and Joe Furst got there first because a decade of scar tissue in Wynwood turned directly into the masterplan for Nora. That's not luck. That's

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the only real advantage that compounds: having already made the mistake once, somewhere else, on somebody else's dime.



Keep your SPF high and your standards higher.

See you at the beach,

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