

# HOUSTON★CHRONICLE

## The town downtown

As city's center comes to life, newcomers — and old-timers — rediscover urban life

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Published: January 23, 2005



**Brett Coomer / Chronicle**

**ART PARTY:** Artist Ross Irwin, from left, Caryn Landauer, Thomas G. H. Dorsch and Nicola Parente, work on a project on the floor of Parente's downtown loft.

I keep hearing people pay Houston's street scene the ultimate compliment: It makes you feel like you're someplace else — New York, Philadelphia, San Francisco, New Orleans. One thing we all agree on: Houston can't go back to the blahs. Street life for the masses is here to stay. Downtown is here to stay.

Now street life really only cranks up around 10:30 p.m. Thursday through Saturday. And the crowd might be mixed in race, but it isn't in age, or in its ideas of what makes for a good time. It's a little dispiriting, actually, to this boho of a certain age, to look at the clubs along Main and say, "This is our downtown? A place where young people can dance in old buildings?"

But when I start to brood about downtown's future, I wander into Kaveh Kanes coffee house. When I step in to find a very young-looking jazz quartet tearing through an original composition, and see the customers talking or listening or maybe even reading and, blessedly, none of them posing, I feel that I've entered a pocket of reality. The owner of the coffee house, Ben Fullelove, surprises me with the news that he and his family have moved downtown, into the Rice. It's temporary, while his house is being remodeled, but Fullelove is happy here. "It's weird," he says, "but downtown is the part of Houston that feels most like a small town. You keep running into people you know."

Soon, when I get my own chance to spend more time downtown, through the loan of a loft, I come to realize what Fullelove means about the area's small-townness. For all its apparent glitz, downtown may be the Houston neighborhood where you're most likely to not only know your neighbors but even knock on their door to borrow the proverbial cup of sugar.

I got to live the urban dream recently when my wife, son, dog and I crashed in the Hermann Lofts on Milam for three nights that turned into a week. We were having too much fun to go home. I set myself the challenge of going 72 hours without getting in a car. No sweat. I walked to ballet, baseball and movies. Hopping on the rail, we had the perfect Saturday morning, shopping at a farmers market and pancaking at the Breakfast Klub. The pooch even got her turn, with a rare unleashed run along the bayou. And yes, I did say, "I feel like I'm somewhere else."

But I was just a tourist.

### **Informal Survey**

What's it like for the people who live downtown? The answers range from pretty good to pretty great. In my informal survey, the starriest-eyed residents tend to be the most recently arrived, especially two households that just moved from Austin. In these cases, the kindling wood of low expectations makes Houston and downtown both shine more brightly.

Amanda Jones and her boyfriend, Matt Reading, moved here when Jones was transferred last May. Unenthused about changing cities, the couple rented an apartment in the Keystone Lofts on Texas so they could be near Jones' downtown job while they looked for a permanent home. But they soon found themselves falling for downtown.

Jones even says those words that sound so strange to a Houstonian: "Houston is a lot better than Austin." It's clear, though, that when she says Houston, she means downtown. "You can walk everywhere, and there's so much to do. You have access to lots of interests, and there are lots of great people." Reading chimes in, "This can be your headline: Austinite pleasantly surprised by Houston."

The other pair of Austin refugees have an even better story. David and Pam Krischke are native Houstonians who moved away in the '70s. David was a college football coach, and when he quit in the mid-'80s, they opened a printing business in Austin. They did well enough that when they sold it a few years ago, they were able to retire young. But their rather vigorous idea of retirement meant they were free to spend their weeks working as substitute teachers in the public schools.

About a year ago, downtown real-estate agent Minnette Boesel sold them an apartment in the Hermann Lofts and a vision of the urban life. But they continued to teach during the week in Austin, returning to Houston for the weekends. I've heard of people arranging for their lives to run in the other direction, but to work in Austin and weekend in Houston — never.

But to the Krischkies, the arrangement wasn't so exotic. David says, "Austin's great if you're under 35 and want to go hear live music. But here you can do it all. You can hear music, or go to the theater or to major-league sports. And you can walk everywhere. It's safe. You see homeless people, but all they do is panhandle you. They're not going to hurt you."

Like everyone else I talked to, he does wish there were at least a small grocery store downtown.

They like it so much, they dropped the substitute-teaching gig and moved here full time. Or at least they had, until David said he needed yet another challenge and signed up to go to Iraq as a kind of morale coach for the troops. "Maybe I'm naïve, but I don't feel like I'll be in danger," he says. Pam, who is about to start a new downtown job herself, looks on her husband's Iraq adventure with apparent equanimity. "I'm not worried," she says.

## **'More European'**

So, yes, downtown has attracted some remarkable newcomers, including artist Nicola Parente from Italy. He moved into the Bayou Lofts three years ago and uses his 900-square-foot apartment as both living space and studio.

To create a work space, he pushes his furniture against the walls and just throws dropcloths on the floor. He recently had his first sold-out one-man show, but he's most eager to talk about his artist collaborative, Inventive Art, in which he and three other artists meet in his apartment to work together on paintings. "It's not like the Bauhaus collaborations, where each painter only worked on one corner of the canvas. We actually paint over each others' strokes, so it's a true collaboration," Parente says.

Parente gets excited talking about making art and living downtown. "It feels more European," he says. "You're forced to walk on the street, and then you meet people." He also finds a downtown market for his work. His pieces hang in a couple of cafes, Blank Canvas and Franklin Street Coffee, and the 6 Degrees bar has commissioned a mural from him when it opens from its current remodeling. "It's a fantastic market here," Parente says. "And there are lots of good artists."

## **Some Disappointments**

But living in the heart of Houston also has its disappointments, at least for Treebeards owners Dan Tidwell and Jamie Mize, who were early downtowners. In 1994, with three other people, they bought the small unnamed building next door to the Hermann Lofts, which the group converted into two large apartments and an office for Minnette Boesel's real-estate business.

"We'd been promoting urban redevelopment for so long that it was time for us to put our money where our mouth was," says Mize. They say they had been attending workshops on possible redevelopment since the '80s. "We've seen more charettes (artist renderings of architecture sketches) than we can remember." Mize recalls that when the Rice deal was announced in 1997, "We thought, 'We're on our way.'"

But things haven't changed as much as they'd like. "We're a little disappointed," says Tidwell. "We thought there would be more retail by now. More of everything, really."

Sure enough, almost no non-bar or non-restaurant retail has opened downtown. And no new housing has been built (though the Shamrock Towers project is supposed to break ground at Texas and Main any day now), and developers are nearly out of historical buildings to rehabilitate.

That points to downtown's crying need — affordable and middle-class housing. Reading is amazed at how cheap downtown Houston is. Renting and buying are about half of what they would cost in downtown Austin, but for most people, even those who crave an urban lifestyle, buying a \$400,000 loft is out of the question. And until downtown's population rises dramatically — doubling, at least, to 10,000 — you won't find significant retail there.

"Why isn't there more housing that a nurse working in the Medical Center could afford?" asks urban broker Jeff Kaplan of Wulfe & Co. developers.

The answer is and isn't complicated. Simply put, the dirt is expensive. On the other hand, other cities with equally expensive dirt have found ways to build mixed-income housing. But Kaplan says that Houston hears "mixed-income" and understands "housing projects."

In any case, Houston still has plenty of dirt downtown to redevelop. The area around the ballpark, to name just one parking-lot district, remains such a wasteland of surface lots that you expect to find T.S. Eliot taking up the parking at Astros games.

Many property owners cling to the notion that some developer will make them rich by building an office tower on their property. These owners are not being realistic, says Guy Hagstette of the Houston Downtown Management District. "They're stuck in the 1970s, when skyscrapers sprouted out of the Houston gumbo. But in the last 20 years, there have only been five new office buildings (downtown)," Hagstette says. "There will maybe be six lucky landowners whose lots are bought for high-rise development. The rest will either have to hang on to their parking lots or agree to sell for less than dream money. Then middle-class housing can be built."

But in the meantime, how can the city achieve this no-brainer of a goal? Realtors talk about the city's giving tax abatements to encourage developers to pay the asking price for the land. But Hagstette says, "City government has done a hell of a lot," referring to the massive public and private works projects that led up to the Super Bowl. How much more can we ask? He adds, "We (the Downtown Management District) are looking for every idea that doesn't involve public funds."

These ideas often involve corporate help. Maybe corporations that subsidize their employees' parking could take that same money and help employees pay for downtown housing. Maybe some corporations and the city could collaborate to build a public school downtown.

### **Early Stages**

These specific ideas may or may not fly. But they point to Hagstette's main point vis-à-vis downtown. The redevelopment process is in its early stages, and the work to come will take just as much creativity and hard work as has the recent substantial progress. My biggest fear is that people are going to think that now that we have the rail and the hotels and the sports facilities, downtown will take care of itself. It won't.

Still, Hagstette says, he is optimistic. "It's just that this job has taught me to be patient. But the city is too good about responding to the market for (housing and retail development) not to happen."

So yes, the downtown that so many people want so badly is coming, but it will only unfold one block at a time, and the picture may not be complete for another 20 years. I'm happy that downtown is coming back, but I still share in the lament of Tidwell and Mize. We think downtown is going to happen. We're just afraid we're going to be too old to enjoy it.