



Windows into the Past

THE LATEST STOREFRONT POP-UP ON THE MILE IS AN EXPERIENCE

BY KAREN BUCHSBAUM

Empty storefronts are the bane of any main street, including Miracle Mile. This past fall, the largest landlord on the Mile – Terranova – allowed the city and the downtown Business Improvement District to install working artists in a half dozen vacant stores (half of which have now been leased). The idea was that pedestrians would stop, watch and maybe go inside to chat with the artist (or buy their work).

Now comes a pop-up project by The Villagers, the county's oldest historic preservation society. In a vacant storefront at 355 Miracle Mile, Kerdyk Realty has temporarily let Villager Joanne Meagher and artist Nancy

Martini – two friends who live in the Gables – set up a display of shadow boxes depicting 12 historic sites the organization helped preserve. Five of them – the Merrick House, the Woman's Club, Douglas Entrance, Miracle Theatre and the Montgomery Botanical Center Greenhouse & Home – are in Coral Gables. But this is not just a static window display. It is an e-tail experience. Passersby can scan QR codes on the storefront and connect directly to The Villagers' website for more information about the sites, future events, becoming a member or purchasing a copy of the award-winning coffee table book "Gardens of Miami," which

is also on display. Another QR code takes visitors on a virtual tour of quilts The Villagers have crafted and raffled as fundraisers through the years. Each quilt highlights a different historic theme; several are included as backdrops in the display.

Like the art studios on the Mile, the pop-up fits into the downtown's new approach to marketing itself as an "experience" rather than a shopping destination. "The retail experience is ever-evolving," says Meagher. "This e-tail concept combines e-commerce with an engaging, interactive 'window shopping' experience that encourages [pedestrians] on and around the

Mile."

According to artist Martini, the response to the e-tail window has been overwhelmingly positive. "The occupied storefront creates more foot traffic to help nearby stores and restaurants as well as making it more marketable for the realtor leasing the space," she says. The other benefit, she adds, is that "the e-tail window Joanne and I created serves as an educational tool to help promote historic preservation in our community – while also serving as a fundraising tool by featuring The Villagers' garden book." For more information go to thevillagersinc.org. ■