

From the South Florida Business Journal:

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Billionaire founder of Cirque du Soleil joins new innovation district project in Miami

Dec 5, 2017, 12:00pm EST Updated: Dec 5, 2017, 12:28pm EST

Guy Laliberté, a Canadian billionaire and the founder and creative force behind Cirque du Soleil, has formed a partnership with the developers of the Magic City Innovation District, a new project in Miami's Little Haiti.

The addition of Laliberté's company, Lune Rouge, is expected to add an infusion of technology, arts and entertainment into the project. Over the long term, the project partners plan to redevelop the Magic City site with permanent structures, including residential, office/incubator space, retail space and an auditorium.

Located on a 17.5-acre industrial property and abandoned trailer park at 6300 N.E. 4th Ave., the Magic City Innovation District idea was announced in 2016 by Tony Cho, head of Miami-based brokerage and development firm Metro 1, and California venture capital investor Bob Zangrillo, head of Dragon Global.

Cho is known as one of the driving forces in the transformation of Miami's Wynwood into an arts and restaurant district.

In April, they were joined by a new partner: Miami-based Plaza Equity Partners, led by Neil Fairman, Anthony Burns, and George Helmstetter. Plaza developed the Marina Palms Yacht Club & Residences in North Miami Beach, among other condos.

Little Haiti is a working-class neighborhood known for its Caribbean culture. Property values there have been increasing, leading some residents to worry about being priced out.

There's been less large-scale development in Little Haiti than in neighborhoods closer to Miami's downtown.

"I loved the area. I felt it had a lot of authenticity," Fairman said. "The younger generation is looking for something authentic, something a little bit gritty, someplace to launch new technology ventures."

Cho said he's been a property owner in Miami's Little River longer than in its Wynwood neighborhood. For years, Little Haiti has attracted artists and creative professionals to its warehouse buildings and he hopes to use Magic City to showcase local businesses.

The difference between Wynwood and Little Haiti is that there's one owner for the large Magic City site, as opposed to the multiple owners in Wynwood, Cho said.



Redevelopment and adaptive reuse is planned at the Magic City Innovation District, at 6300 N.E. 4th Ave. in Miami.

"In Magic City, we have more control over our destiny and we as a partnership are aligned in doing business in the community," Cho said. "It's a truly regenerative project that benefits all people in the community as much as possible...We want to support local entrepreneurs and local businesses while bringing in international businesses as well."

Magic City could offer some tenants lower rents and even provide micro loans to them, the developers said.

The partners' initial plan for Magic City is to seek a temporary-use permit with the city for the former trailer park site — once known as the Magic City Trailer Park. The plan is establish a venue for pop-up retailers, restaurants and incubator space for technology and creative companies, Cho said. Exactly what physical form these pop up structures would take hasn't been finalized, but the plan would include transforming the historic DuPuis building through adaptive reuse.

Laliberté would provide unique entertainment and technology for this space.

"Magic City is an opportunity for us to put all our creativity to the service of entertainment and new technologies," Laliberté said in a statement. "This collaboration will allow us to explore new forms of entertainment and make available multimedia and interactive installations adapted to future Magic City residents and visitors."

Fairman said Laliberté, a fellow Montreal native, is a friend of his and he was impressed after visiting the Magic City property. Laliberté developed a project in Montreal that hosts video game development companies, and Fairman hopes he can similarly attract creative technology companies to Magic City.

"Nobody is better qualified to do entertainment," Cho said. "Guy sees it as a lab to test new technology."

Cho said he hopes to launch the pop ups at Magic City by late 2018.

As for future development, Cho said the partners are still in the site planning and community feedback stage for the future phase.

"We want to preserve and adapt to the culture that is here as much as possible," Cho said.

The partners also created the Magic City Innovation District Foundation, a nonprofit that will support economic, social and cultural prosperity in Little Haiti.

Magic City is also hosting a Little Haiti-themed gallery called Route 1804 from Tuesday through Sunday as part of Miami Art Week.

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