Fort Lauderdale warehouse block emerges as happening destination

By Larry Barszewski

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A design-on-a-dime flash mob will descend on a desolate-looking, block-long stretch of downtown Fort Lauderdale warehouses Saturday, transforming the street — if only for a day — into a hopping, happening, urban arts village.

Northwest First Avenue's wide swath of asphalt will give way to temporary landscaping, outdoor seating and attractions, including pop-up businesses and cafes, live music, food trucks, interactive art and a miniature dog park.

Better Block Fort Lauderdale is not a street fair, organizers say, but a living blueprint of what the street's future could be as a major downtown destination. The event is the first in Florida for the Better Block movement, which started in Dallas two years ago and has spread to more than 20 cities nationally.

"It's all about potential," said Venessa Santiago, president of the Flagler Village Civic Association. "It shows what a little bit of vision and hope for a better neighborhood can do."

While seeds of arts districts have sprouted in other South Florida cities, including Wynwood in Miami and Pineapple Grove in Delray Beach, Fort Lauderdale's Flagler Village block is taking a different approach to establish itself.

Organizers have conducted traditional community brainstorming sessions to come up with design ideas for the block. Rather than put those plans in a report that gathers dust on a shelf, Better Block brings them to life on the street.

Saturday's guerrilla-style demonstration will be short-lived — volunteers will begin to set it up at 8 a.m., and it should be dismantled by nightfall — but more than ideas will be left behind. A number of the buildings have been painted, murals have been added along the street and some bike racks will remain.

Organizers hope the event will attract potential tenants to the street. They also want to promote the use of streetside kiosks for boutique businesses that might need lower overhead costs to survive.
Visitors will be asked to use their imaginations as they sit on shaded benches made from discarded wooden pallets, eat at large spools doubling as tables and view taped-together cardboard boxes as art.

"These are all ideas about what good amenities should be popping up on streets," said Rebecca Bradley, with the planning and design firm Cadence, one of the event's organizers. "It's an experiment and a demonstration."

The goal is to show how life on the street can be a daily event, not just an occasional activity.

"We've forgotten that streets are really public spaces," said Eric Dumbaugh, interim director of Florida Atlantic University's School of Urban and Regional Planning, a project participant. "Streets are where people come together."

Flagler Village residents see their area as an up-and-coming downtown community that needs more of the food, entertainment and shopping outlets Better Block envisions.

The block is already home to monthly art walks, sponsored by the FAT Village Arts District. Art businesses have a growing presence in the area and include graphic design, fashion photography, commercial filming and art studios.

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If you go

What: Better Block Fort Lauderdale

When: 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Saturday

Where: 500 block of Northwest First Avenue