

The Next Era of Downtown Denver:

Reinventing Downtown for the Way We Live Now

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and the Creative Class Group

Downtown Denver Partnership

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Introduction

Downtown Denver is in the midst of a remarkable reinvention. Denver's seven professional sports franchises are investing some $10 billion in a series of mixed-use districts with housing, restaurants, retail, entertainment, offices, public spaces, and places for people to gather. That stands in sharp contrast to other cities, where major professional sports franchises are moving away from downtown to the suburbs. Denver's franchises are doing the opposite, investing billions in the heart of the city. That is a clear signal of confidence in downtown's future.

This investment is part of a much larger ongoing reinvention. The reconstruction of 16th Street is complete, transforming downtown's central spine with wider sidewalks and new public spaces and bringing people back into the heart of the urban core. The Downtown Denver Development Authority has been created and approved by voters, providing a powerful new vehicle for investment and reinvention. Major public and private projects are moving forward across the broader downtown area — from Skyline Park, Glenarm Plaza, and the 5280 Trail to Civic Center and the transformation of parking lots surrounding Ball Arena.

Over the past year and a half, I walked the old office core block by block and biked through the larger downtown and its surrounding neighborhoods. I spent time on 16th Street during the day and went back to see it at night. I sat in cafés, ate in restaurants, visited the stadium districts, toured major development projects, and experienced downtown in winter, spring, and summer. I saw people walking and biking, filling restaurants and sidewalk cafés, and felt safer than I do in many American downtowns. So, when the Wall Street Journal later dubbed Denver "America's emptiest downtown," I was puzzled.[1] It simply did not square with what I had been seeing on the ground.

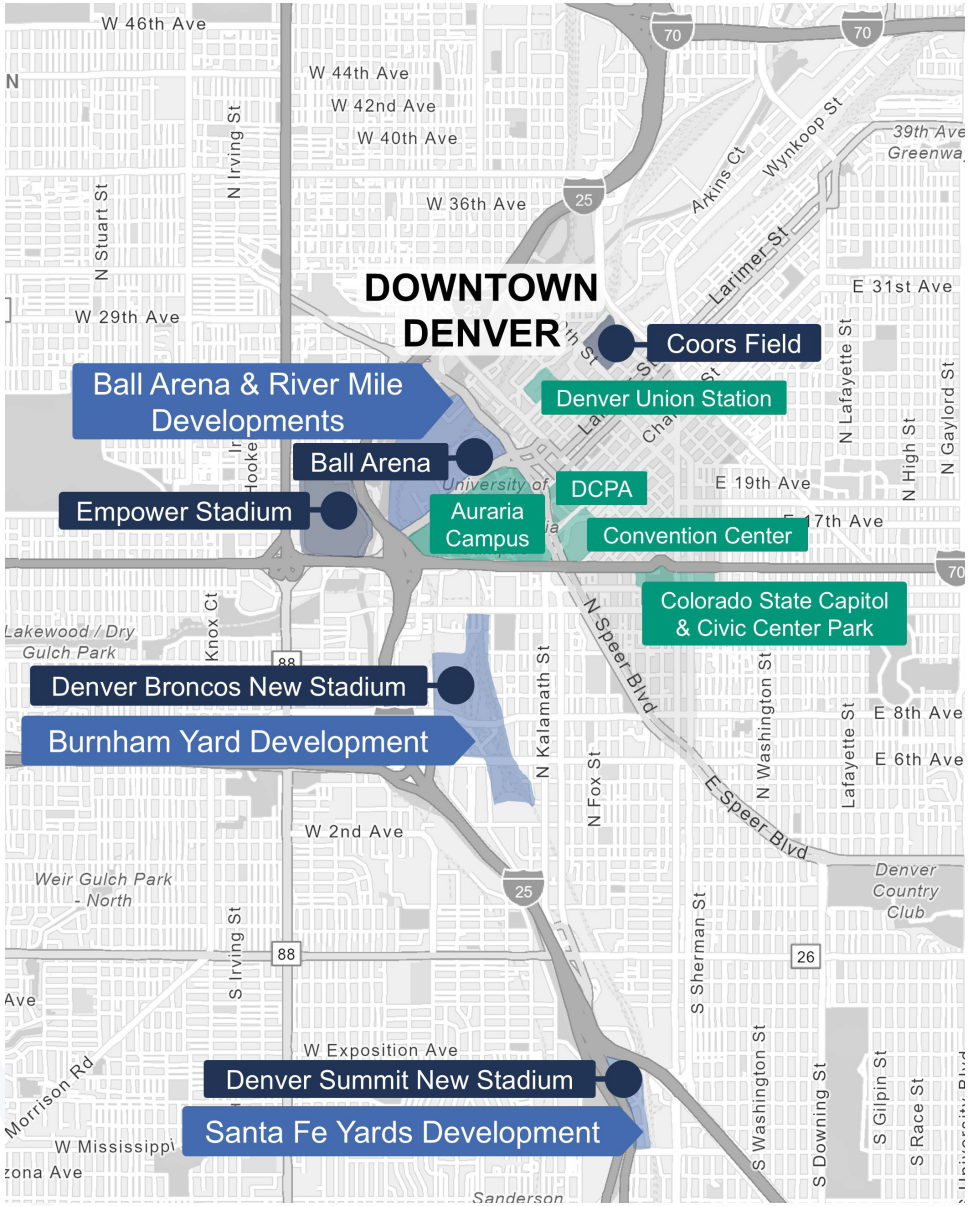




Photo by: Nikki Rae Photography

The reason for that disconnect soon became clear. The old office core does struggle with vacant buildings and diminished activity. But that is not the same thing as downtown as a whole. The problem is concentrated in the old Central Business District, while much of the larger downtown around it is experiencing significant investment, activity, and reinvention. The remaining step is clear: reinvent the CBD for the way people work now and connect it to the broader rebound already taking shape around it.

So why does the narrative of decline persist? Because too many people still equate downtown with the old Central Business District and judge it by the metric that defined that district: office vacancy. The old CBD was built around thousands of workers commuting into office towers five days a week. In that world, office occupancy was a reasonable proxy for downtown health. That world is gone. Digital technology has untethered knowledge workers from the office. Work has spread out — into homes, cafés, hotel lobbies, coworking spaces, and countless other places.

Office vacancy tells us something useful about the office market. It is far less useful as a singular measure of downtown health. A more precise and comprehensive measure is downtown activity — the workers, residents, and visitors who come downtown to work, live, eat, shop, play, meet, learn, and spend time there.

By that measure, Denver looks very different. Foot traffic has recovered to roughly 90 percent of its pre-pandemic level, with evening and weekend activity helping drive the rebound. Visitors and residents are already at or above pre-pandemic levels, and more people live in Downtown Denver today than before the pandemic. The Auraria Campus, home to three academic

[1]*Wall Street Journal: Peter Grant, "Can This Guy Get People to Live in America's Emptiest Downtown?" Wall Street Journal, May 27, 2026. https://www.wsj.com/real-estate/commercial/america-s-emptiest-downtown-f1f4cdf.*

institutions and more than 45,000 students and faculty, has already exceeded its 2019 activity levels, brings a major daily flow of people into downtown, and has plans underway to add thousands of housing units for students and faculty.

When I met with Mayor Mike Johnston, he recited the famous line attributed to Tennessee Williams — "America has only three cities: New York, San Francisco, and New Orleans. Everywhere else is Cleveland." Denver, he said, has a chance to become America's next iconic city. Part of what makes Denver an iconic American city is its connection to the frontier. The frontier occupies a powerful place in American history and mythology. More than a century ago, historian Frederick Jackson Turner argued that the frontier helped shape a distinctly American character — independent, entrepreneurial, open to newcomers, willing to experiment, and constantly reinventing itself. Denver was both a gateway to that frontier and a product of it, and that frontier spirit remains an important part of the city's identity today.[2] Its remarkable natural setting and access to the outdoors complement an extraordinary mix of sports, arts and culture, entertainment, restaurants, neighborhoods, and urban amenities. And Denver has long been a model for urban reinvention. Coors Field and LoDo, 16th Street, the Arts Complex, and Union Station all drew national attention and provided models other cities looked to. Today, with the old Central Business District being reinvented, Denver has another opportunity to help define the future of the American downtown.

The most successful downtowns are never generic; they reflect and amplify what makes their cities distinctive. New York announces itself through the drama of its skyline — the Empire State Building, the Chrysler Building, the Freedom Tower rising from the tip of Manhattan. San Francisco is framed by the Golden Gate, its hills, and the Bay. Miami's downtown opens onto Biscayne Bay, its glass towers shimmering above the water and radiating tropical energy.

Denver is equally distinctive: its skyline is framed by the mountains, and its identity is inseparable from the outdoor way of life they make possible. Denver's distinctiveness also comes from the texture of the city itself — its wide array of neighborhoods; its mix of large companies, tech startups, and small businesses; its arts and cultural scene; and its extraordinary combination of urban life and outdoor recreation. Together, these create a remarkable mix of experiences and opportunities that enable people to live a full and fulfilling life. The Populus Hotel is a microcosm of what a more distinctly Denver downtown can become. Designed by award-winning architect Jeanne Gang, its aspen-inspired façade and natural materials bring Colorado's landscape into the architecture of the city, while its position across from Civic Center connects that new expression of Denver to its historic City Beautiful core and helps anchor the emerging neighborhood around it.

The opportunity is to bring that distinctly Denver way of life into downtown. The old CBD was built primarily around work. The new downtown can combine reinvented workplaces with more housing for residents and the full range of activities that draw people into the city and make them want to stay — sports, arts and culture, food and nightlife, entertainment, recreation, hospitality, social connection, and the outdoors. Few cities are better positioned to bring all of these elements together.

[2] The Frontier: Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," Address to the American Historical Association, Chicago, Columbian National Exposition, July 12, 1893. Frederick Jackson Turner, The Frontier in American History, New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1921.

The challenge now is to bring the old CBD into the larger downtown taking shape around it and reinvent it for the way Denver lives and works now. The Downtown Area Plan provides the blueprint for the reinvention already underway. This long-term plan shows how Downtown Denver can build on that momentum and accelerate it through strategic investments in key focus areas that connect downtown, activate the market, and bring more life and play into the urban core. It also reflects the extraordinary amount of work taking place across downtown and the growing alignment between Denver's public and private sectors around a shared goal: redefining what downtown is today and what it can become for the next generation.

Realizing this vision will require the energy and alignment of Denver's business, public, civic, academic, philanthropic, and community leadership. One of the things that struck me most in doing this work was the extraordinary depth of Denver's civic commitment. Across our meetings, roundtables, dinners, and site visits, I encountered people from all of these sectors who care deeply about Denver and are eager to contribute to its future. Even more impressive is how open that civic culture is. Established and emerging leaders, longtime Denverites and newcomers, people from different sectors, generations, and perspectives all have a place in the conversation. People who want to contribute can find a way in, and those who have succeeded seem genuinely committed to helping others do the same. That combination of openness, engagement, and commitment creates an extraordinary reservoir of civic energy. Harnessing it around a shared vision for downtown may be one of Denver's greatest advantages in turning that vision into lasting change.


Photo provided by: Outside Days

Downtown's Long Legacy of Reinvention

The history of Downtown Denver, like the history of downtowns more broadly, has been one of episodic reinvention. As the way our economy and society are organized has changed — from the compact walkable city to the streetcar city, the automobile suburb, and today's more distributed world of work and life — downtown has changed with it. Each era produces a different kind of downtown, organized around the concentration of different kinds of economic activity, enabled by new technologies, and reinforced by a broader pattern of urban development.

In his magisterial history of downtown, Robert Fogelson traces how the mixed-use downtowns of the nineteenth century — where merchants, bankers, shopkeepers, artisans, and residents lived and worked alongside one another — became the highly specialized business districts of the twentieth century.[3]

Before industrialization, the heart of the city was an organic neighborhood. As the Industrial Revolution separated work from home, the word "downtown" emerged to distinguish the commercial core from the residential districts growing around it. Offices and commercial activity concentrated in that core. Transit carried workers into it. Skyscrapers stacked them vertically. Downtown increasingly became synonymous with the Central Business District.



Photo provided by: Denver Union Station

The history of Downtown Denver reflects this same pattern of episodic reinvention. Each successive era of economic and urban development has reshaped downtown around a new set of functions and activities.[4]

Like so many cities, Downtown Denver's ancestral story originates at the confluence of two waterways, Cherry Creek and the South Platte River. Though not functionally navigable waterways, this intersection of water amid the arid western plains just east of the Rocky Mountains was rich in resources and served as a natural gathering place for Indigenous peoples — and later for settlers — looking to trade and stake their claims to the rugged western frontier. Downtown grew at this location as a supply outpost and trailhead for adventures heading farther west. With a critical connection to the transcontinental railroad completed in 1870, Downtown evolved into a place of opportunity in its own right — not only for those passing through, but for those seeking to establish businesses, build communities, and make a life in Denver.

Its original downtown grew around Larimer Street as a compact, walkable, mixed-use center where business, government, shopping, hotels, entertainment, and housing were concentrated together. Downtown was the center of urban life because most of what happened in the young city happened there.

The railroad changed the shape of Denver's downtown. Union Station created a new center of gravity around the movement of people and goods. Warehouses, wholesalers, hotels, and other commercial activities clustered around the station and rail yards, while 16th and 17th Streets emerged as major retail and business corridors. The railroad enlarged downtown and reorganized it around Denver's growing role as the commercial center of the Rocky Mountain West.

[3]History of Downtowns: Robert M. Fogelson, Downtown: Its Rise and Fall, 1880–1950, Yale University Press, 2001.

[4]Historical Evolution of Downtown Denver: Stephen J. Leonard and Thomas J. Noel, Denver: Mining Camp to Metropolis, University Press of Colorado, 1990. Stephen J. Leonard and Thomas J. Noel, A Short History of Denver, University Press of Colorado, 2016. Thomas J. Noel, Denver's Larimer Street: Main Street, Skid Row and Urban Renaissance, Historic Denver, 1981. Thomas J. Noel and Barbara S. Norgren, Denver: The City Beautiful and Its Architects, 1893–1941, Historic Denver, Inc., 1987. Donna McEnroe, Denver Renewed: A History of the Denver Urban Renewal Authority, Denver Foundation, 1992. Barbara Gibson, The Lower Downtown Historic District, Historic Denver, 1995. Colorado Historical Society, Denver Inside and Out, History Colorado, 2012. Phil H. Goodstein, Denver in Our Time: A People's History of the Modern Mile High City, Volume 1: Big Money in the Big City, New Social Publications, 1999. Phil H. Goodstein, Denver in Our Time: A People's History of the Modern Mile High City, Volume 2: DIA and Other Scams, New Social Publications, 2000.

Photo provided by: History Colorado



Downtown Denver was remade again with the rise of the streetcar and the development of early streetcar suburbs. Streetcar lines enabled the residential city to stretch outward into new neighborhoods while keeping downtown at the center of the larger urban system. Home and work became more spatially separated, and downtown became increasingly specialized around business, shopping, government, and culture.

Denver's Civic Center took shape during this same era as part of the City Beautiful movement, the turn-of-the-century effort to bring monumental architecture, grand public spaces, parks, and boulevards into rapidly growing American cities. Under Mayor Robert Speer, Civic Center Park became Denver's monumental civic and cultural heart, giving downtown a new public function even as the residential city spread outward around it.

Suburbanization after World War II challenged Downtown Denver in a much more fundamental way. The automobile and the massive expansion of suburban development allowed households to move farther from the core, and retail, businesses, and jobs increasingly followed them. Downtown was no longer simply becoming more specialized as the city expanded around it; it was losing economic activity to an increasingly decentralized metropolitan region.

Denver responded in much the same way as other American cities: by doubling down on the functions that still benefited from centralization. Corporate headquarters, banks, professional services, and office workers clustered in increasingly large office towers, while urban renewal attempted to remake the physical fabric of downtown for the automobile and the modern business economy. Beginning in the late 1960s, Denver's Skyline Urban Renewal Project cleared 30 blocks, approximately 120 acres, of the older mixed-use fabric for modern buildings, roads, parking, and new development. The result was the increasingly specialized office-centric Central Business District, organized around thousands of workers commuting into the core each morning and leaving it each evening.



Photo provided by: Denver Union Station



Photo provided by: Outside Days



Photo provided by: Two Parts

The office-centric Central Business District that emerged from this era is the part of downtown that is struggling today. It was built around the concentration of office work and the daily flow of workers into and out of the core. Restaurants, shops, hotels, transit, and support services grew up around that flow, while housing, culture, recreation, public space, and street life remained secondary. Its towers functioned essentially as factories for knowledge work and information processing, with floors of workers tethered to phones, files, and computers fixed to their desks. It is this highly specialized office district — not downtown as a whole — that is now experiencing the deepest vacancy and facing the greatest challenge of reinvention.

Fogelson argued that this model had already outlived its usefulness by the middle of the twentieth century — reflected in the subtitle to his book, Downtown: Its Rise and Fall, 1880–1950. He was right about the trajectory, if early about the timing. What Fogelson could not yet see were the forces that would give downtown another lease on life. The rise of knowledge work, the back-to-the-city movement, and the rise of the creative class extended the life of the CBD by bringing new people and new functions back into and around the office core.

The redevelopment of Larimer Square by Denver preservationist and developer Dana Crawford showed that older buildings could be reused rather than demolished and could play an important role in the downtown urban fabric and acquire new economic value in the process. LoDo took that model further, turning former warehouses and commercial buildings into restaurants, housing, galleries, offices, and entertainment. The 16th Street Mall, which opened in 1982, created a new public spine through the office core. Openings of Coors Field, investments in the performing arts complex, new downtown housing development, openings of several light-rail lines, a new Central Library, and the reinvention of Union Station and Central Platte Valley launched Downtown Denver into the twenty-first century.

These new functions did not replace the office-centric CBD. They gave it a reprieve. They also made downtown more magnetic, creating the kinds of places and experiences that attract people, deepen their attachment to place, and give them reasons to stay and return. Knowledge workers still went to offices, but they increasingly wanted those offices embedded in places with restaurants, housing, culture, entertainment, transit, and street life. Downtown became larger and more mixed-use, while the office remained its economic anchor.

The new digital technologies of remote work have now upended that anchor itself. The rise of digital technology has untethered knowledge workers from the office and given them the freedom to work from virtually anywhere. The pandemic massively accelerated the shift, creating a large-scale experiment in remote work. The share of Americans who work from home tripled from about 6 percent in 2019 to more than 18 percent in 2021. The shift was even more pronounced in Denver County, where the share of workers working from home rose from 9 percent in 2019 to more than 27 percent by 2022. According to detailed research by Stanford economist Nicholas Bloom and his collaborators, remote work has since stabilized at roughly 30 percent of all workdays in the United States — about one and a half days a week — and runs even higher among knowledge workers. Two-thirds of knowledge workers in science and management fields engage in remote or hybrid work.[5]

What is happening to the Central Business District is analogous to what happened to factory districts during deindustrialization. Factory districts did not decline because cities ceased to be productive. They declined because the industrial economy no longer required that particular urban form. Some factories with good bones became lofts, studios, housing, and small-business incubators. Others stood empty for decades or eventually came down. Brownfields had to be remediated, parcels reassembled, streets restored, and zoning rewritten before a richer and more varied urban fabric could emerge.

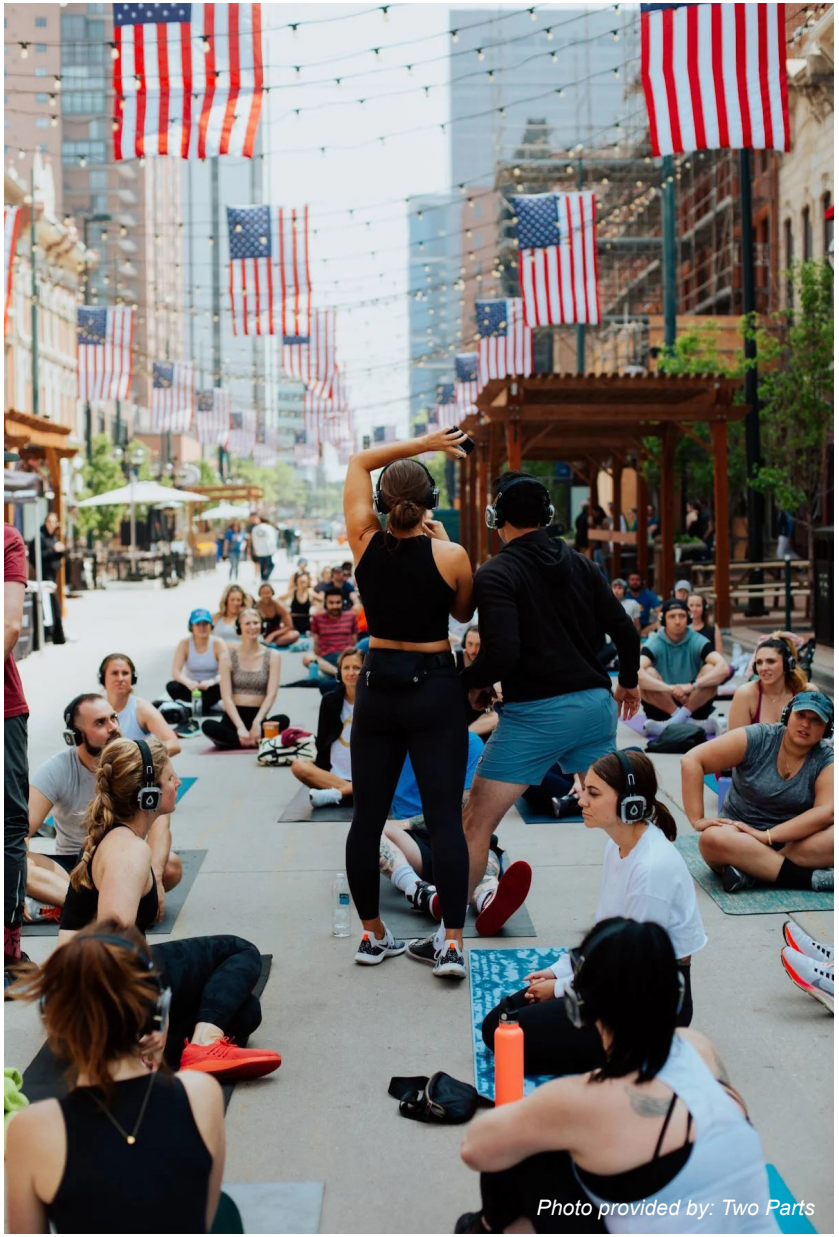


Photo provided by: Two Parts

Remote Work's Challenge to Downtown

The Central Business District is entering a similar transformation. Remote work has done to the office district what deindustrialization did to the factory district. It has made the old office-dominated form less necessary without making downtown itself less important. Some office towers will be converted and repurposed. Others will remain stranded or eventually come down. Districts built almost entirely around the daily flow of office workers will have to become something more varied. The office remains important, but it can no longer be downtown's sole organizing principle.

The eclipse of the old office-centric CBD does not mean the end of downtown as a place where people work and come together. Remote work has brought about a fundamentally different way of working, combining digital and remote work with more purposeful periods of face-to-face interaction.

What it does mean is the end of the conventional office building as a place to pack and stack knowledge workers on a nine-to-five schedule. That building was defined by the technologies of its day, designed for a world in which workers had to be physically present because the tools they relied on — telephones, computers, files, and



Photo provided by: Jonathan Phillips

colleagues — were concentrated inside it. Workers were quite literally tethered to their desks. Digital technology and artificial intelligence have broken that tether. But they have not eliminated the need for downtown as a place where people come together. They have changed what people come downtown to do — to collaborate, learn, connect, build relationships, exchange ideas, and draw on the energy and amenities of the city around them.

Scott Rechler, CEO of RXR Realty, one of the country's leading developers of high-end urban office buildings, and developer of the new signature tower planned to replace the former Grand Hyatt beside Grand Central Terminal, likes to say that Manhattan office buildings are the "people data centers" of the AI era. Just as data centers concentrate computing infrastructure in racks of servers, the new urban headquarters concentrates human infrastructure — talent, interaction, judgment, and collaboration — in buildings and districts designed to generate creative friction. One runs on silicon; the other runs on proximity, trust, and the energy that comes from being together in a great place.

The clearest sign of this transition is the emergence of a new generation of headquarters designed for this new way of working. In some cases, companies are literally tearing down headquarters built for the old model and replacing them with new ones. JPMorgan Chase's multibillion-dollar headquarters at 270 Park Avenue occupies a whole city block and opens onto a large public plaza, with restaurants, gathering spaces, and extensive wellness facilities inside. The new headquarters of Pfizer and BlackRock at Hudson Yards sit within a dense mix of transit, retail, housing, restaurants, and public space. One Vanderbilt connects directly to Grand Central Terminal and creates a vertical neighborhood of restaurants, lounges, terraces, and meeting suites. Google's expansion around Chelsea and its campus at St. John's Terminal embed its workplaces in the restaurants, culture, public spaces, housing, and activity of the surrounding city.

[5]Shift to Remote Work: U.S. Census Bureau, "The Number of People Primarily Working From Home Tripled Between 2019 and 2021," American Community Survey, September 15, 2022. Michael Burrows, Charlynn Burd, and Brian McKenzie, Home-Based Workers and the COVID-19 Pandemic, American Community Survey Reports, ACS-52, U.S. Census Bureau, April 2023. José María Barrero, Nicholas Bloom, and Steven J. Davis, "The Evolution of Work from Home," Journal of Economic Perspectives, vol. 37, no. 4, Fall 2023, pp. 23–49. Cevat Giray Aksoy, José María Barrero, Nicholas Bloom, Steven J. Davis, Mathias Dolls, and Pablo Zarate, "The Global Persistence of Work From Home," Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, vol. 122, no. 27, 2025.



Photo by: Nikki Rae Photography

These new headquarters are not conventional office towers whose primary purpose is to contain assigned desks. They are places designed for collaboration, learning, culture, identity, social connection, and creative friction. Their value comes not only from what happens inside the building, but from their connection to everything around them. They draw on the energy of downtown and the larger urban environment — its restaurants, cafés, culture, transit, housing, public spaces, and constant flow of people and ideas.[6]

The combination of Downtown Denver's vacancy and rents can easily be read as a story of decline. But the reset in building values also creates an opportunity. Buildings that no longer make sense as conventional offices can become economically viable for other uses — housing, culture, education, innovation, and new forms of work. Some obsolete offices can become homes, adding the round-the-clock population a thriving downtown needs. Others can be reinvented as the next generation of workplaces described above — places built around collaboration, amenities, talent, and connection rather than rows of desks. The result is an opportunity to turn an office district built for an earlier era into a much richer and more varied part of the city. And Denver has another important advantage: growing alignment among its civic, political, and business leadership around making that transformation happen. This is a generational opportunity to show what the next great American downtown can become.



Photo by: Nikki Rae Photography

[6]Richard Florida, Masaki Hamura, Vladislav Boutenko, and Natalia Konyukova, "The Rise of the Urban Knowledge Campus," Harvard Business Review, May–June 2026. https://hbr.org/2026/05/the-rise-of-the-urban-knowledge-campus.

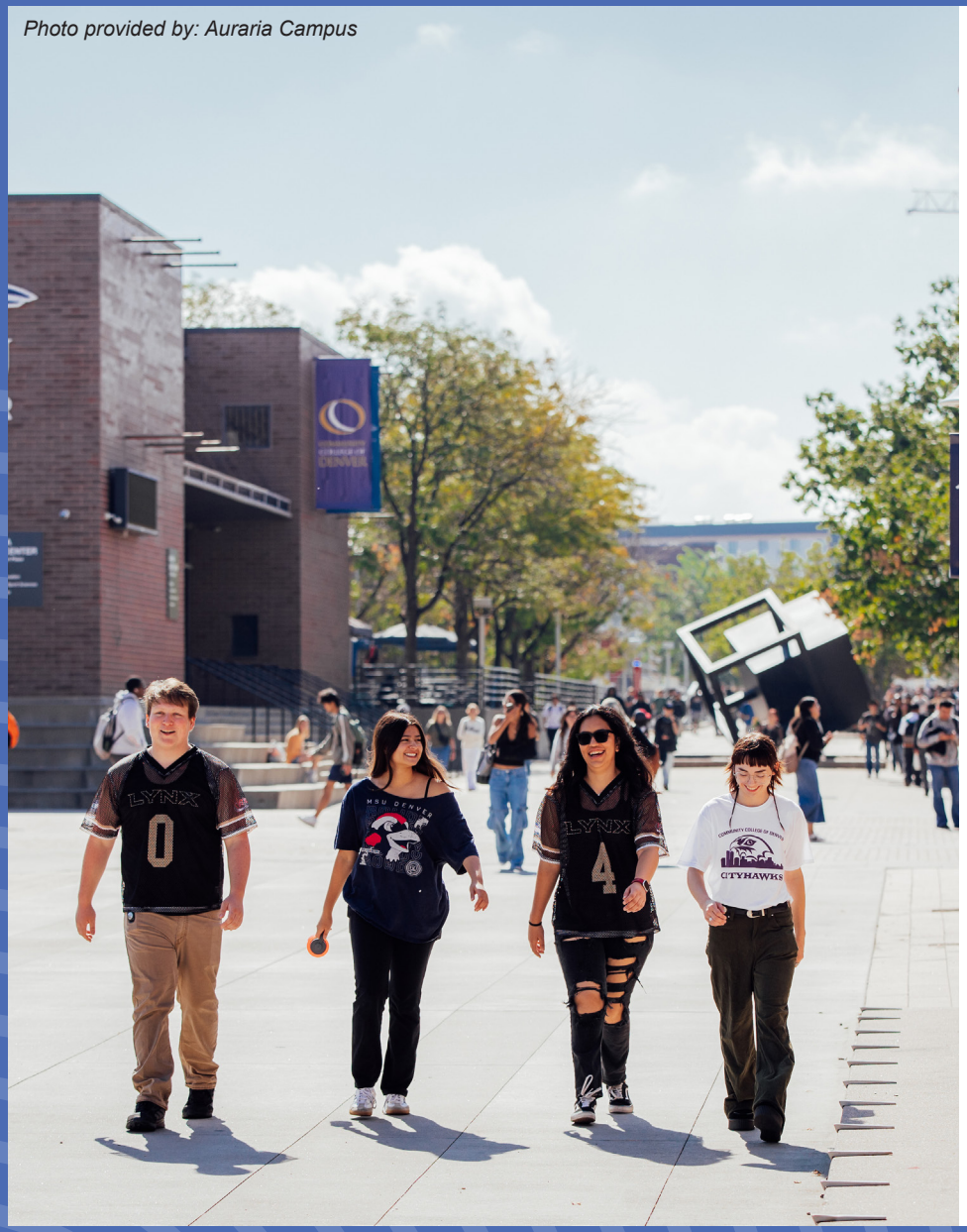


Photo provided by: Auraria Campus

Downtown as Talent Magnet

"For cities to have sustained success, they must compete for the grand prize: intellectual capital and talent," wrote then-New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg in the Financial Times in 2012. "Recent college graduates are flocking to Brooklyn not merely because of employment opportunities, but because it is where some of the most exciting things in the world are happening—in music, art, design, food, shops, technology, healthcare, and green industry. Being cool counts. When people can find inspiration in a community that also offers great parks, safe streets, and extensive mass transit, they vote with their feet."[7] A decade before Bloomberg wrote those words, a trio of leading urban economists had identified the rise of a new kind of city: "the consumer city."[8] It was a shift from the old city of production—a city that created value by attracting companies and production—to a city where lifestyle and leisure and consumption matter more.

The competition for talent has now become the overriding concern of the world's leading business districts. The 2025 Global Business Districts Attractiveness Report from Ernst & Young and the Urban Land Institute examined 30 major business districts around the world and surveyed downtown stakeholders. More than three-quarters of the respondents rated the ability to attract and retain talent as a very important location factor—more important than

proximity to markets and business partners, global influence, cost, real-estate quality, or innovation. The report calls this “the tyranny of talent.”[9]

So, what exactly makes for a great downtown? Not the office per se. According to Gensler’s 2021 City Pulse survey of 7,500 urban residents across 15 global cities, more than seven in ten of respondents said restaurants, cafés, bars, and lounges were among the most important features of a great business district. They were followed by parks and green spaces, public transit, shopping districts, theaters and performing spaces, museums, historical and cultural landmarks, and a unique, authentic identity. Businesses and office buildings ranked near the bottom.[10]



Photo credit: iStock

[7]*Former New York City Mayor Mike Bloomberg on Cities and Talent: Michael R. Bloomberg, “Cities Must Be Cool, Creative and in Control,” Financial Times, March 27, 2012, https://www.ft.com/content/c09235b6-72ac-11e1-ae73-00144feab49a.*

[8]*The Consumer City: Edward Glaeser, Jed Kolko, and Albert Saiz, “Consumer City,” Journal of Economic Geography, 1, 1, January 2001, pp. 27–50.*

[9]*Talent: Urban Land Institute and Ernst & Young, The Global Business Districts Attractiveness Report 2025, Washington DC and Paris: ULI / EY, 2025. https://knowledge. uli.org/en/reports/research-reports/2025/the-global-business-districts-attractivenessreport-2025.*

[10]*Survey Rating Great Business Districts: Survey rating of great business districts: Gensler Research Institute, City Pulse Survey 2021: The Return of the City, Fall 2021, https://www.gensler.com/gri/return-of-the-city.*

These preferences are especially clear among remote and hybrid workers, who continue to come downtown even when they are not going to the office. Roughly 40 percent come downtown regularly to use cafés, restaurants, coworking spaces, libraries, hotel lobbies, and other third places. The share is larger still among hybrid workers whose offices are downtown: two-thirds visit downtown on at least some of the days they work remotely, and nearly 60 percent work from cafés, coworking spaces, and other third places while they are there.[11]

For many people, downtown remains a compelling place to work—just not from a conventional office. They want flexible, vibrant settings that allow them to draw on the energy, amenities, and social life of the city.

As the urbanist and former mayor of Ventura California, Bill Fulton puts it, growing numbers of people are "bowling together but typing alone." They are returning to downtowns—to restaurants, stadiums, concerts, festivals, parks, and street life—even as much of their work remains individualized and digitally mediated. Fulton's phrase plays on Robert Putnam's famous warning that Americans were "bowling alone" — that the bowling leagues, civic clubs, and neighborhood associations that once held communities together were fading. But when Putnam wrote, the office was still one of the principal institutions of everyday social life — the place people went each day, saw colleagues, and built relationships over coffee, lunch, and hallway conversations.[12] Hybrid and remote work have weakened that role. The office can no longer bring people together as regularly or reliably as it once did. Downtown itself is taking its place.

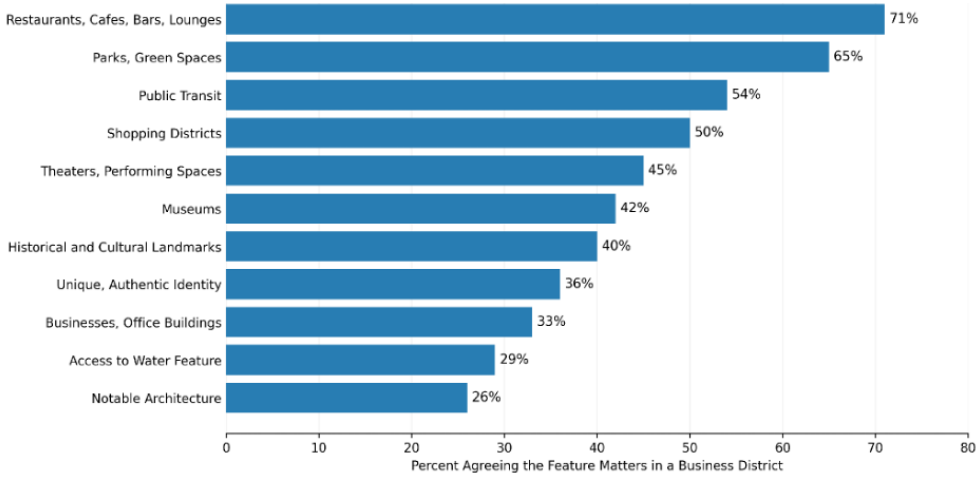


Figure 1: What Makes a Great Downtown
Source: Gensler Research Institute, City Pulse Survey 2021: The Return of the City, 2021.

[11]Survey of Remote and Hybrid Workers Use of Downtown: Gensler Research Institute, City Pulse 2023: The Future of the Central Business District, 2023, https://www.gensler. com/blog/the-future-of-the-central-business-district. Third Places: Ray Oldenburg, The Great Good Place, Paragon House, 1989. Eric Klinenberg, Palaces for the People: How Social Infrastructure Can Help Fight Inequality, Polarization, and the Decline of Civic Life, Crown, 2018.

[12]Typing Alone, Bowling Together: Robert D. Putnam, Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community, Simon & Schuster, 2000. Bill Fulton, "Typing Alone and Bowling Together," The Future of Where Substack, 2025. Bill Fulton, "Is The Third Place Dead?," The Future of Where Substack, February 23, 2026.

Opportunity for All

Attracting talent is part of a larger role for downtown: creating opportunity. The business community often talks about attracting companies downtown by making it more "business-friendly." But that language is too narrow. It reflects the old idea of downtown primarily as a business district, when downtown now plays a much broader role. The narrative needs to change with that reality. Downtown should be understood as a platform for opportunity for a broad spectrum of Denverites — businesses and entrepreneurs, workers and students, families and young people, residents from across the city, and anyone looking to build a better life.

A healthy business climate is essential to creating jobs, income, and economic opportunity. But prosperity also depends on ensuring that more people can participate in and benefit from that growth. Downtown can do both. It brings together businesses, workers, entrepreneurs, students, institutions, and resources in a density and combination that few other places can match. That concentration connects people to jobs, education, entrepreneurship, relationships, and pathways to advancement. The old downtown was built primarily for business. The new downtown should be built around opportunity — generating it, broadening it, and extending it to more people.

Downtown is the area of the city and metropolitan region that is best suited to this important role. It is the city's town center and town square — the most central and accessible place where people from across the city and region can come together. Its density, transit connections, institutions, arts, culture, amenities, and public spaces bring together people who might otherwise rarely cross paths. It is where talent, ideas, capital, institutions, and opportunity intersect. That is what gives downtown a role no individual neighborhood, suburban center, office park, or shopping district can replicate.



The Visitor Economy and the Playground City

Downtown is still largely thought of as a place where people mostly work and occasionally live—but that is no longer the case. Visitors, not office workers, are the engine of downtown. A detailed study by downtown expert Paul Levy of 26 downtowns in America's largest cities found that visitors accounted for more than 60 percent of all downtown activity, more than workers (27 percent) and residents (11 percent) combined. Visitors account for an even higher share of activity in Downtown Denver, making up 67 percent of downtown activity in 2025, compared with 20 percent for employees and 13 percent for residents.[13]

But whether they're coming from the suburbs, across the region, or from another country, visitors need a reason to show up. Downtowns are bound up with the shift of cities and the broader economy from centers of work to centers for consumption, leisure, entertainment, and experiences. This reflects what Harvard's Edward Glaeser and MIT's Carlo Ratti aptly dub the rise of the Playground City. "If people do not need to go downtown for wages, they must instead desire to go there," they wrote in the New York Times.[14] The Playground City is not a place people are required to go for work, but a place they choose for the activities of everyday life — culture, leisure, recreation, social connection, and experience.

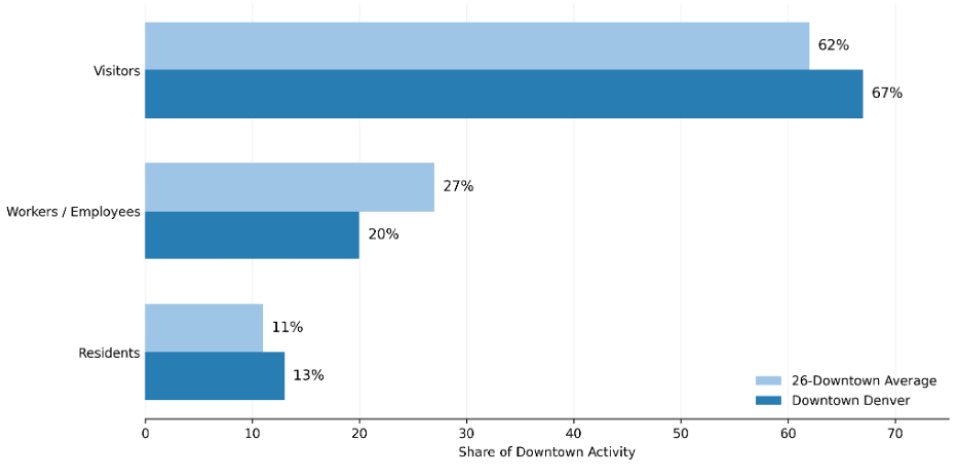


Figure 2: Visitors Outnumber Workers and Residents in Downtowns[13]

[13]Paul R. Levy, Downtowns Rebound: The Data-Driven Path to Recovery, Center City District, Philadelphia, October 5, 2023. Placer.ai, 2025

[14]The Playground City: Edward L. Glaeser and Carlo Ratti, "26 Empire State Buildings Could Fit Into New York's Empty Office Space. That's a Sign," New York Times, May 10, 2023. https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2023/05/10/opinion/nyc-office-vacancy-playground-city.html.

Play does not come at the expense of work. The two are no longer separate. Work is no longer conducted solely inside an office or conference room. Increasingly, it happens across the broader urban environment — over lunch or drinks, at restaurants and cafés, at games, concerts and museums, on a bike ride, or climbing together. These are places where people meet, talk, exchange ideas, build trust, and develop professional relationships. They are increasingly part of how work actually gets done. This is why the new corporate headquarters are increasingly oriented toward the outside environment and embedded in the fabric of downtown. Denver's Downtown Area Plan recognizes this shift, using Play as a lens for implementation alongside Equity, Connection, Resilience, and Innovation. Few cities are better positioned to take advantage of it than Denver — a place people choose because it allows them to combine economic opportunity with the way they want to live their lives. Downtown's evolving role must be to bring more of that distinctly Denver way of life into the heart of the city.

Downtown Denver is already extraordinarily well suited to the Playground City. Few, if any, American cities have so many major-league sports venues concentrated in and around downtown: Coors Field anchors LoDo, Ball Arena is home to the Nuggets and Avalanche, and Empower Field sits just across the Platte. When the Avalanche won the Stanley Cup in 2022 and the Nuggets won their first NBA championship a year later, hundreds of thousands of fans poured into downtown for the championship parades — a vivid reminder that the center city remains the place where Denver comes together to celebrate. The arts and culture run just as deep. The Denver Performing Arts Complex, the museums of the Golden Triangle, the Convention Center, restaurants, music, and other destinations draw people into the core at night and on weekends. Together, they make downtown not simply a place to work, but a place people actively choose to be.



Photo by: Grace Smith/The Denver Post



Photo provided by: Denver Center for the Performing Arts

How Downtown Makes Life More Productive

The increasing importance of amenities, experiences, entertainment, and recreation — the functions that make up play — reflects a broader shift in what people need from downtown. The best downtowns do more than make work more productive; they make life more productive too — making it easier to get around, exercise, socialize, care for family, and fit more of what matters into the day.

Denver's business and civic leaders have come together around a powerful message: "Denver: The Best Return on Life." In a study published in Harvard Business Review, my colleagues at CCG and I looked at 39 downtown business districts across 13 global cities and surveyed more than 1,200 knowledge workers. We distinguished between two kinds of productivity: Work Productivity — how effectively people can focus, collaborate, learn, and get their work done — and Life Productivity — how effectively they can manage the rest of their lives, from commuting and exercising to socializing, caring for family, and fitting more of what matters into the day.[15] Workers in the best-performing downtowns reported roughly 12 percent higher Work Productivity. But the bigger effect was on Life Productivity — roughly 15 percent higher. The best downtowns don't just make people more productive



Photo by: Nikki Rae Photography



Photo by: Nikki Rae Photography

at work. They make their lives more productive too — giving them more time and more opportunities to do the things that matter to them.

Most people think first about Work Productivity — the familiar debate over whether people are more productive working in the office or remotely. Workers in the best-performing downtown districts reported roughly 12 percent higher work productivity than workers in traditional downtown business districts.

But the effect was even greater on a second kind of productivity: Life Productivity. Life productivity encompasses all the activities and conditions that make everyday life easier and sustain our ability to work — from getting to work and taking care of our families to exercising, socializing, and managing the rest of daily life. Workers in the best-performing downtown districts reported roughly 15 percent higher life productivity. The best downtowns enable people to be more productive not only at work, but in their lives. They give people time back by making the activities of everyday life easier, closer, and more convenient, as well as offering many reliable connections in and out of the center city.

This is especially important for Denver, where people choose the city in large part because they want a different relationship between work and life. A great downtown can give people more of something increasingly scarce: time. By making everyday life easier and more convenient, downtown can leave more time for the things that define Denver's way of life — the outdoors, exercise, family, culture, social connection, and experience — turning the city's defining lifestyle advantages into an economic advantage.

[15] Work and Life Productivity: Richard Florida, Masaki Hamura, Vladislav Boutenko, and Natalia Konyukova, "The Rise of the Urban Knowledge Campus," Harvard Business Review, May–June 2026.

A Mosaic of Districts

Downtown is morphing as its boundaries expand far beyond the traditional Central Business District. That old CBD concentrated office work in a tightly bounded footprint. The new downtown is larger, more distributed, and more functionally diverse. It extends across mixed-use neighborhoods, former industrial and warehouse districts, universities and urban knowledge campuses, medical and innovation districts, cultural and entertainment districts, hotels, cafés, coworking spaces, and public spaces. Each district performs a different function, but together they form a connected urban whole.

The pattern Denver is experiencing — higher vacancy in the CBD alongside stronger performance in nearby mixed-use districts — is not unique but is playing out in cities across the country. A detailed study by Federal Reserve economist Jordan Rappaport examined changes in office occupancy across more than 50 downtowns and found much the same thing. San Francisco's Financial District declined while nearby Mission Bay and Potrero Hill gained ground. Seattle's traditional downtown contracted while South Lake Union grew. Within the same city, only a few blocks often separate a struggling office-dominated Central Business District from the thriving mixed-use districts that surround it.[16]



Photo provided by: RiNo BID



Photo by: Nikki Rae Photography

A separate study by Christopher Leinberger and a team from the real estate firm Cushman & Wakefield reinforces this finding. Examining more than 200 walkable urban neighborhoods, including traditional downtowns, they found that decline was concentrated in office-dominated Central Business Districts. Nearby mixed-use districts — former warehouse neighborhoods, waterfront areas, and university-anchored communities — devoted substantially less space to offices and considerably more to housing, retail, entertainment, and amenities. In city after city, the difference between a shrinking district and a growing one is not the metropolitan economy or even downtown as a whole. It is the mix of uses found within a few blocks. Their research points to an optimal mix of roughly 42 percent of space devoted to work, 31 percent to housing, and 26 percent to retail, entertainment, and other amenities, compared with the current downtown mix of roughly 70 percent devoted to work, 16 percent to housing, and 15 percent to retail, entertainment, and amenities. The key to success lies in a richer mix of activity that brings different people downtown for different reasons at different times of day.[17]

But the emerging downtown is not simply an amalgamation of mixed-use neighborhoods. As downtown expands beyond the boundaries of the old CBD, it is evolving into a mosaic of distinct but interconnected districts, each with its own functions and identity.

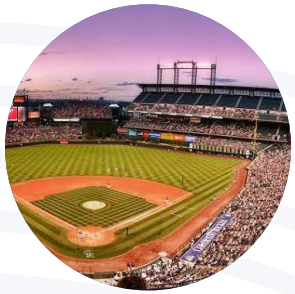
[16]Rappaport Study: Jordan Rappaport, "Accounting for Changes in Downtown Office Occupancy Since the Pandemic," Economic Bulletin, Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City, April 24, 2025.

[17]Leinberger Study: Rebecca Rockey, David C. Smith, Kevin Thorpe, Christopher B. Leinberger, and Michael Rodriguez, Reimagining Cities: Disrupting the Urban Doom Loop, Cushman & Wakefield, 2024.



LoDo:

Home to Union Station, Denver's front door and regional transportation hub, LoDo is downtown's most established mixed-use district. With a high concentration of historically preserved buildings and cultural ties to Denver's diverse heritage, including Denver's original Chinatown, the largest Chinatown in the Rocky Mountain region, LoDo feels authentic to Denver's past while serving as a present-day complete neighborhood. Historic buildings, offices, housing, hotels, restaurants, entertainment, and public spaces come together in a highly walkable environment. That diversity keeps the district active throughout the day and evening and has helped both its office and residential markets remain comparatively resilient. LoDo demonstrates the power of combining connectivity, employment, housing, entertainment, culturally significant architecture, and public space — and provides an important model for the reinvention of the CBD. The opportunity for LoDo is to draw on the history of the neighborhood and find ways to celebrate and support its cultural heritage.



Ballpark / Arapahoe Square:

Anchored by Coors Field, this district is one of Denver's most vibrant entertainment centers, combining historic character, restaurants, nightlife, and urban living with significant opportunities for new development. It also serves as an important gateway between downtown and RiNo. The opportunity is to add housing, jobs, and mixed-use development while creating better connectivity to neighboring districts and build on the energy and character that already make it a destination. The physical merging of the Ballpark neighborhood with Arapahoe Square also invites Downtown Denver to honor and elevate its rich Asian American history, rooted in the blocks surrounding Coors Field. Just steps from the ballpark, Sakura Square has stood for generations as the heart of Denver's Japanese American community, a living reminder that this part of downtown has always been shaped by the people who built their lives here.



Skyline Park / Arts Complex / Convention Center:

The Colorado Convention Center and Denver Performing Arts Complex make this one of downtown's major visitor and entertainment districts, drawing conventions, performances, and events that support hotels, restaurants, and businesses throughout the year. The reinvention of Skyline Park and the surrounding public realm provides an opportunity to better connect these assets, infill with new mixed-use development, and create a more active district at the heart of downtown.



CBD / Upper Downtown:

Denver's traditional business core remains the region's largest concentration of office space, jobs, and corporate activity. It is also the part of downtown most challenged by the shift in the way people work and elevated office vacancy. But the CBD has enormous assets to build on — its central location, transit access, employment base, and public spaces such as Glenarm Plaza and Denver Pavilions. The opportunity is to transform it from a predominantly office district into a more complete mixed-use neighborhood with more residents, retail, restaurants, public space, and new kinds of workplaces. Reinvented in this way, the CBD can once again become a vital part of downtown's economic and urban life.



Golden Triangle:
Framed by Civic Center and major cultural institutions including the Denver Art Museum, Clyfford Still Museum, and History Colorado Center, Golden Triangle is downtown's civic, cultural, and increasingly residential district. Investments in Civic Center Park can improve connections and bring more regular activity to the park and historic Greek Theater. At the same time, a wave of multifamily development is adding thousands of residents within walking distance of the commercial core. Together, these cultural assets and new residents are creating an increasingly important connection between Denver's civic, cultural, and residential life.



Central Platte Valley:
Once dominated by rail yards and industrial land, the Central Platte Valley has become one of Denver's great urban redevelopment success stories. Housing, employment, parks, trails, and major destinations have reconnected downtown to the South Platte River, while Riverfront Park demonstrates the value of combining residential development with public space and connectivity. The district forms an important link between downtown, Union Station, the river corridor, and the emerging districts to the west.



Auraria Campus:
Auraria has an important history in Denver as a neighborhood enclave for generations of migrant families who were displaced by flooding and socio-economic pressures. As Denver's oldest neighborhood, Auraria was for half a century the heart of the city's Mexican American community, centered on St. Cajetan's Church, until urban renewal displaced its families in the 1970s. The land was redeveloped for industrial uses and, later, as the Auraria Higher Education Campus that exists today. The Auraria Campus is Downtown Denver's education, talent, and innovation district, bringing tens of thousands of students from the University of Colorado Denver, Metropolitan State University, and the Community College of Denver immediately adjacent to downtown. The campus itself is evolving from a commuter campus into a more complete mixed-use neighborhood, with new housing and other development underway. Yet it remains too disconnected from the rest of the core. The opportunity is to weave its students, faculty, research, entrepreneurship, cultural activity, and everyday campus life more fully into downtown, turning the boundary between the two into one of Denver's most important seams of activity and opportunity. And as edges fade, honoring the neighborhood's legacy, along with the Chicano history carried forward in neighboring La Alma Lincoln Park, is essential to building a center that belongs to everyone.

Connected Neighborhoods of the Broader City Center

As downtowns expand, nearby neighborhoods increasingly become part of a larger downtown mosaic. These neighborhoods sit outside downtown's traditional boundaries and have their own important heritage and community significance, but they are increasingly connected to the larger economic and urban geography taking shape around it.



RiNo:
RiNo has emerged as a center for creativity, entrepreneurship, and new investment, transforming a former industrial area into a dense mix of artists, makers, galleries, music venues, breweries, restaurants, startups, creative firms, housing, and street life. Its appeal comes from the way these activities reinforce one another, creating a distinctive place to live, work, create, and spend time. One of RiNo's emerging anchors, Denargo Market, is adding three million square feet of mixed use development, including 4 acres of new parks and open space, and is already establishing itself as a regional destination.


Photo credit: iStock



Five Points:
Five Points is one of Denver's most important historic and cultural neighborhoods. Its deep African American and Japanese American history, cultural institutions, music, businesses, and residential life give it an identity that is distinct from downtown while making it an important part of the larger urban geography surrounding it.



Uptown / Capitol Hill:
Uptown and Capitol Hill bring density, housing, street life, and major civic and cultural institutions immediately adjacent to downtown. Their large residential populations help support restaurants, shops, services, and activity throughout the day and week, extending the life of the urban core beyond the traditional business district.



Jefferson Park / Highlands:
To the west and northwest, Jefferson Park and the Highlands provide strong residential neighborhoods increasingly connected to downtown through new investment, mobility improvements, and regional destinations. Their proximity helps extend downtown's reach across the South Platte River and into the larger urban fabric to North Denver, connecting with the historical significance of Denver's Mexican American history as the commercial center of the Hispanic, Mexican and Central American community.



La Alma-Lincoln Park:
To the south and southwest, La Alma-Lincoln Park connects downtown with major projects taking shape around Burnham Yard and the future Broncos stadium district while maintaining its own rich cultural heritage and neighborhood character. In 2021, La Alma Lincoln Park became the first Denver neighborhood designated a historic cultural district for its role as the birthplace of the city's Chicano Movement, a struggle for civil rights and cultural pride that resonated nationwide. As these investments move forward, protecting that identity while strengthening connections to downtown will be critical.

Stadium and Destination Districts

Denver's larger city center is also being reshaped by billions of dollars of investment in sports, entertainment, and destination districts. Though they extend beyond the traditional downtown, their proximity and growing connectivity make them an increasingly important part of the larger urban core.



Photo by: Eric Fitch | Kentwood Real Estate



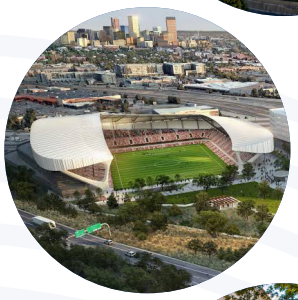
Ball Arena / River Mile:
More than 120 acres around Ball Arena are being transformed into a mixed-use district with housing, hotels, entertainment, restaurants, offices, public spaces, and connections to the South Platte River trail system. The first phase includes new entertainment venues, hotel, residential, and office development, as well as a new pedestrian and bicycle bridge connecting the district to LoDo and Union Station. Ball Arena itself is undergoing a $135 million modernization. Together, these investments can turn what was once largely an event destination surrounded by parking into a complete urban district connected directly to downtown.



National Western:
The National Western Center is transforming a major piece of North Denver around agriculture, research, education, entertainment, and events. New facilities and year-round programming extend Denver's destination economy northward while creating new connections among tourism, jobs, education, and community development.



Burnham Yard:
More than 100 acres of former rail and industrial land at Burnham Yard are planned for transformation into a new mixed-use district anchored by the future home of the Denver Broncos. Housing, commercial development, public space, transit, and a new stadium can transform this long-underused site into a new urban district closely connected to downtown.



Santa Fe Yards:
Santa Fe Yards is transforming a long-vacant industrial site along South Broadway into a transit-connected sports and entertainment district anchored by the future home of Denver Summit FC. A purpose-built women's soccer stadium, public spaces, businesses, pedestrian connections, and future mixed-use development can create another year-round destination connected to the larger urban core.



Cherry Creek:
Cherry Creek is Denver's premier retail and increasingly important office district, combining shopping and restaurants with hotels, housing, professional services, and workplaces. Companies are drawn not simply by the quality of its office space but by the environment around it. Its retail, restaurants, offices, housing, hotels, parking, amenities, and public realm reinforce one another. Rather than competing with the CBD, Cherry Creek complements it, providing a different model of an amenity-rich business district within Denver's larger urban economy.



Sun Valley/Empower Field Redevelopment:
The Denver Housing Authority has recently completed the development of over 900 units of mixed-income housing in Sun Valley, replacing 333 public housing units and creating a walkable district with access to open space and neighborhood amenities. All of this lies just south of the existing Empower Field, which, if the Broncos' plan to relocate to Burnham Yard comes to fruition, the existing 80-acrea stadium site, will become another major development opportunity for the city.

A Playbook for Reimagining Downtown

Downtown Denver has an enviable set of assets to build on — big-league sports and cultural anchors, a nationally recognized food and bar scene, great hotels, one of the deepest talent pools in the country, a global hub airport, and outdoor assets that extend from creek paths and city parks to the Front Range itself. What has struck me most is how much Denver has to work with — and how many people are committed to making the most of it. Civic and political leaders, developers, employers, universities, artists, entrepreneurs, and community leaders are all deeply engaged in the future of downtown. That depth of engagement and willingness to work together may be one of Denver's greatest advantages in reinventing and repositioning its downtown for the 21st century and the way we live and work today.

The most successful downtowns do more than provide places to work. They provide places to live, gather, play, and experience the city. They create identity and attachment, generate energy and excitement, and give people reasons to come back again and again.

Denver is already moving in this direction, with major initiatives underway across downtown. 16th Street has been remade as a more active pedestrian spine. Skyline Park is being reimagined as a major gathering and play space. Glenarm Plaza and the Denver Pavilions are helping transform Upper Downtown.

The 5280 Trail will connect downtown neighborhoods through walking, biking, and public space. Civic Center is becoming a stronger cultural and civic destination. And the transformation of Speer and Cherry Creek can better connect downtown to Auraria, the stadium districts, and the riverfront.

The recently adopted Downtown Area Plan provides the larger framework for reimagining and reactivating downtown around three priorities. 'Connect All' breaks down the physical barriers that separate downtown's districts and destinations. 'Activate the Market' spurs investment in housing, businesses, development, and activity. 'Elevate Play' creates more places where people want to explore, linger, gather, and spend time. Together, these priorities do more than connect the pieces of downtown and bring new energy to its streets. They can fundamentally reinvent Downtown Denver — transforming a 20th-century office district into a complete, vibrant urban neighborhood built around the way people live, work, connect, and play today.





Photo by: Nikki Rae Photography

Live

More people living downtown is fundamental to its ongoing rebound. The Downtown Area Plan sets an ambitious but concrete target: doubling downtown's residential population from roughly 35,000 to 70,000 by 2045. More people living downtown means activity throughout the day and week, a permanent customer base for restaurants and shops, greater street life, and more eyes on the street. Downtown added 468 residential units in 2025, with more than 1,600 additional units now under construction and another wave of office-to-residential conversions in the pipeline. The Luzzatto Company plans roughly 1,100 apartments across four downtown office buildings, with about 500 units already in the pipeline. When I toured the projects, I saw the vision of former office space being transformed into bright urban lofts. The Downtown Denver Development Authority is backing the conversions with a $63 million loan, its largest ever. Projects like these can turn obsolete office space into housing and bring thousands more residents into the heart of downtown.

Downtown Denver is only getting started as a place for people to live. While many people now live in the neighborhoods and districts surrounding downtown, the downtown core itself still has a relatively small residential population. That creates enormous room to grow. Bringing more people downtown to live will generate more activity throughout the day and week and help create a more vibrant, 24-hour neighborhood.

Learn

Universities are powerful downtown anchors. They bring students with flexible schedules who animate downtown throughout the day, evening, and week, while generating demand for housing, restaurants, shops, culture, and other amenities. At the same time, universities are major tenants, talent pipelines, research institutions, cultural organizations, and engines of innovation and entrepreneurship. Across the country, universities are expanding into urban centers to immerse students and faculty in the economic and cultural life of cities.

Downtown Denver already has an enormous educational anchor at its doorstep. The 150-acre Auraria Campus brings together the Community College of Denver, Metropolitan State University of Denver, and the University of Colorado Denver — roughly 45,000 students in all. The campus is adding housing, childcare, services, and amenities to become a more complete neighborhood. But Auraria remains physically separated from much of downtown by the vast divide created by Speer Boulevard. The opportunity is to connect its students and everyday university life more fully with the downtown core. Programs such as film, architecture, design, and other fields that thrive in urban settings can occupy downtown buildings. Vacant offices can become student housing. Students can fill cafés, restaurants, shops, cultural institutions, and streets at times when office workers do not.

That process is already beginning. The University of Colorado completed its acquisition of Independence Plaza in August 2026, extending CU Denver's presence directly into the heart of downtown. The 567,000-square-foot property will expand opportunities for education, research, entrepreneurship, and collaboration with industry and the broader community, including a planned 30,000-square-foot innovation and entrepreneurship hub developed with Denver Economic Development & Opportunity.[18]

It is also worth considering attracting other universities and educational programs that can take advantage of affordable space while bringing more students, faculty, research, and 24-7 activity into the core.

[18]CU Denver's Expanded Downtown Presence: Bernadette Berdychowski, "Welcome to CU Denver's Newest Campus Spot: A Nearly Empty Downtown Office," Denver Gazette, August 12, 2026. https://www.denvergazette.com/2026/08/12/welcome-to-cu-denvers-newest-campus-spot-a-nearlyempty-downtown-office/.



Innovate

Downtowns have also become critical centers of innovation. Over the past two decades, high-tech startups and venture capital have shifted from their traditional homes in suburban office parks toward dense, mixed-use urban centers. Downtown San Francisco and Lower Manhattan were at the forefront of that shift, along with urban innovation hubs in cities such as Boston, Toronto, London, and Berlin. Today, downtown San Francisco has become the epicenter of the AI economy, home to OpenAI, Anthropic, and a dense concentration of AI startups, talent, and venture capital.[19]

The Denver metro area has emerged as one of the nation's leading centers for venture capital investment in high-tech startups. In the third quarter of 2026, it was sixth in the nation — behind only the San Francisco Bay Area, Los Angeles, New York, Boston, and Austin — attracting $4.7 billion in venture capital investment.[20] Downtown and the center city are a critical part of this high-tech ecosystem. The area is home to roughly 1,500 tech startups employing 7,200 people, with tech startups accounting for 13 percent of all center-city businesses.[21]

Downtown Denver anchors the metropolitan talent base that drives its innovation economy. The Denver region is home to one of the country's largest concentrations of college graduates and creative-class workers — more than one million college graduates, roughly half the metro population, and more than 850,000 creative-class workers, also roughly half the workforce. Denver also continues to attract talent from other major knowledge centers. Denver ranks as the 10th-best large U.S. market for tech talent.[22]

Denver has also been gaining knowledge workers from major superstar cities and leading tech hubs, including the San Francisco Bay Area, Chicago, New York, Washington, D.C., Austin, Los Angeles, and Boston, according to LinkedIn data.

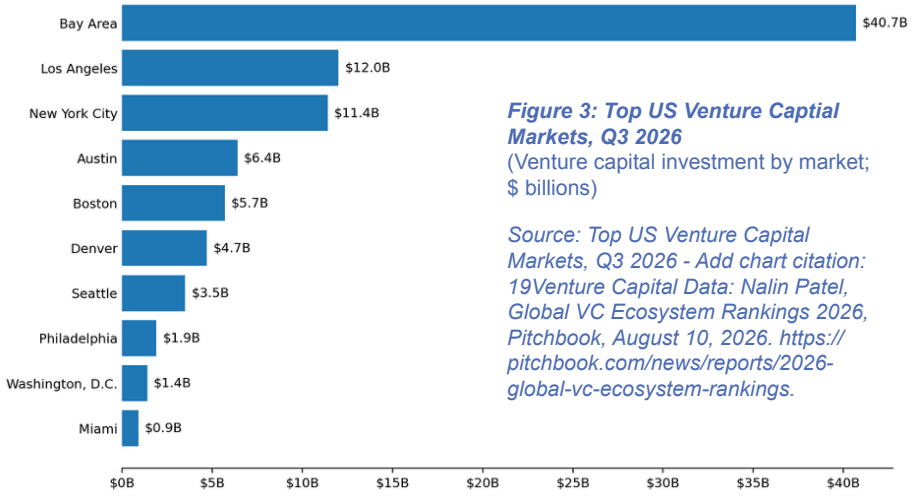


Figure 3: Top US Venture Captial Markets, Q3 2026
(Venture capital investment by market; $ billions)

Source: Top US Venture Capital Markets, Q3 2026 - Add chart citation: 19Venture Capital Data: Nalin Patel, Global VC Ecosystem Rankings 2026, Pitchbook, August 10, 2026. https://pitchbook.com/news/reports/2026-global-vc-ecosystem-rankings.

[19]Urban Shift of High-Tech Innovation: Richard Florida and Charlotta Mellander, "Rise of the Startup City: The Changing Geography of the Venture Capital Financed Innovation," California Management Review, vol. 59, no. 1, 2016, pp. 14–38, https://cmr.berkeley.edu/2016/11/59-1rise-of-the-startup-city-the-changing-geography-of-the-venture-capital-financed-innovation/. Richard Florida, "Why San Francisco May Be the New Silicon Valley," CityLab, August 5, 2013, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2013-08-05/why-san-francisco-may-be-the-newsilicon-valley.

[20]Venture Capital Data: Nalin Patel, Global VC Ecosystem Rankings 2026, Pitchbook, August 10, 2026. https://pitchbook.com/news/reports/2026-global-vc-ecosystem-rankings.

[21]Downtown Tech Ecosystem: Downtown Denver Partnership, State of Tech 2026, Denver, 2026. https://issuu.com/downtowndenver/docs/state_of_tech_report_2026_digital?fr=xKAE9_ zMzMw

[22]Denver Talent: Richard Florida, The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life, Basic Books, 2002, revised and updated 2019. Richard Florida and Karen King, Heartland of Talent 2025, Heartland Forward, February 2025, https://heartlandforward.org/research/heartlandoftalent/. CBRE, Scoring Tech Talent 2025, 2025. https://www.cbre.com/insights/books/scoring-tech-talent-2025.

Downtown Denver is the hub of an extraordinary innovation corridor that extends to Boulder. The world's strongest innovation ecosystems often combine the research and technical capabilities of a great university town with the scale, talent, capital, and urban environment of a major city. Palo Alto and San Francisco work together as an integrated innovation complex, combining the research and technical capabilities of Stanford University with the talent, capital, companies, and urban environment of San Francisco, where much of the new AI economy has gravitated. Cambridge and Boston work in much the same way, combining the research and technical capabilities of Harvard and MIT with the larger talent pool, companies, capital, infrastructure, and urban environment of Boston.

Denver and Boulder have the ingredients to function as the same kind of integrated innovation system. Boulder brings the University of Colorado and an extraordinary concentration of federal research institutions, including NIST, NOAA, and NCAR. Denver brings the scale of a major metropolitan economy — a larger workforce, companies, business infrastructure, capital, global connectivity, and urban energy.

The region's emerging quantum cluster is already taking shape across this corridor. Elevate Quantum brings together the research base centered in Boulder with companies, talent, investors, workforce development, and commercialization capacity across the larger Denver region. Its federal Tech Hub encompasses both the Boulder and Denver-Aurora metropolitan areas, with new laboratories, fabrication facilities, accelerator programs, and workforce initiatives designed to move quantum technologies from research to commercialization and production. The $40.5 million federal award was accompanied by $74 million in state support.[23]

Downtown Denver is the urban node of this larger innovation system. It is the region's central meeting place, with its densest concentration of companies, talent, restaurants, hotels, cultural

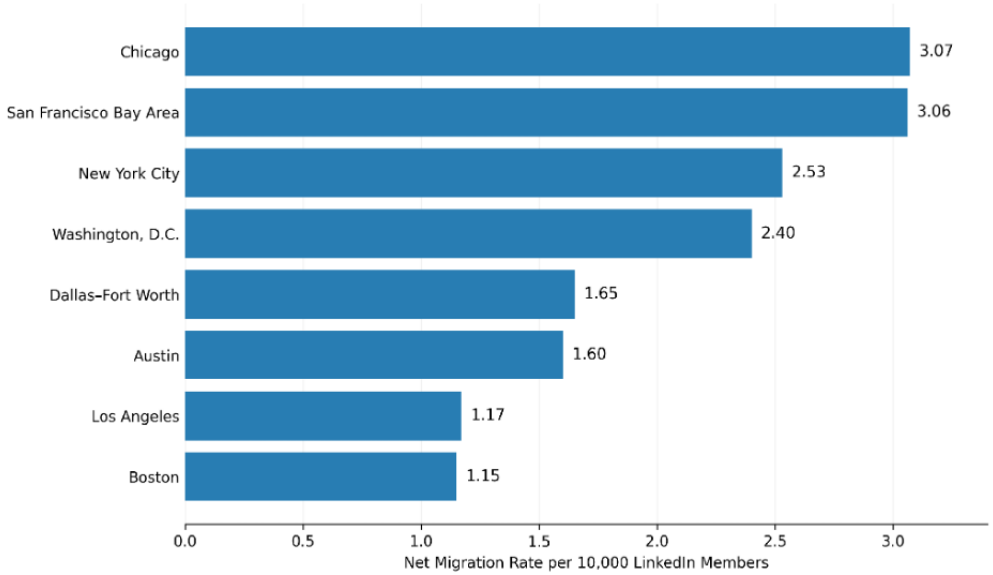


Figure 4: Denver's Top Sources of Talent

Source: LinkedIn Economic Graph, "LinkedIn Workforce Report | Denver | January 2024," January 5, 2024. https://www.linkedin.com/jobs/blog/linkedin-workforce-report-january-2024-denver-co.

[23]*Denver–Boulder Quantum Innovation Corridor: Christopher DiLella, "Quantum Rush: DenverBoulder Area Aims to Be the Silicon Valley of the Future," CNBC, April 9, 2024, https://www.cnbc.com/2024/04/09/quantum-rush-denver-boulder-aims-to-be-silicon-valley-of-the-future.html*





Photo provided by: CU Denver

institutions, amenities, transit, and places where people can meet, interact, and exchange ideas. CU Denver provides an institutional anchor for that role. Its planned Open Innovation District and new College of Engineering, Design and Computing along Speer can connect research, talent, entrepreneurship, and commercialization directly to the larger economic and social life of downtown.

These investments in technology boost other prominent sectors in Denver such as healthcare - with a prominent medical campus, Denver Health, located downtown and nationally recognized medical research institution, the University of Colorado Anschutz School of Medicine nearby - both benefiting from the investment and talent attracted to- and produced by- the Denver market.

Furthermore, Downtown Denver has an abundance of a key asset required for innovation and creativity – cheap space. Startups, artists, makers, small businesses, and entrepreneurs need affordable places where they can experiment and take risks. Older buildings with good bones can become incubators, studios, maker spaces, and affordable workplaces. Downtown can turn its distressed real estate from a liability into an innovation asset.

Connect

Innovation, talent, education, housing, and all of Denver's other downtown assets become more valuable when they are connected — to one another, to the region, and to the rest of the world.

Downtown is the connective hub of the larger Denver region — the central place where transportation, business, culture, entertainment, education, and people come together. That role is especially important because Denver is unusually isolated from other major metropolitan areas. An analysis of the 40 largest U.S. cities ranked by the population within a three-hour drive placed Denver last — more geographically isolated from peer metros than any other major American city. Cities packed into dense regional corridors — from Boston to Washington or across Southern California — can draw on much larger networks of nearby metros. Denver cannot. It grows by being a destination.

Denver International Airport is what enables Denver to overcome that geographic isolation. One of America's great gateways, DEN handles nearly 82 million passengers a year, connects Denver directly to more than 200 destinations, and has a direct commuter rail connection to downtown's Union Station. People come to Denver deliberately — for work, for school, for a convention, for a weekend, for a game, for the mountains, or for a life they cannot build elsewhere. Downtown is the front door to that destination economy and the connective hinge between the metropolitan region, the Front Range and mountains, and the rest of the world.

Downtown also has to be better connected to itself. Highways, wide arterial roads, rail infrastructure, and the legacy of urban renewal have left important parts of the larger downtown



Photo provided by: Denver International Airport

separated from one another. One of the most consequential proposals for reconnecting these pieces is the Reconciliation of Speer Boulevard and Cherry Creek. The concept would move all lanes of Speer to the Auraria side of the creek, freeing a large band of largely publicly owned land on the downtown side. That land could accommodate thousands of permanently affordable housing units and new development, create new recreational and park access to Cherry Creek, extend Sculpture Park into a major event lawn, create a River Walk-style environment along the creek, reconnect Auraria to downtown, and allow CU Denver's Open Innovation District to grow toward the core. It could also stitch the stadium districts and River Mile into downtown rather than leaving them as islands.

The proposed Mile High Line offers an opportunity to strengthen these connections, linking downtown neighborhoods with major new stadium, park, and housing developments. Other projects can begin stitching these pieces together now. The 5280 Trail, an envisioned 5.280-mile pedestrian and cycling route, has broken ground on its first section, and several other projects are planned, designed, or funded for construction. One example is the Ball Arena pedestrian bridge, which will cross Speer Boulevard and land in Lower Downtown, creating a new pedestrian and bicycle connection between the stadium district and the heart of downtown. The newly opened bus rapid transit line (BRT) on Colfax will increase the ease of which people travel between downtown and the eclectic retail, restaurants, and neighborhoods of East Colfax. These targeted interventions can begin breaking down the physical barriers between downtown's emerging districts.

Downtown also has to be easy to reach and easy to use for people coming from across the region. Parking matters, but the answer is not more surface parking. Surface lots create dead space and work directly against the density and street activity downtown needs. Miami's Design District, for example, uses inexpensive valet parking to make access easy while preserving a walkable public realm. Denver needs parking solutions that make downtown convenient without sacrificing the urban fabric people are coming downtown to experience. The Area Plan calls for a "park once, access-oriented" approach that accommodates parking while creating a human-scale transportation system with convenient connections among different modes and a greater emphasis on walking.



Photo provided by: HDR Inc.

Play

Downtown Denver's greatest advantage is the extraordinary range of ways people can play. It means running or biking along Cherry Creek, skiing, hiking, or climbing in the mountains. But it also means going to a game, a concert or the theater, visiting a museum or gallery, having a great meal, or listening to live music. What makes Denver special is the way all of these things come together — the outdoors and urban life, sports and culture, recreation and entertainment.

That is what makes Denver a natural Playground City. The opportunity is to bring more of that distinctly Denver way of life into downtown — its arts and culture, food and nightlife, sports and recreation, and especially the outdoors. Downtown should be a place where people can work, meet, eat, see a game or a concert, go for a run or a bike ride, and experience many of the things that make them want to live in Denver in the first place.

The larger ambition is to make downtown the everyday home of the whole Denver lifestyle — its arts and culture, food and nightlife, sports and recreation, and especially the outdoors — and to make that way of life accessible to everyone, including kids and families who may not have easy access to the mountains.

Downtown can be the place that brings these athletes and other lead users together with entrepreneurs, designers, artists, engineers, companies, and investors, generating new products and technologies, new companies and industries, and turning Denver's outdoor lifestyle into an economic-development advantage.



Photo provided by: Denver Summit FC


Photo by: Nikki Rae Photography

That opportunity is already beginning to take shape. Alterra Mountain Company, the company behind the Ikon Pass and Colorado destinations including Winter Park, Steamboat, and Arapahoe Basin, is moving its headquarters to the former Denver Post Building in Upper Downtown after considering a relocation to Salt Lake City. The move provides a clear signal of downtown's potential to become the urban capital of the outdoor economy.

Downtown Denver has another major advantage in its extraordinary concentration of professional sports. Seven professional sports franchises are concentrated in and around downtown, with an eighth just announced. Ball Arena hosts more than 200 events a year, Coors Field draws roughly 2.5 million fans, and Empower Field brings 70,000 people per game. In March 2026, the new Denver Summit FC drew more than 63,000 fans to Empower Field for its inaugural NWSL match, shattering the league's single-game attendance record by more than 23,000.

Denver also has a high density of culture and entertainment. The National Western Center, attracting 650,000 visitors annually during the National Western Stock Show, has been completely redeveloped with 2.2 million square feet of modern facilities that accommodate year-round concerts and festivals, farmers' markets, sporting events, trade shows and conventions, as well as office space, business incubators, classes, public art, cultural events, and family activities.

The Denver Performing Arts Complex, with more than 10,000 seats under one roof, is one of the largest in the country, drawing crowds for Broadway, symphony, ballet, and opera. Red Rocks, just outside the city, is one of the most storied venues in American music. Around these anchors are a nationally recognized craft-beer culture, a Michelin-recognized restaurant scene, great hotels, and record convention activity. Together, sports, culture, entertainment, food, and hospitality bring people downtown throughout the day, week, and year.

The next step is to make Denver's active outdoor lifestyle visible in the physical fabric of downtown. Other cities show the range of what outdoor urbanism can look like. In Copenhagen, Bjarke Ingels's CopenHill turns a waste-to-energy plant into a ski slope, climbing wall, and hiking trail. Copenhagen's new Waterfront Culture Center on Paper Island, designed by Kengo Kuma, brings together indoor pools, outdoor thermal baths, wellness spaces, and public waterfront access in a single civic complex. Both turn individual buildings and sites into destinations for outdoor life.

But outdoor urbanism can also operate as connective tissue woven through the everyday fabric of the city. Indianapolis' Cultural Trail connects six cultural districts and major destinations and landmarks with a world-class linear park, combining recreation and mobility with placemaking and public art. Outdoor urbanism can range from signature destinations to the systems that connect neighborhoods and make walking, cycling, recreation, and public life part of the everyday experience of downtown.

Denver already has the building blocks. Bike routes thread through the city, including along Cherry Creek, allowing people to ride without being pushed into traffic. 16th Street prioritizes people walking and lingering along the 1-mile linear corridor. Experiencing the outdoors is part of Colorado's culture; downtown should feel like it.

Climbing walls can animate the façades of repurposed buildings. Trails and linear parks can reach more deeply into the core and double as cross-country ski routes in winter. Rooftops can become public terraces framing the Front Range. Parks, pitches, courts, and plazas can make recreation part of everyday downtown life. The existing downtown soccer pitch shows the appetite for exactly this kind of activity. Outdoor life should be woven into the daily life of downtown. Denver has the opportunity to reinvent its downtown as its own unique version of a Playground City — bringing work and play, arts and culture, sports and recreation, and the outdoors together as part of everyday life.



Image provided by: Civitas

Reinventing the CBD

Downtown Denver is already making great progress in these directions. The remaining challenge is to reinvent the old Central Business District in ways that reflect this broader transformation. Downtown has roughly 12.2 million square feet of vacant office space, nearly 11 million square feet of it in the CBD alone. That surplus can be turned from a challenge into an opportunity.

In my meetings with Denver's commercial real estate brokers, one thing came through loud and clear: a likely path to dealing with the scale of the vacancy problem is to repurpose a significant number of these buildings. Many are outmoded and unlikely to attract high-quality tenants again without massive reinvestment. As we have seen in New York, even leading companies are demolishing obsolete headquarters and replacing them with buildings designed for the way people work today. Some Denver buildings can be converted or substantially reinvented. Others should come down — thoughtfully and strategically — freeing land for housing, parks, entertainment, innovation, and new development.

Cities have been through this kind of transformation before. When manufacturing disappeared from older industrial districts, buildings with good bones found new lives as housing, studios, workplaces, and cultural spaces.



Photo by: Nikki Rae Photography



Photo provided by: Colorado Rapids

Others came down. Brownfields were remediated, parcels reassembled, streets restored, and former industrial land put to entirely new uses. That process ultimately created places such as the High Line and Brooklyn Bridge Park in New York and Millennium Park in Chicago. Denver's old CBD is being reshaped by similar forces. The growing alignment of the public and private sectors around this vision creates a real opportunity to make that transformation happen.

The old CBD needs new functions and roles that reflect the ongoing reinvention of Denver and its greatly expanded downtown. It was built as one large, relatively homogeneous office district. Today, the larger downtown is a mosaic of smaller, more specialized districts, each with its own functions and identity. The CBD must be reimagined in the same way — as a series of smaller micro-districts organized around nightlife and music, outdoor recreation and the outdoor economy, innovation, culture, food, and new forms of work. It can become a collection of distinctive places that complement and reinforce the downtown rebound already taking shape around it.

Nearly 11 million square feet of vacant office space in the CBD is a significant challenge. But it also creates an enormous opportunity. Denver does not have to recreate the old office district. It can use this space to create more housing, new kinds of workplaces, innovation and education, arts and culture, recreation and entertainment, and other uses that bring people downtown throughout the day and week. The reset in building values makes many of these possibilities more feasible than they were just a few years ago. And the growing alignment among Denver's civic, political, and business leaders gives the city an opportunity to turn the old CBD into an integral part of the larger downtown taking shape around it.

Downtown Is for Everyone

Downtown Denver is the city's shared place — its gathering ground and its front door. But throughout its history, downtown has not worked equally well for all Denverites. Its next reinvention provides an opportunity to change that — to create a downtown where more people can participate, find opportunity, and feel that they belong. Jane Jacobs famously argued that "downtown is for people."[24] Denver's downtown must be for everyone.

The surplus space created by the transformation of the old CBD provides an extraordinary opportunity to make that real. Some of it can be used to create more affordable housing for service workers, artists, students, hospitality workers, young families, and others who otherwise could not afford to live in or near downtown. Nearly 5,600 affordable units have been added over the last two and a half years, and office conversions can add more. Affordability should be a central priority in deciding how this surplus space is reused.

That same surplus can provide affordable space for people to start businesses, make art, build organizations, study, work, and experiment. Vacant and underused buildings can become homes for startups, artists, makers, small businesses, civic organizations, students, and entrepreneurs who have increasingly been priced out of



Photo provided by: Downtown Denver Partnership



Photo by: Nikki Rae Photography



Photo by: Nikki Rae Photography

successful urban neighborhoods. Downtown's surplus is not just a real estate problem. It is the raw material for broadening who gets to participate in the reinvention of the city.

Opportunity also means extending Denver's distinctive way of life to more people. Sports, arts and culture, music, outdoor recreation, food, entertainment, and social life are central to what makes Denver an attractive place to live, but access to many of these experiences can be constrained by cost, distance, equipment, and other barriers. Bringing music, art, climbing, cycling, skating, courts, dancing, pitches, trails, and other forms of recreational, cultural, and social infrastructure into downtown makes more of that distinctly Denver way of life part of everyday life for everyone.

Denver's downtown now has to work for all Denverites — residents and workers, students and service workers, entrepreneurs and executives, families and visitors. Broadening access to housing, opportunity, culture, recreation, and the life of downtown will make more people feel that they have a stake in its future. A downtown that creates opportunity and belonging for everyone is not just a better downtown. It is a stronger one.

Denver stands at a defining moment — an inflection point in the evolution of its downtown. Few cities have an opportunity like this, and fewer still have so many of the pieces already in place: thriving neighborhoods from Union Station and LoDo to Golden Triangle and the Ballpark; extraordinary sports, arts and cultural assets; a deep and growing pool of talent; major new investment; and a distinctive way of life that combines urban life with the outdoors.

[24]*Downtown Is for People: Jane Jacobs, "Downtown Is for People," Fortune, April 1958. https://fortune.com/article/downtown-is-for-people-fortune-classic-1958/*

The challenge now is to bring these pieces together and connect them to the old Central Business District. The reset of the old CBD creates room for more housing, new kinds of workplaces, innovation and education, arts and culture, recreation and entertainment, and new places for people to come together. It also creates an opportunity to make downtown more accessible — with room for service workers and young families, artists and entrepreneurs, students and people just starting out.

Denver has another enormous advantage: the depth of its civic commitment. Business, political, civic, academic, philanthropic, and community leaders are deeply engaged in the future of downtown and increasingly aligned around its reinvention.

Denver has the opportunity not simply to bring its downtown back, but to reinvent and reposition it for the way we live and work today. By bringing all of these pieces together, Denver can show the rest of the country what the next era of the American downtown can be.



Photo by: Ashleigh Wurzbach

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At the Creative Class Group, Rana Florida's vision and judgment shaped the project from start to finish. Mark Block kept every piece of it moving.

The report draws on interviews, conversations, and site visits with dozens of business leaders, public officials, civic and community leaders, university leaders, entrepreneurs, developers, journalists, and others across two rounds of fieldwork. The analysis and recommendations are mine. The understanding behind them belongs to them. Their work on the ground convinces me that Denver will rise to the challenge.



Photo by: Nikki Rae Photography

Interviews, Roundtables & Conversations

- JJ Ament, President and CEO, Denver Metro Chamber of Commerce
- Adam Agron, Partner, Brownstein Hyatt Farber Schreck, LLP
- Blake Ammon, Partner, Westside Investment Partners
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