

The New York Times

Seattle

MEET ME DOWNTOWN

After decades of transformation and the pandemic's upheaval, the beating heart of the American city is climbing back to vibrancy.



As downtown shops fill up again and street festivals invite strolling, residents are stepping out to shop, eat and play games.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY HILARY SWIFT FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

‘It’s better than 2019.’



FOR YEARS, DOWNTOWN LEXINGTON was an afterthought to everything around it — two universities, a ring of homey residential neighborhoods and, in the rolling bluegrass hills surrounding the city, world-class horse farms. Basketball fans would go into town for University of Kentucky home games, and horse owners would gather at the few nice restaurants when the big horse sales in the area were underway. But otherwise, downtown was a stodgy precinct of banks, law offices and not much else.

That changed in the 2010s. Years of effort by civic boosters dovetailed with a nationwide rediscovery of urban living, and suddenly downtown Lexington was blooming. New bars, restaurants and coffeehouses proliferated; old bank buildings were repurposed into boutique hotels; old distilleries started making bourbon again; and developers put up glassy high-rises. There were plans for a \$300 million renovation of the city’s convention center and basketball arena.

“It just seemed like, starting from 2010, every year was getting better,” said Debbie Long, the owner of Dudley’s on Short, a restaurant that has been a downtown mainstay for 41 years, where regulars would linger over filet mignon as the city first slept, and then boomed. “The Marriott was getting ready to open in March,” Ms. Long said of the months just before the pandemic took hold. “The Breeders’ Cup was coming in 2021. We were scheduled to host some regional games for the N.C.A.A. tournament.”

About a week after the Marriott opened, though, the city shut down.

Lexington is more recession-proof than some other cities, because its largest employers are universities and hospitals. But still, the city was brought to an abrupt halt. Restaurants and bars were among the hardest hit businesses, and the hits came in waves.

“Either we weren’t making enough money, or there was high demand and we couldn’t find staff,” said Dan Wu,

An effort put on hold during the pandemic roars back, flooding a once-sleepy district of steakhouses and banks with new businesses and new life.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHENEY ORR FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES



who opened the first of what would be four Atomic Ramen locations in 2017. By the summer of 2021, they had all closed.

The big real estate developers in town had a different problem. When the pandemic hit, they had already spent millions on their projects, so they pushed ahead, if nervously. Some opened during the height of the pandemic.

“They just took the attitude of, ‘You know, this can’t last forever, or at least we hope it can’t,’” said Harold Tate, a former leader of the city’s development authority, who is now working as a project manager.

Is Lexington back to where it left off? Not completely. According to a report by the Downtown Lexington Partnership, a variety of measures of the local economy — including convention attendance figures — were considerably higher in 2021 than they were in 2020 but still not quite at prepandemic levels.

You’d be hard-pressed to know that, though, if you went downtown on a Friday night — even one in mid-August, before the students were back in town or the horse sales were going. The streets were noisy and full, the parking valets were busy at the steakhouses, concertgoers spilled out onto the sidewalks and D.J.s played to rooftop dance parties. The next morning, the downtown farmers’ market was packed, and around the corner, people stood in a half-hour-long line to buy tickets for a flight of coffee tastings at the annual Cold Brew Festival.

The pandemic “was such a drastic hit,” said Nate Polly, who has been roasting coffee downtown for a decade. But now, he said, “from a perspective of seeing people out doing things, it’s better than 2019.”





From the farmers' market to community runs to drag shows, downtown has grown far beyond its past as a meeting place for horse traders from farms outside of town.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHENEY ORR FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

‘We’re always almost getting there.’



AT MIDDAY ON A MONDAY IN AUGUST, downtown Hartford was desolate. A scattering of workers ate lunch in Constitution Plaza, the heart of the city’s business district. Elevated walkways were eerily quiet. Buses slipped through empty streets.

The pandemic has hollowed out Connecticut’s capital, a city of 120,000 about halfway between New York and Boston. The major companies that once secured Hartford’s claim to be the “insurance capital of the world” have drastically reduced their footprints downtown, as employees opt for remote work. In the past year alone, Travelers Insurance, UnitedHealthcare, Prudential Financial and others have relinquished hundreds of thousands of square feet of downtown office space.

“I worry about it every day,” said David Griggs, chief executive of the MetroHartford Alliance, the region’s chamber of commerce.

Hartford has long been defined by the rhythms of its office workers, with a reputation as a place that rolled up the sidewalks at 5 p.m. Before Covid-19 hit, downtown streets would be busy with tens of thousands of workers in the mornings, at lunchtime and around happy hour. Now, though, with hybrid work schedules at many companies, “we’re not seeing that same influx of corporate workers,” said Jordan Polon, executive director of the Hartford Business Improvement District.

As remote work cuts off a full-scale revival of the city’s business district, local leaders and developers are hoping that deeper investments in residential life and cultural attractions downtown will help fill the void. The pandemic has shown that the city needs to be “more residential-focused and less dependent on the office,” said Michael Seidenfeld, chief operating officer at Shelbourne, a commercial landlord with a major stake in the downtown area.

That transition is slowly underway. A \$50 million luxury residential development downtown has already attracted tenants, and hundreds more units are scheduled to become available in the area over the coming years. Free events on weekends and in off-hours have begun to lure people back downtown.

One Saturday toward the end of the summer, a dragon boat festival featuring Thai and Vietnamese food drew Jared Carter, 33, to the banks of the Connecticut River.

Hartford is slower and quieter than New York or Boston, he and his friends agreed. But the city, whose population is predominantly Black and Latino, has a diversity that is rare in New England. And there is an ease to life in Hartford, they said, with good breweries and live music on the weekends.

“It’s been trying to find its own identity for a long time,” Mr. Carter said of the city. “But I think it’s slowly coming together.”

A few blocks away on Pratt Street, a D.J. blasted Earth, Wind & Fire as children twirled hula hoops. Storefronts that had sat vacant for years were plastered with the banners of soon-to-arrive occupants: a cocktail lounge, a tattoo-and-coffee shop, a sports bar. A new bakery, Bloom Bake Shop, was primed to open in a spacious storefront, supported by funding from the American Rescue Plan Act.

Rory Gale, the owner of Hartford Prints!, a stationery store on the block, said she hoped the city would finally capitalize on its potential.

“There’s always this great momentum, and then a decline, and then great momentum,” she said. “We’re always almost getting there.”

Many longtime residents say they still feel the sting of what the city has lost, not just during the pandemic but over the decades before it. Waiting for the first pitch of a minor-league baseball game at Dunkin’ Donuts Park, Abraham Carrasquillo, 51, recalled the long-dead downtown stores where he used to buy shoes and Christmas presents.

“There’s no retail out here anymore,” he said. “Just the restaurants trying to survive.”

But it was a warm summer night, and to his childhood friend Jose Mercado, 50, there was still plenty to love about the city. It was Roberto Clemente Day at the ballpark, a time to reconnect. In the outfield, the American and Puerto Rican flags were unfurled side by side.

“You can see all the way around,” Mr. Mercado said with a smile. “Any seat is good.”



Remote work has hobbled the revival of ‘the insurance capital of the world,’ but there is hope that deeper investments in residential life and cultural attractions will help fill the void.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY JULIA GILLARD FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES







Free events on weekends and outside of working hours have begun to lure people back downtown, where Dunkin' Donuts Park hosts minor league games.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY JULIA GILLARD FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

‘Everything is completely changing.’



SALT LAKE CITY'S DOWNTOWN ROARED BACK from the depths of the pandemic. As newcomers flooded into Utah over the past two years — enticed by a hot economy, a lower cost of living and the outdoors — new residential towers, food halls and whiskey bars have sprouted against the backdrop of the Wasatch mountains. The city's downtown population is expected to double in the next two years.

But it comes at a cost: Rocsheda Wilson said the downtown resurgence was pushing out working-class people like her.

For 30 years, Salt Lake City was her affordable hometown. She lost her customer-service job after getting Covid-19, then lost her apartment. She said she and four of her children had to career from couches to motels to transitional housing.

Apartments in her old neighborhood that once rented for \$850 had been renamed, remodeled and re-rented for \$1,700. She now lives in a subsidized apartment in a suburb 45 minutes' drive south of the city.

"It was either take this and deal with the grind, or be out on the street," she said one afternoon, as she and her son Antwan, 13, walked toward the bus stop on their commute home.

Housing costs have spiraled in Mountain West downtowns during the pandemic, spurred by remote work and worsening housing shortages. Housing costs have soared in cities like Denver and Boise, Idaho, as well as in ritzy mountain towns like Park City, Utah. In Salt Lake City, the price of a typical home rose to more than \$600,000 last month, from \$425,000 at the outset of the pandemic in March 2020.

Salt Lake City has struggled to provide enough hous-

ing for the working poor and people who are chronically homeless. Downtown business owners complained to the police over the summer about security, human waste and drug activity stemming from growing numbers of homeless people who do not have adequate access to help.

Salt Lake City is spending roughly \$26 million on affordable housing projects, such as building new housing and retrofitting existing motels into apartments, and also hopes to build an \$8 million tiny-home community, Mayor Erin Mendenhall said. Advocates say the projects are welcome, but much more is needed.

And the city keeps growing. While only about 60 percent of downtown office workers have come back, tourism and nightlife have surged past prepandemic levels. A dozen downtown restaurants closed while pandemic restrictions were in force, but since then, 19 have opened. In a state where as recently as 2017, strict alcohol laws required that drinks be mixed out of sight of restaurant patrons, tipplers can now order a Utah Old Fashioned at a clubby new restaurant, Franklin Avenue, or have craft beer and tacos in the industrial Granary District.

Matt Crandall, a downtown restaurateur, said the traffic at his restaurants was running as much as 20 percent above prepandemic levels. "People are dying to get out," he said. "The city is getting bigger. It's amazing — on every street corner there are condo buildings going up."

On the eastern edge of downtown, a seven-story apartment building was rising beside Ms. Wilson and her son as they headed home. It promised to have a rooftop swimming pool and a club room. As they looked around, Ms. Wilson's son set down the heavy bag of pantry items that they were lugging to their new apartment far from downtown.

"Everything is completely changing," she said.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY BRIDGET BENNETT FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES



The pandemic drew newcomers to Utah in huge numbers. Downtown Salt Lake City is thriving as a result, but some longtime residents are feeling a housing pinch.

‘We’ve kept our charm.’



IN THE CAFES AND LITTLE SHOPS that ring the courthouse in Mountain View, Ark., residents have found it increasingly common to run into new neighbors “from off.” In the local parlance of the place, “from off” is a label for people who come from off the mountain — who, whether by luck or divine strategy, were raised somewhere else but wound up in a small town reachable by the country highways that wind and weave through the Ozarks.

“We asked God to lead us to the land where we were supposed to be, and ended up in Mountain View,” said Roni Willson, who set off from Nebraska with her husband roughly a year ago to build a new life — “destination unknown,” as she put it.

In recent years, a couple from the Mississippi Delta has reinvigorated the formerly shuttered Inn at Mountain

View, just off the town square. A couple from San Antonio opened the town’s only doughnut shop. The president of the local Folklore Society hails from Baton Rouge, La.

Downtown Mountain View, population roughly 2,800, could be defined by the blocks around the old Stone County courthouse, where the streets are dotted with a cafe serving country staples and a newer spot offering Mexican food; shops selling wooden furniture, and parks where musicians gather for impromptu jam sessions. (There are no bars, though; Stone County, like nearly half the counties in Arkansas, is dry.)

The community is not without its struggles: The economy of the area relies on tourism, and was battered by the pandemic. Festivals that were major draws, like Bean Fest and Folk Fest, went mostly dormant.

But things have been springing back. On a late August



PHOTOGRAPHS BY TERRA FONDRIEST FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

weekend, hundreds of motorcycles rumbled into town for a rally. The dance hall just off the square was filling up again on weekends, with crowds inching up to about half as large as they were before the pandemic.

There are also people in Mountain View like Erwin York, who is anything but “from off.” Mr. York, 97, lives on the land where he was born. He knows in his bones the magnetism of the place. Though he lived in California for 38 years, “I always said when I retired, I’d come home,” he said — and he did, some 40 years ago.

Mountain View is not for everyone. Slowing down to the town’s pace can be a tough adjustment. “We’ve got friends who are all, ‘There’s no Chick-fil-A!’” said Kevin Goggans. He and his wife, Cheri, bought and now run the Inn at Mountain View, a bed-and-breakfast where musicians will play casually in the parlor after a show at Club

Possum, and then return for homemade waffles and syrup in the morning.

“I feel like we’ve kept our charm,” one of the musicians, Pam Setser, a singer and songwriter who grew up locally, said of Mountain View after breakfast. “They’ve been trying to do more things to make it a little more charming.”

Elsewhere, she knew, the arrival of outsiders might be met with resistance and concern. But it seemed to her, she said, that many of the people “from off” whom she encountered were drawn by the soul of Mountain View and were intent on protecting it.

“They have a love and desire to be part of Mountain View,” Ms. Setser said.

Even so, some recent transplants from Texas pointed out one alteration that they would not mind: They’d love a margarita with their Mexican food.

The shops and restaurants that surround the Stone County courthouse are filling up again, welcoming the newcomers who keep arriving.



Music festivals and venues, and a good scoop of ice cream, are drawing visitors to Mountain View, population 2,800. But you won't find a cocktail.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY TERRA FONDRIEST FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES



‘We are open every single night.’



ON A BALMY SEPTEMBER WEEKNIGHT, Aaron Jennings Puckett, a rapper better known to fans as Lil Aaron, took the stage at Antone’s Nightclub, a music joint in the heart of downtown Austin, Texas, and egged the audience on: “I’ve got one more song for y’all,” he yelled into a microphone. “I want to see y’all go ballistic.”

Lil Aaron waved his long green locks as the thundering sounds of drums and guitars electrified the room. The crowd of mostly young people followed his every command.

The energy at Antone’s on this night illustrated why the city’s downtown continues to rebound from the depths of the pandemic.

Even after years of relentless change and progress, local people insist that the capital of Texas remains true to its mantra — “Keep Austin Weird” — and its claim to be the “live music capital of the world,” largely because iconic music venues like Stubb’s, Mohawk and Cheer Up Charlie’s refuse to cede their place in a booming downtown.

“People keep coming because they don’t want to see these places go away,” said Mallory Bellinger, a manager at Antone’s, an establishment whose blues roots date back to the mid-1970s. “We are doing really well. We are open every single night.”

The numbers behind Austin’s growth, which began to pick up pace in 2015, and was only fleetingly halted by the pandemic, tell a story of a city in the middle of a modern gold rush, even as it struggles with rising homelessness. Construction sites and cranes now seem to be permanent features of downtown Austin, whose ever-expanding skyline is starting to rival those of other big American cities.

Once known as a quiet center of Texas state government, downtown Austin has been transformed by waves of investment from many sources, but especially technology industries, with ambitious expansions by Apple, Samsung and Tesla.

“Austin is having its day now,” said Jenell Moffett, an associate vice-president at the Downtown Alliance, a nonprofit group that advocates for the vitality of downtown. “I

don’t think that Austin slowed down the same way other cities slowed down.”

Though the pandemic’s effects are still being felt — not every shuttered business has reopened, and concerts and other shows have yet to return to their prepandemic numbers — getting back to normal economically seems to be within reach, officials and residents said.

But downtown has become less affordable. In 2017, residential rents hovered around \$2.70 a square foot; now they are closer to \$3.40, according to data collected by the Downtown Alliance.

Michael Davis, 32, is one of many people who commutes to work downtown, traveling for a half-hour each way from his home in South Austin to the Red River Cultural District, a hub for music, art and other entertainment. “For me, living downtown is not worth it,” Mr. Davis said. “South Austin is just so peaceful and quiet.”

Others, like Dillon Minacci, 31, say living downtown is worth the price tag. Mr. Minacci, who moved to Austin from Philadelphia during the height of the pandemic in October 2020, said he tried a suburban neighborhood at first, but then moved downtown earlier this year in search of big-city energy.

“I’m a city kid,” he said. “I’m used to being able to walk anywhere.”

Rising housing costs have contributed to a surge in homelessness, with encampments appearing under roaring highway overpasses and close to state legislative buildings. Austin, which has a reputation as a liberal oasis in a conservative state, began trying to clear the encampments last year after voters approved a ban on public camping, but the city has not been able to solve its homelessness problem altogether.

Ms. Bellinger, the Antone’s manager, said she would like to see the city make an extra effort to help its homeless people get on their feet, for their benefit as well as the city’s.

“I do think there is a general feeling of people wanting to take care of one another here,” she said. “We all want a beautiful downtown.”

With rapid development and a rebound from the pandemic, the venues that cement the city’s claim as ‘live music capital of the world’ refuse to cede their place in a booming downtown.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY MIRANDA BARNES FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES





Waves of investment have transformed downtown from a quiet center of Texas state government into a bustling tech hub. And the clubs are packed.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY BRANDON THIBODEAUX FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

‘I never came around this area.’



BEFORE COVID, RESIDENTS and business owners had big dreams for Old Town Peoria, an overlooked little downtown in the Phoenix suburbs. In place of empty lots and shuttered buildings, they envisioned new apartments, shops and restaurants. Maybe a climbing wall or concert space. New money, energy and life.

They are still waiting.

On a 106-degree summer afternoon, Jorge Berber sat outside his family’s barbershop, marveling at how the undertow of the pandemic had never relented. The shop’s haircut numbers were still down 40 percent. The auto parts store next door was empty now. When, Mr. Berber wondered, would Arizona’s galloping growth finally trickle into the quiet downtown that anchors Peoria, a city of 190,000 people?

“All these promises, and nothing ever happens,” Mr. Berber said. “There are a lot of businesses that didn’t survive.”

Business owners say that plans to redevelop downtown seemed to wither during the pandemic, amid turmoil between the city and a developer. As the city sprang back from pandemic shutdowns, the business owners watched spring-training tourists flock to the baseball complex and 100-table restaurants on the north side of Peoria, and lamented that their city seemed to be growing everywhere but downtown.

Peoria appeals to young families and first-time home buyers who find themselves priced out of Phoenix or Scottsdale. They settle in old bungalows, stucco ranches and new apartment complexes. There’s plenty to do, from hiking to jet-skiing and pontoon-boating on the Lake Pleasant reservoir.

There just isn’t as much to do downtown. Restaurants there hung on with takeout menus and outdoor seating. Driftwood Coffee, a locally owned cafe that opened in 2018, survived in part by capitalizing on its to-go window. A distillery shifted focus to become an event and wedding space. But a locksmith and laundromat are no more.

Business owners say that Peoria’s residents are hungry for an excuse to return downtown. People pack the pocket parks and fill the streets whenever the city holds an art walk or a Second Saturdays party. Unlike so many Arizona commercial strips that are built around parking lots and five-lane streets, Peoria’s downtown is made for strolling, with parks and houses within walking distance.

One business that opened downtown during the pandemic is 808 Social, a Hawaiian-themed coffee shop that has found an improbable niche selling macadamia-nut iced coffees and Spam musubi in the middle of the Sonoran desert. “I never came around this area,” Sarah Ihori, a barista, said of downtown. “It’s changed a lot.”

But day to day, it is still too empty, said Lance Linderman, an owner of Driftwood Coffee.

“It hasn’t really come back,” Mr. Linderman said. “Most people never come through here. Or know about it.”





Most of the 190,000 residents of Peoria, a Phoenix suburb, visit the north side to eat, shop and have fun, leaving the quiet little downtown struggling to fill its parks and restaurants.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ADRIANA ZEHBRAUSKAS FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES



PHOTOGRAPHS BY ADRIANA ZEHBRAUSKAS FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES



People fill the streets when the city holds an art walk or a Second Saturdays party. But many storefronts are closed, and those that are open are rarely busy the rest of the time.

‘It became a ghost town.’



Washington, D.C.

PROXIMITY USED TO BE EVERYTHING in Washington, D.C.: proximity to the seat of the federal government, to influential staff members and lobbyists, to power. That was, until the pandemic hit.

The streets that intersect in the nation’s political epicenter are lined largely with government buildings and lobbyists’ offices, and with the restaurants and bars that serve them. Though pandemic restrictions have ended and workers have trickled back, the area remains subdued. The food trucks that used to line Farragut Square are gone.

Gerren Price, the chief executive of the DowntownDC Business Improvement District, said the city “is underperforming when it comes to the return to office.”

“It’s clear the future of downtown will need to be more

mixed-use, and somewhat less office-dependent,” he said.

A survey of 100 commercial buildings in downtown Washington conducted by Kastle Systems found they were just over 41 percent occupied, on average, over a four-week period ending in early October.

Residential neighborhoods just outside downtown are flourishing. New apartments are going up along the waterfront, and the Union Market, with its small restaurant stands and shops, is bustling. But rents have climbed in those areas, contributing to the city’s housing affordability crisis.

In August, a homeless encampment in McPherson Square had more than two dozen tents scattered around the park within sight of the White House and the Department of Veterans Affairs.

When the pandemic hit downtown Washington, “it be-



PHOTOGRAPHS BY DOUG MILLS/THE NEW YORK TIMES

came a ghost town, except for people who live on the streets,” said Christy Respress, executive director of Pathways to Housing DC, which helps people experiencing homelessness in Washington. The push to isolate as a way to stem the spread of the coronavirus, she said, meant that more people chose to pitch tents in federal and local parks, rather than stay in shelters.

A block away in Franklin Park, Bill Bortz, 78, a retired tax counselor at the Treasury Department, walked with his pug Sadie, carrying an array of croissants and pastries he had picked up at two of the remaining downtown bakeries. Mr. Bortz said there had long been a division between the transient political scene and the residents whose families had lived in the city for generations.

“Washington doesn’t have a single character — it’s a more complex, nuanced place than that,” he said.

During the height of the pandemic, the city’s many museums were closed, and tours of the Capitol were suspended. The number of visitors to the city dropped to 13 million in 2020, from more than 24 million, a record, in 2019.

Tourism rebounded in 2021, with an estimated 19 million visitors to the city, and tourists can once again be found scooting across the National Mall or traipsing through the Capitol behind red-jacketed tour guides.

Sitting on a newly installed swinging picnic bench in Franklin Park, Adam Toeg, from London, sipped an iced coffee and chatted with his tour group, made up of students from Europe and Australia.

Mr. Toeg, 23, talked about how impressed the group was with the grand architecture of the monuments and federal buildings. “They put a lot into it to make it like the showpiece of the United States,” he said.

Tourists and office workers have started to return to the heart of the nation’s capital, but as pandemic restrictions ease, the streets are subdued.



New apartments are going up in bustling areas along the waterfront, just outside downtown, and the city agrees it needs to rethink the long-term plans for its business district.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY DOUG MILLS/THE NEW YORK TIMES

‘The city is so resilient.’



MAURO BRUNO, AN OWNER OF AVANTI, an Italian cafe in downtown Chicago, stood in his restaurant’s dining room and pointed to the empty space where customers used to form lines at lunchtime that stretched from the counter out to the sidewalk.

Finance guys, office workers, administrative assistants, he remembered — all in a hurry to grab a panini and get back to their desks.

“It was crazy — we used to have a rock-solid business,” Mr. Bruno said. “But if people aren’t going to work, they’re not going to lunch. I don’t think it’s ever coming back.”

In this part of the Loop, the heart of Chicago, the scene on Friday afternoons resembles that of the dark, spooky days early in the pandemic, when people rarely ventured out of their homes and office buildings were barely functioning.

Restaurants are quiet now, especially on Mondays and Fridays when working from home is most common, and Mr. Bruno said he was constantly watchful for pickpockets who prey on his few customers. Many nearby storefronts are vacant, with signs in the windows offering leases. One real estate company estimated this year that one-third of Chicago’s downtown storefronts were empty.

Venture away from the corporate-office parts of the Loop, however, and Chicago starts to look closer to normal.

Along Lake Michigan and the Chicago River, the areas that are most popular with tourists are bustling with visitors, public art and street musicians. Architectural boat tours of the city are seeing the crowds return. Large trade shows and concerts in the city over the summer brought some downtown hotels their biggest month ever, according to Kimberly Bares, chief executive of the Magnificent Mile Association, a trade group representing Michigan Avenue businesses.

In Millennium Park, at the huge shiny sculpture known as the Bean, crowds jostled for a spot to take a picture with the skyline of Chicago reflected above.

Janet Agunloye, 31, a social worker who lives in the city, was there with a visiting cousin. Her usual downtown spots — restaurants, rooftop bars overlooking the river — have been full again lately, she said, after a pandemic lull when she could always get a table. “Everything is crazy here again,” Ms. Agunloye said.

Graham Thompson, a native Chicagoan and the owner of Optimo, a store that sells high-end hats manufactured on the South Side, is straddling both sides of a bifurcated downtown.

From his gleaming store in the Monadnock Building in the Loop, he has seen foot traffic in the area climb steadily, but not to prepandemic levels. He is optimistic that in the long run, downtown’s purpose is shifting away from a focus on corporate life and more toward the arts, culture and music. He described the downtown as “depressing” during the pandemic. But “the city is so resilient,” he said. “Chicago’s feeling better.”





The Loop is in the middle of a split recovery: In areas around the office buildings, desolation, but elsewhere, tourists, diners and excitement.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JAMIE KELTER DAVIS FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES





Along Lake Michigan and the Chicago River, tourists are back, strolling the waterfront, taking architectural boat tours, and enjoying the public art and street performers.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY JAMIE KELTER DAVIS FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES



PHOTOGRAPHS BY JAMIE KELTER DAVIS FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Vacancies are common in the corporate-office parts of the Loop; by one estimate, a third of the area’s storefronts sat empty this year.

‘I believe Seattle can be what it used to be.’



IN THE HEART OF SEATTLE'S retail core, a multimillion-dollar renovation has given the Pacific Place Mall an expansive atrium entranceway, with natural wood and natural light that beckon to a valuable clientele: the thousands of people who, in ordinary times, would be working at Amazon's nearby headquarters.

But these days, the city's tech industry remains largely in work-from-home mode, and the stores in Pacific Place — which completed its renovation in 2020 — are mostly vacant. A few shoppers ride the escalators through an eerie emptiness. Much of the sunlight harnessed by the architects now falls on painted plywood walls.

“Welcome to the great indoors,” says one of the walls, apparently oblivious to all that has transpired.

Retail destinations meant to draw shoppers into major cities spent much of the pandemic struggling to survive. Now they are trying to discern whether the stark changes in downtown life are permanent, or whether the allure of downtowns will keep the retail sector on a methodical path back toward the vibrancy of their heyday.

Perhaps nowhere is that uncertainty more acute than in Amazon's hometown, where the company and the city's brick-and-mortar retailers have had a complicated relationship, often competing but also at times complementing one another.

At Pacific Place, many of the national retailers who were once anchor tenants have not returned. The mall's managers have instead offered pop-up retail space for local businesses to showcase their wares and test the viability of taking a more permanent space.

On the second floor, Laurie Kearney has set up her shop, Ghost Gallery, featuring local art, wine and décor — many of the items with ghost themes — in a mall that is trying to avoid being a ghost town. The items she sells are things you can't find on Amazon. So, too, are the experiences: In the back, where before the pandemic shoppers

The waterfront is abuzz again because of conventions and tourism. But one nearly empty mall embodies the struggle to return to normal.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY RUTH FREMSON/THE NEW YORK TIMES



would try on clothing from Francesca's, visitors can now get a tarot card reading.

Ms. Kearney's shop used to be in the nearby Capitol Hill neighborhood, but she seized on the opportunity to relocate into Pacific Place during the pandemic. Since then, she said, her foot traffic and business have steadily increased.

“A lot of my customers are tech folks,” she said. “They come in and want to buy art and support small businesses.”

There are other signs of hope for downtown: Demand for hotel rooms in Seattle is nearing prepandemic levels, and so are visitors, according to the Downtown Seattle Association, and more people live downtown now than in 2019. Cruise ships arriving over the summer brought tourists flooding into the waterfront, which is undergoing a sweeping renewal to better connect visitors to the Pike Place Market to the north and the city's sports stadiums to the south.

Still, office workers are only commuting to downtown at about 40 percent of their prepandemic numbers, and many businesses and visitors express concern about safety and homelessness.

The city is experimenting with a program to subsidize small retailers who move into vacant stores downtown. One business owner in the program is Sierra Jones, who opened a shop called Inside in April. The store, a few blocks from Pacific Place, features local art, products and events.

Ms. Jones views her shop as part of an effort to rebuild what was lost in a downtown that gave her many fond memories.

“To me, personally, I believe Seattle can be what it used to be,” she said, “thriving with businesses, thriving with commerce, thriving with community events.”

