

# A DECADE OF DOWNTOWN- TOWN

As San Antonio nears the close of former Mayor Julián Castro's "Decade of Downtown," we take a look at progress that's been made, what it's like to work and live downtown right now and what's still needed in the decades to come

BY KATHLEEN PETTY



# A Vision for Vibrancy

**FORMER MAYOR AND PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE JULIÁN CASTRO** started talking about the importance of revitalizing downtown almost as soon as he took office 10 years ago. He opined about the center city's heydays in the 1920s when a downtown Joske's was bustling, moviegoers packed the Majestic Theatre, museums began to open, streetcars traversed down Houston Street and the Aztec Theatre and Municipal Auditorium drew people downtown long after they'd clocked out for the day. "Somewhere along the way, something very precious went missing," he said during a 2014 farewell speech after he accepted the position of secretary of Housing and Urban Development in the Obama administration. "What went missing was a sense of ownership and connection by locals with downtown."

The Majestic Theatre shut its doors in 1974 and major retailers continued abandoning Houston Street through the mid-1980s.

As was the case with many American cities, master-planned suburbs lured people to the outskirts and San Antonio's city limits sprawled. Downtown became a place known as a hot spot for tourists and convention-goers but not an area that locals ever needed to go.

Castro set out to change that, officially declaring the start of the "Decade of Downtown" in the fall of 2010. His vision aligned



with feedback from the thousands of San Antonians who helped shape SA2020's goal of creating a vibrant downtown that would not only allow businesses to prosper but also be a place that would continue to draw visitors *and* entice more locals there to "live, work and play." "If the vision statement for downtown is realized, it's the heart of San Antonio and is everyone's neighborhood," says SA2020 CEO Molly Cox.

"Great cities have great downtowns" became the mantra of Castro and other proponents of the urban core, including Cox, Andres Andujar at Hemisfair and developers like Graham Weston, David Adelman and Silver Ventures.

"There were several decades of disinvestment in the downtown area starting in the 1950s when we started building highways and beautiful suburban developments," says Andujar, CEO of Hemisfair Park Area Redevelopment Corp. "The 2010 proclamation was a shift from that disinvestment that had taken a toll on the general infrastructure of downtown."

Even before 2010, some of the building blocks for revitalizing downtown were already taking shape, says Mary Bartlett, partner at Marmon Mok, an architecture firm that has been involved in redeveloping some of downtown.

At the turn of the century, work was done on buildings across from the Majestic Theatre (which reopened in 1989 and was expanded in 1996) to update for modern uses while still maintaining the structures' historic feel. The Palm opened in a refurbished space in 2000 and Bohanan's followed, renovating an old building on Houston Street and opening in 2002. "That was kind of the prep work," Bartlett says.

Plans for what would become the Tobin Center for the Performing Arts got underway in 2007, and the River North Museum Reach project concluded in 2009. That stretch created a new place for local development between downtown and Pearl, which was also beginning its true renaissance with the opening of the Culinary Institute of America in 2010.

A 2012 municipal bond would infuse \$93.5 million into downtown and development incentives helped to catalyze real estate projects like Pearl's Can Plant and 1800 Broadway, plus the Flats at Big Tex and Cevallos Lofts in Southtown, while places like the Vistana and Cadillac Lofts downtown paved the way for showing true downtown living was possible. By the time Castro left for D.C., other residential projects were in the

PEARL BREWERY: COURTESY PEARL; MAJESTIC MARQUEE: COURTESY MAJESTIC & EMPIRE THEATRES; RAND BUILDING: COURTESY GEEKDOM

## DOWNTOWN MILESTONES

### 2009

River Walk expands to include Museum Reach, which stretches from Lexington to Grayson.

### 2010

The Culinary Institute of America, Twig Bookshop and La Gloria open at Pearl. Silver Ventures had purchased the 22-acre property in 2001 and tenants including Aveda, Il Sogno and Sandbar had moved in by 2009—the same year the Farmers Market launched—but many attribute the CIA's opening as the tipping point to Pearl becoming a hub for culinary and cultural activity in San Antonio. When Southerleigh and then Hotel Emma opened in 2015, it further cemented Pearl as a model for successful redevelopment.

### 2011

Graham Weston and Nick Longo launch Geekdom, a co-working space and startup incubator program, in Weston Centre.

### 2013

Briscoe Western Art Museum opens in former Circus Museum and public library.

### 2014

Tobin Center for the Performing Arts opens thanks to a \$203 million investment.

### 2014

As Geekdom continues to grow, it moves to the historic Rand Building on Houston Street, which now also houses other tech companies plus Rosella Coffee, Pinch Boil House and more.





# PROGRESS MADE TOWARD SA2020 GOALS

works, helping fulfill his goal of bringing people downtown, with the idea that major employers and retail would follow.

In 2016, the Henry B. Gonzalez Convention Center's expansion and updates were unveiled and another nearly \$200 million in bond money was approved for downtown.

Thanks to \$70 million in funding from the University of Texas System Board of Regents and a \$15 million gift from Weston, the University of Texas at San Antonio is greatly expanding its downtown footprint. It plans to have its School of Data Science, National Security Collaboration Center and eventually its business school downtown and to triple its downtown enrollment over the next 10 years from the current 4,500 students to 15,000.

TOBIN CENTER, ALAMODOME: COURTESY MARMON MOCK; FROST TOWER: COURTESY VISIT SAN ANTONIO; TOP: SHUTTERSTOCK.COM



Frost Tower opened this year, USAA and CPS Energy are moving their headquarters downtown and cranes scattered between Pearl and Southtown are an outward sign that more residential and commercial development is on the way.

Numerically, that all has added up to San Antonio meeting most of the goals set forth by SA2020. But, advocates say, that doesn't mean we've arrived. Turn to page 54 to find out what leaders think is needed for downtown San Antonio to truly thrive in the decades to come.



## Downtown Economic Impact

**Goal:** Sustain a 5 percent increase annually

**Progress:** Met

Updated numbers are due out this year, but even in 2015 this goal had been met with a \$14.8 billion assessed impact compared with nearly \$9.6 billion the year before.



## Downtown Employment

**Goal:** Increase by 25 percent or more

**Progress:** Met

The city has seen a 57 percent increase in downtown employees since 2010. With USAA, CPS Energy and others moving downtown, that number will only grow.



## Downtown Crime

**Goal:** Reduce by at least 50 percent

**Progress:** Improved

After a spike in 2016, crime has again begun to decline with 2,167 instances of assault, burglary, larceny, vehicle theft, homicide and other crimes in 2017 (down from 3,134 in 2012 and 2,864 in 2016).



## Downtown Population

**Goal:** Increase by at least 15 percent

**Progress:** Flat

At just over 23,180, downtown's population has remained relatively flat since 2013. (Although, Cox says, the way population is measured has been updated making it difficult to compare).



## Downtown Housing Units

**Goal:** 7,500 new units

**Progress:** Met

With 7,017 units created and another 1,663 in the works, the goal will be exceeded by 2020.

## 2015

Yanaguana Garden debuts at Hemisfair next to the Magik Theatre. The property has since added Dough, CommonWealth Coffeehouse, Blue Cat Yoga and other retailers, and just welcomed its first residents to the The '68 apartments.

## 2015

H-E-B opens its South Flores Market, the first grocery store in downtown.

## 2016

Henry B. Gonzalez Convention Center's \$325 million expansion and upgrades are unveiled.

## 2017

Around \$50 million in upgrades are made to the Alamodome, which proponents say led to the 2018 NCAA Men's Basketball Final Four taking place in San Antonio (it will return in 2025).



## 2018

The first segment of Phase 1 of the San Pedro Creek Culture Park opens between North Santa Rosa and Houston streets. Three more phases of development will bring walking trails, landscaping and public art along the creek through Cevallos street.

## 2019

Frost Tower is completed, the first major addition to the city's skyline in over two decades.







# Today's Reality

## 3 young professionals on living and working downtown



**SEAN WEN, CO-OWNER AT PINCH BOIL HOUSE**

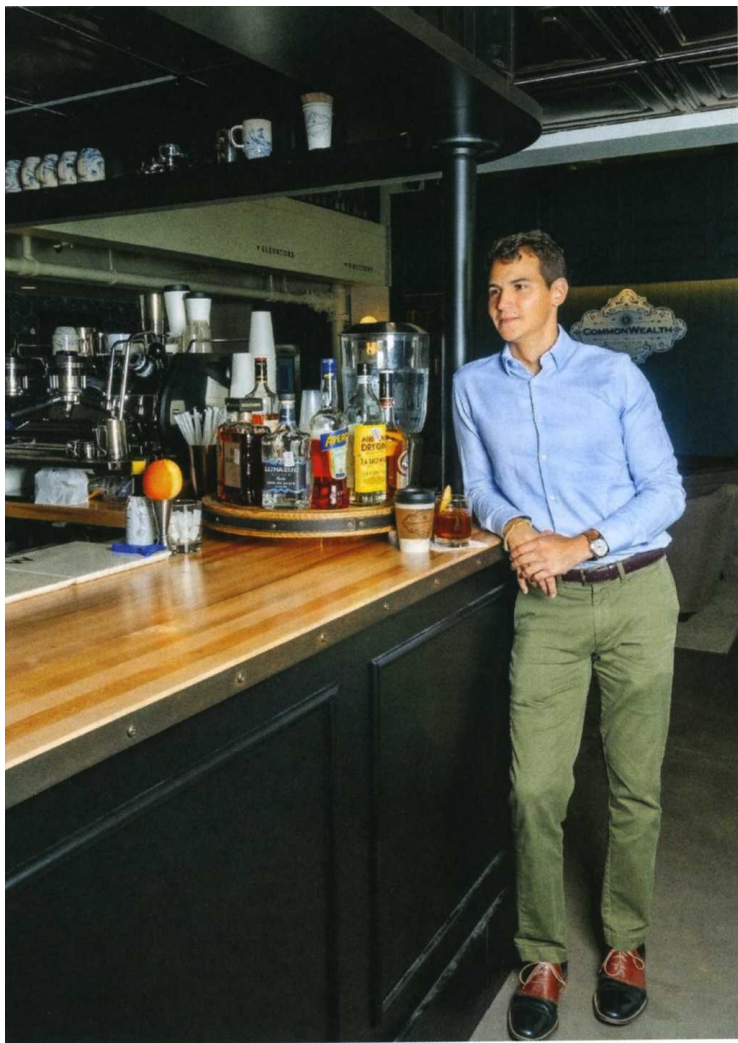
WHEN SEAN WEN MOVED TO SAN ANTONIO TO work at Geekdom, he never envisioned being able to bike to work. Perhaps it was his recent experience as a University of Texas student in downtown Austin or his years growing up in Houston, but Wen had tempered his expectations when it came to urban life in the once lackluster center of the Alamo City. That was nearly five years ago, and Wen is the first to say that he's been proven wrong.

Now the co-owner of Pinch Boil House on the ground floor of the Rand Building, Wen bikes the 6 minutes to work each day from his home off Main Street near Pearl and often spends his free time visiting other downtown businesses, like La Panadería, Jet-Setter and Rebelle. "That's not something I pictured being able to do when I moved here," he says. "But there's so much happening downtown."

He and Andrew Ho opened their restaurant in 2017 after testing it as a pop-up concept and in the two years since, Wen says they've seen increased traffic from downtown employees and residents. "(Pinch) is crazy now at lunch—it's a mad house, which is amazing," Wen says. "What ultimately helped was that the community is such a huge part of downtown that they really try to support everything that happens downtown."

A higher density of downtown dwellers still is needed to keep the momentum of growth going, Wen says, but San Antonio is on its way. "It's made such huge strides already," he says. "If we continue to have this approach of 'how can we make it more fun and more livable and more walkable?'—those are the things that are going to change the landscape quickly."





## JOSÉ RAMON CAMPOS, CO-OWNER AT COMMONWEALTH COFFEEHOUSE & BAKERY

**GROWING UP IN SAN ANTONIO,** the only time José Ramon Campos' family went downtown was if they had visitors who requested to see the River Walk. "People thought of the River Walk as a tourist trap," says Campos, whose parents moved from Mexico City and settled on the North Side.

Campos, co-owner of CommonWealth Coffeehouse & Bakery, which has multiple locations downtown, left San Antonio to attend college in Dallas and then worked overseas and in San Francisco before coming home in 2013. He started as a consultant for Jorge Herrero, co-owner at CommonWealth, and later joined the venture.

Since returning to the Alamo City, Campos says he's been continually migrating toward downtown, starting out at the Quarry and now living just north of the city's center in Tobin Hill.

After their flagship cafe opened in Mahnce Park, CommonWealth Coffeehouse expanded to Hemisfair, which Campos says they believe is one of downtown's most transformative developments. They opened in the Weston Centre in early 2018 at

the invitation of Graham Weston and recently debuted an outpost in the Burns Building, which was redeveloped by David Adelman. The office building was once the home to Bromley Communications, a powerhouse ad agency that Campos remembers visiting as a kid when his aunt worked there. "It's just very iconic and very San Antonio," he says. The national co-working giant WeWork is opening in the nearby Kress Building, which Campos says they expect will fuel a stream of regulars like they're already seeing at the other locations.

General manager and co-owner Marcel Arana says Campos is the first to encourage employees to move closer to the cafes, even helping people look for downtown apartments if that's what it takes. Both he and Campos say transportation is one of the biggest issues the city needs to tackle for downtown to go from growing to truly thriving—though Campos says that doesn't have to mean more parking if people live close enough to walk, bike or rideshare. "Appreciate downtown," he says. "We get lost in the growth and change, but 10 years or so ago, Pearl was an epicenter for drug use. Broadway was dead. We've come so far and there's more coming in the next few years."

## LIBBY DAY, MARKETING MANAGER AT THE AZTEC THEATRE

**LIBBY DAY ENROLLED AT TRINITY** University in 2008 with a clear vision: study international environmental policy and then move to one of the coasts.

After shifting her concentration to urban design, however, she began to learn about San Antonio's history and to appreciate its still developing downtown. "We were encouraged to explore and make mental notes," she says.

Still, when she graduated, downtown was usually empty on weekends and the St. Mary's Strip, which she'd heard was once a cultural hub, had all but died out. With a love for live music, she and a fellow graduate founded SATX Music in 2011, hoping to create a website where locals could learn about all of the shows happening each week. That morphed into a booking and promotion business and eventually led Day to her current position at the Aztec Theatre in the heart of downtown.

Through it all, she met others who shared her passion for reinvigorating the city's urban spaces and watched as the St. Mary's Strip came back to life. "Ten years

ago if you came downtown on a Friday, unless there was an event, it was pretty dead," she says. "Now it's a different story. The parking garages are full. People are walking around."

Having graduated from high school in Arizona, where her parents lived 45 minutes from the closest gas station, Day says she wanted to be close to the city's center and has always lived within 10 minutes of downtown. She spends a lot of time at the Aztec and outside the theater, loves having cocktails from Downstairs at The Esquire Tavern. If she doesn't pack lunch, she walks to the recently opened Royal Blue Grocery on Houston Street.

She doesn't see this as downtown's peak, though. Ongoing development at Hemisfair, San Pedro Creek and along the Broadway corridor will help, but she believes attention also needs to be paid to issues like homelessness and gentrification in downtown areas. She still encounters suburban residents at the theater whose negative impressions of downtown were cemented decades ago and knows reshaping those takes time. "You always have to be moving forward in my opinion," she says.







# Downtown of the Future

BEXAR COUNTY'S POPULATION IS EXPECTED TO GROW TO 3.34 million by 2050, according to census data. The only way to add that many people without creating the kind of traffic headaches that exist in places like San Francisco is to increase density downtown and create places where people can live, work and play without having to drive 20-plus minutes on highways, leaders say.

That's in the works at places like Hemisfair, along Broadway and elsewhere. But while plenty of once-abandoned buildings have found new life, empty storefronts still remain just a block off Houston Street. Residents have returned downtown but more are needed and now developers and city leaders are grappling with what kind of housing to create so they can meet demand from those moving in while still catering to those who've long lived around the center of the city. Here, leaders in shaping the future of downtown weigh in on the work that remains and their vision for the future.

## LORI HOUSTON, ASSISTANT CITY MANAGER

One of the visionaries behind the progress made during the Decade of Downtown, Lori Houston says the last 10 years have been a catalyst for development and for garnering support of the city center. Now the work continues. "Since 2012, downtown has exploded and looking at all of the cranes now, it's just amazing," she says. "But we're not done. We still need to focus on downtown, through infrastructure, development and activation."

Surface parking lots still account for over half of downtown. That has to change, Houston says. Whether those small lots are developed into boutique hotels, high-rise housing or soon-to-be-needed Class A office space, a truly vibrant downtown thrives on active spaces. "My dream would be 14,000 hotel units and 14,000 rental units," she says, adding that rental units need to include a mix of market rate housing and affordable housing.

Houston points to green space development coming near Frost Tower, the San Pedro Creek project, Broadway corridor work and the next two stages of Hemisfair as projects that will continue to transform downtown. "Narrowing and activating Broadway and making the street pedestrian-friendly will be huge," she says, adding that the project is one she hopes can be replicated elsewhere in San Antonio.

SKYLINE: COURTESY VISIT SAN ANTONIO

## IN DEVELOPMENT

### RESIDENTIAL

- Broadway Jones Apartments
- Museum Reach Lofts
- The Arts Residences and The Thompson Hotel
- The Flats at River North
- Cattleman Square Lofts
- Villas at Museum Reach

### OFFICE

- The Soto
- Credit Human tower on Broadway
- CPS Energy headquarters at the former AT&T offices
- Jefferson Bank headquarters
- WeWork in the Kress Building
- Light Building

### OTHER

- UTSA's downtown campus expansion
- Alameda Theater
- San Pedro Creek
- Hemisfair's Civic and Tower Parks (to include a hotel, office space, residential and retail)
- Alamo Plaza redevelopment
- Broadway corridor
- Hotel and restaurant in place of demolished Solo Serve building
- Redevelopment at La Villita





Lastly, she says, focus is needed on drawing families downtown and retaining millennials who are already there as they continue to age. “We need to look at where families gather and develop those areas and also look at where their kids can go to school,” she says.

**ANDRES ANDUJAR, HEMISFAIR PARK AREA REDEVELOPMENT CORP. CEO**

Andres Andujar likes to think of downtown San Antonio as a teenager—it’s made immense progress, but it still has decades of growth to go.

“When you come to downtown San Antonio in 2040, the first thing I want is for locals to feel immense pride and visitors to feel jealousy,” Andujar says. “I want Hemisfair to be the equivalent of Central Park and a place that people will come from other countries to see how an urban park is done. I want to see pedestrian and bicycle friendly infrastructure that permits you to get around no matter where you live. It will be a place that is comfortable no matter your color or income stream.”

He knows these are grand visions, but Andujar says long-term, strategic planning and large-scale dreams are what’s required to work toward the ultimate goal of a thriving downtown that is still authentically San Antonio.

COURTESY HEMISFAIR



**MOLLY COX, SA2020 PRESIDENT AND CEO**

The last nine years have shown that no one organization or development can transform downtown, Molly Cox says. Instead, it requires the combination of industry, development, public activations (think Chalk It Up! and Síclovía) and activity around the urban core in places like Pearl, St. Paul’s Square, Southtown and elsewhere.

“Downtown is a success story, and it’s also had its challenges. There’s been sort of a reclaiming of our downtown and there’s so much to celebrate about that. At the exact same time, we are at a point in our development and focus that now we can say, ‘Let’s be very mindful of how we keep moving forward,’” Cox says. “If the last decade was one of development, the next decade is one of mindfulness and intentionality.”

In being mindful, Cox says San Antonians need to consider mobility and how they will build a downtown that is safe for pedestrians, cyclists and even those often-complained-about scooters. Hemisfair’s leaders are being intentional about including workforce housing and structures that honor the park’s past while still introducing retail, hotel space and more. That type of thoughtfulness needs to be carried throughout downtown so that San Antonio doesn’t lose what makes it San Antonio.

As part of SA2020, Cox says it’s tough to separate the goals for downtown from goals for reducing domestic violence in the city, increasing education levels and building up a strong workforce. For downtown to succeed, all of those other major city issues need to continue to be addressed, as well, she says.

**MATT BROWN, CENTRO SAN ANTONIO PRESIDENT AND CEO**

Along with thoughtful development of housing and office space, Matt Brown says downtown growth needs to continue to include those lesser-noticed elements like cleanliness, which Centro San Antonio plays a lead role in through its ambassador program that, among other duties, keeps the River Walk and downtown streets clean. Going forward, Brown says creating an inviting downtown will also mean more public art, greenery and thoughtfully executed details that can really establish the sense of place that San Antonio has always prided itself on.

“We need more public art. It adds an important aesthetic dimension to making a city feel alive. Artists have to have their part in all great downtowns,” he says. “I think that’s going to be part of a much larger campaign we’ll embark on regarding beauty, (including) art and natural beauty through planters and greenery. We’re talking about a more ambitious and complete strategy to bring color and natural beauty all over downtown—and that might take another decade.” ★

## 3 MAJOR CHALLENGES

**Parking and Transportation**—Is more parking needed or can San Antonians shift to become city dwellers who bike, walk, rely on rideshare and plan to park and walk several blocks to their destination? The streetcar Castro once talked about wasn’t a solution citizens went for. Besides VIA, could other public transportation options help?

**Affordability**—Several upcoming developments have included elements of workforce housing, but leaders say there still is a need to strike a balance between affordable and market rate housing, which helps bring the disposable income that drives more development. Can downtown and its surrounding areas—from Dignowity Hill to Denver Heights and the West Side—develop without gentrifying?

**Education and Workforce**—Less than 40 percent of San Antonio adults have college degrees, according to SA2020, and the number of locals enrolling in college has remained largely flat. Those issues impact the whole city, but if improved could make an acute impact on downtown. Companies looking for new urban centers in which to locate require robust workforces to be in place. Families wanting to live downtown also need more public ed options for their kids, like SAISD’s CAST Tech.