

City of Coral Gables City Commission Meeting
Agenda Item G-3
August 26, 2025
City Commission Chambers
405 Biltmore Way, Coral Gables, FL

City Commission

Mayor Vince Lago

Vice Mayor Rhonda Anderson

Commissioner Melissa Castro

Commissioner Ariel Fernandez (Absent)

Commissioner Richard D. Lara

City Staff

City Attorney, Cristina Suárez

City Manager, Peter Iglesias

City Clerk, Billy Urquia

Arts and Cultural Coordinator, Catherine Cathers

Public Speaker(s)

Jose Mata, Representing Empira Group

Michele Oka Doner, Artist

Agenda Item G-3 [4:03 p.m.]

A Resolution of the City Commission approving the concept and commissioning of a work of public art by Michele Oka Doner in conjunction with The Aurelian development project at 912 E. Ponce de Leon Blvd., in fulfillment of the Art in Public Places requirement for public art in private development (unanimously recommended by the Arts Advisory Panel approval/denial vote: 5 to 0; unanimously recommended by the Cultural Development Board approval/denial vote: 7 to 0).

Mayor Lago: We have a time certain four o'clock. It is item G-3.

City Attorney Suarez: G-3 is a Resolution of the City Commission approving the concept and commissioning of a work of public art by Michele Oka Doner in conjunction with The Aurelian

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development project at 912 E. Ponce de Leon Blvd., in fulfillment of the Art in Public Places requirement for public art in private development.

Catherine Cathers: Good afternoon, Mayor, Vice Mayor, Commissioners, Catherine Cather's, Arts and Culture Coordinator for the City of Coral Gables. I'm going to quickly hand it over to the developer representative with the Empira Group, Jose Mata and Kenneth Dupre are here on their behalf. And then I believe we do have the artist on Zoom. We'll check in with the City Clerk in a moment, Michelle Oka Doner. And so, we have a PowerPoint presentation. They will begin, and then I will come back up and talk about how it's meeting the requirements for the code.

Mr. Jose Mata: Good afternoon, Commissioners. My name is Jose Mata. I reside in 363 Aragon Avenue. Along with me, I have my colleagues, Kenneth Dupre and Dimitri Hacke. And we are here on behalf of Empira Group. We are a Swiss-based firm that began operations in the United States about four years ago. And since then, we have taken on two projects in Brickell. And now we're moving on to our third in South Florida, which is most importantly, our very first in Coral Gables. However, nobody from our team is strangers to Coral Gables. And we've worked on previous developments here, including the Plaza in which Kenneth was part and involved in commissioning the art. Right now, we're taking on a project that is also known as the Regency. And this project has a long history dating back all the way to 2017. That was tried to be developed by other developers, but it fell through multiple times. But now we have had our eyes on it since 2023. And it's finally coming to life. Our project will be called the Aurelian. And our inspiration came from Aurelius that radiates golden elegance and shining brightly in the heart of Coral Gables, meaning golden, gilded. And it's basically going to be luxury apartments that come into character with the city. And because this is our first project in Coral Gables, we want to give a cultural contribution that extends beyond the building itself. So, we request the Art in Public Places waiver to propose and install a work of public art, something lasting, memorable, and in harmony with the series character. Therefore, we have engaged pre-approved artists by the City of Coral Gables, Michelle Oka Doner, which I'm sure most of you know she has many wonderful works of art, including the most memorable one in the Miami International Opera, that I think is one of the most viewed public displays in the world, because there's over 50 million travelers that look at her art. And without further ado, we have her on Zoom, and maybe she can explain a little bit about her work.

Mayor Lago: I always enjoy, when I go to the Plaza and I see young children playing on the sculpture or on the tree, it's pretty memorable, you know, and especially just the beauty alone of the sculpture, and that it's functional. It's something a little bit different than most Art in Public Places installations.

Arts and Culture Coordinator: With the permission of the City Manager, I'm going to just help them a little bit through their presentation. Thank you. So, this is the site location.

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Mr. Mata: So yeah, the site location, as you can see, is in Ponce de Leon, Calabria, East Ponce. And we're going to do luxury apartment complexes in this area. And these are some renderings that we have prepared for the apartment complex itself. And as you can see...

Arts and Cultural Coordinator: Sorry.

Mr. Mata: No, yeah, you can keep going.

Arts and Cultural Coordinator: I went the other way, sorry.

Mr. Mata: As you can see, in that rotunda is where we want to install a memorable piece of art, which Michele has come up with some ideas that match with the Aurelian, and she's going to call her work of art the Aurelian. So, to match it, and she wants to keep it Floridian or South Florida, if you would, matching with gold and with our concept.

Arts and Cultural Coordinator: So, if we can, Michele, if we can invite you onto the Zoom and you can speak through the presentation.

Ms. Michele Oka Doner: Thank you. It's wonderful to see the Mayor and the Council perform their function for the city. And I've enjoyed watching the past a little bit. And it's a wonderful place, Coral Gables. I have probably a longer history there than most of you. As I was born and raised, I think you know I'm a Miami native. And Coral Gables was always part of our greater life. And right now, I pulled out a book of poetry from your founding father, which I'll treat you to at the end of the presentation. One of his beautiful poems that ironically references the vision that the Aurelian people who want to bring this luxury building have expressed to me. I think they'll be surprised as well. So, when I received the call from them and responded, I thought about the city of trees and the beautiful trees in Coral Gables, which is something that Miami Beach has always looked to define the leafy dome and the canopy for a city. And certainly, your designation as a city of trees is well-earned and shared by all of South Florida. And I did a figure. Let's see who has their finger on this pulse here. The next one is, let's see how to do this.

Arts and Cultural Coordinator: Michele, we actually have the presentation here. So, we have some of the images of your past work, and then we'll get to the piece itself.

Ms. Oka Doner: Well, here's one that now, let's go. So, you know me from Miami Airport, maybe if you've flown American Airlines. And then moving forward, there's some details, but all of that is locally sourced, which is the same as the project I'm conceiving for Aurelian right now. So, let's keep going. Now, this is in Doral, and this was created as a landmark for a new community. And it's made really from inspired by local bark that I picked up around the area and blown up and use them as imaginary forces, which is really how the history of architecture is formed. There's a wonderful book by James Reichert called On Adam's House in Paradise. And this is just what he's

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speaking about. And we even put some plantings in and referenced. Next, this is a piece that will be a sister to the Aurelian sculpture called Aurelia. And it's made of palm. This is in Valletta in Malta. And this was commissioned. They had a pedestal in the main square. They had nothing for it. They commissioned a work of art. This is their local palm. They had a very unique palm because they're so isolated on that rock far away. You know, seeds come, but like Darwin's finches, it evolved differently on the island. So, in green really fits the nature of the city. You can see one of their windows there, the City Hall. Next slide. And then because, you know, my airport work and, you know, the bench at Plaza Coral Gables, this piece is, you know, figurative work is something I've done for 60 years. There's always been a thread of that coming through the practice. This piece is in Connecticut, and it watches the sunset. But its root structure takes a language from you know where, South Florida. But don't tell them that. Next. And these are figurative works that were in the botanical garden in Atlanta. And so just to give you a sense that there have been many, and they have found wonderful homes. And they're based, this one is also based on tree structure and bark. Next. One of them found a home outside of Boston, and it was very cold, but there was nothing I could do about the weather once I sold the piece. Next. And then this was the first time I played with the idea of integrating human form with the palm form, which I loved so much growing up. And I did once make a skirt out of palm for a costume party. So, it's not the first time I had come to this conclusion about how the sculpture would be. I called it Guardian. It's in a private collection in Midland, Michigan. Next. And then I'm working. This was another one. I'm here in the foundry. And this is in a private building that has a public courtyard on Central Park South. The building is 40 Central Park South, and it goes back to 58th Street. And in the courtyard where people could look down from their apartments and their hotel rooms, they would look into the piece as well. So, it's not even three dimensional. It's really four dimensional. This was a big challenge, this piece, but they love it. Next. And so, when I spoke with Jose and Kenneth about this building and I saw their aspiration, the first thing I thought about when I saw the rotunda was Rome and my favorite building there, which is the Temple of Vesta. And then all of the gods and goddesses that reign supreme in Rome. We love walking there among their wonderful life of, I won't call it fantasy because who knows, but the fantastic, at least. So, this piece would be seen from the street, and she would be very happy, I think, surrounded by this, I'm going to say that, you know, classical structure that has always contained a work of art, a piece of sculpture. It has a great tradition. So, the streetscape. And then finally, I think there's the placement there. And there's a wonderful nest of palms that are planned for the landscaping that are in the plans of the developer. So, and it's now coming, the coming of tropical night by George Merrick. If I can hold your attention two more minutes and it is the end of the day. So here, the life that is day is dying away, fading, receding as the tropical ocean sleepily ebbs in sensuous motion. That's certainly our sculpture. With swift moving brush in colors of fire, the spirits of nature, the great Western canvas transform, touch softly and subtly inspire. Great torrents and rivers, mountains of gold with molten floods streaming, swift changing visions, transcendently hued, born of a touch to pass at their flush.

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I think he was a better real estate developer than poet, but nice to have found this book at the last minute this afternoon in my Florida library where it has a place of honor next to Vivian Larimer Yesler's Poinciana poems. So, thank you so much for your time.

Arts and Culture Coordinator: Okay, this is a, the budget that was put together for it and a close up also of what the piece may have texture wise. So, this is in compliance with section 9-103 of the Art in Public Places Code and the fund requirements, waivers and exemption that the applicant is requesting a waiver of the Art in Public Places fee by acquiring or commissioning artwork in this case it would be the commissioning of a unique singular work of art. As the City Attorney said it was approved by the Arts Advisory Panel recommended approval to the Cultural Development Board on August 6, and the Cultural Development Board is moving with a recommendation to the City Commission, they made that on August 19. This is, they're taking 1% of the project's total Art in Public Places fee. The cost of the proposed project is about \$300,000 for the artwork solely, plus there will be additional expenses towards the foundation and other related expenses. This is, it will probably end up being above what their fee is so the developer would be putting in additional fees beyond their required amount. The funds for the artwork are not to replace the expenses toward lighting and other infrastructure or hardscaping that would otherwise be designed and applied, and the artwork and all related expenses will be the responsibility of the developer with any difference in cost to be paid into the art fund, although we don't anticipate that happening in this case. When I'm done, I'm going to ask Jose just to talk a little bit more about some of the changes, or Michele, that they have made to what you've seen in the rendering in response to comments that they did receive from both the panel and the board. The developer is required to provide for the perpetual maintenance of the artwork in accordance with the Art in Public Places funding goals and implementation guidelines, which will be memorialized in a covenant to run with the land, and coordination of maintenance will be the responsibility of the developer and is not related to the Art in Public Places fee. Thank you. So, can you just talk a little bit about some of the modifications that were in response to comments?

Mr. Mata: Yes. So, when we went to the Arts Advisory Board, they recommended a few changes that we needed to incorporate, one of them being the pavers of the rotunda to make it more inviting and make it play with the art, as well as a pedestal that is more in line with the City of Coral Gables. Also, at night, they also recommended that we put lighting, and we agreed to all of this. So that is some of the changes that Michele will add towards her artwork. So, it's not only going to be the sculpture, but the entire area on its own.

Mayor Lago: Okay, perfect. Okay. Can I have a motion?

Commissioner Castro: I'll move it.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Second.

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Mayor Lago: Mr. Clerk, do you have any public comment?

City Clerk Urquia: No, Mr. Mayor.

Mayor Lago: I will close the public comment. Any further comment from the Commission?

Commissioner Castro: Through the Mayor, this is an empty lot right now, right?

Mr. Mata: Yes.

Commissioner Castro: This is actually the lot I walk my dog in. But we're going to enjoy the artwork.

Mr. Mata: That's awesome, I'm glad.

Commissioner Castro: Besides that, we're good.

Mayor Lago: Thank God we got that out of the way now.

Mr. Mata: Yes.

Vice Mayor Anderson: There's still going to be some grass there.

Mr. Mata: Yes.

Mayor Lago: Okay. Commissioner Lara. I just want to say that I really was impressed with the Aurelian artwork that's been produced. It is gorgeous, as are all the other pieces that were shown as part of the presentation. And I wanted just to recognize Ms. Doner for being a fellow Michigan Wolverine, and she's doing us all very, very proud. I'm actually representing today with my water mug and looking forward to this project coming to fruition.

Mayor Lago: An amazing artist. We're blessed to continue to expand on the portfolio of artworks that we have here. This is just going to continue to push what we do here in the city, and we're going to have some major additions over the next two to three years, once these projects come online. So, it's going to be something special.

Vice Mayor Anderson: I concur.

Mayor Lago: Anything else? We have a motion and a second.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Yes

Commissioner Castro: Yes

Commissioner Lara: Yes

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Mayor Lago: Yes

(Commissioner Fernandez: Absent)

(Vote: 4-0)

Mayor Lago: Thank you very much. Thank you, Catherine.

Arts and Cultural Coordinator: Thank you.

Mayor Lago: I think we're scheduling a meeting for this week, right? Okay, looking forward to it.