

Urban pioneers await dynamic downtown Tampa

By KEVIN WIATROWSKI | The Tampa Tribune
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TAMPA -- Nicole Loftus moved to Channelside looking for the kind of city living she enjoyed in South Florida.

From her apartment, she can see downtown's towers about a half-mile away. But that's where the city living ends.

Between her apartment and the city's center lies a no man's land of busy streets, barren plots and shadeless sidewalks.

"I would never walk downtown," she said recently as she visited the Washington Street dog park with her two miniature Doberman pinschers. "I don't feel that it's extremely safe."

In the past few years, thousands of people such as Loftus have moved into Tampa's urban core looking for the feel of a city, complete with nightlife and maybe a short walk to work.

They are pioneers in what Mayor Bob Buckhorn hopes will be a wave of urban living that will make Tampa's core a 24-hour environment similar to St. Petersburg rather than the 9-to-5 business center it has long been.

Those new residents quickly learn that they live in an urban archipelago: Downtown's residential areas are islands surrounded by parking lots and vacant commercial sites.

"I like Tampa a lot," said Gil Parsley, another Channelside resident. "But it feels undeveloped. Raw."

Several recent studies have offered up ideas for pumping more life into downtown:

- InVision Tampa calls for creating a unified city center extending from Armenia and Hillsborough avenues to Ybor City and Channelside. That plan calls for knitting together downtown and its surrounding neighborhoods to improve urban life.
- The Urban Land Institute, a planning think tank, spent a week in Tampa helping the city develop a plan for converting more than 100 acres of largely public land on the west bank of the Hillsborough River to residential and retail uses.
- The University of South Florida held (re)stitch Tampa, a design contest, looking for ways to turn the Hillsborough River into an engine for revitalizing the city center.

"Tampa is on people's radar now," Buckhorn said recently. "It's a long process to get from interest to construction."

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Tampa's tattered urban tapestry rated a mention in some of the reporting about last summer's Republican National Convention. Articles in The New Yorker and Salon.com painted unflattering pictures of downtown's empty spaces.

"Half of downtown Tampa is parking lots," George Packer wrote in The New Yorker on the first day of the RNC, "and anyone with enough money to own a car drives to work (there aren't many other reasons to go downtown)."

Bob Abberger sees reason to expect those empty spaces to begin filling up again, thanks in part to residential growth.

"The things that have occurred have created a glass that is half full, not half empty," said Abberger, senior managing director in Florida for real estate firm TrammelCrow.

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His own property, at Brorein and Morgan streets, is a temporary parking lot, waiting for the market conditions that can support a new 400,000-square-foot office tower.

"Now we're cautiously optimistic," he said. The property, which was rezoned in 2011, will go to the city for site-plan approval this spring. Construction could start as early as the end of the year.

Buckhorn says more residential growth will spur more commercial growth downtown.

This year, he offered up an acre of city-owned land between the John F. Germany Public Library and the Straz Center for another residential tower. The developers, Greg Minder and Phillip Smith, built SkyPoint and the Element towers.

Minder and Smith had planned to put up a third tower on a vacant city block at Cass Street and Ashley Boulevard. That deal collapsed and the land went back to TECO, which has used it as an employee parking lot for 30 years.

"This is held for future use," said TECO spokeswoman Cherie Jacobs. "We don't have any plans to change things there."

The same applies to the site of the former Maas Bros. department store, which was demolished in 2006 to make way for a high-rise. That project died on the vine.

Today, the land is a parking lot run by the ubiquitous Seven-One-Seven Parking Enterprises, which operates parking lots on vacant spaces throughout downtown.

"For us, it's a long-term hold," said Cliff Levy, local president of Toronto-based ICI Shopping Centers, which owns the land. "There's certainly the critical mass for a lot of things downtown today, but we're just not thinking of developing it right now."

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Seven-One-Seven President Jason Accardi said his company is not holding up development downtown. Parking lots are interim uses, he said.

"We want to see our property develop, to see the city shine," Accardi said.

Abberger said city officials loosened their rules to encourage parking lots on the city's empty spaces as the economy crashed.

"It was a good strategy to help the landowners in one of the most distressed markets in the country," he said.

Now, however, the rules are tightening up — demanding parking lots install lighting and landscaping — as a way to push landowners toward development, he said.

Shannon Bassett, a University of South Florida architecture professor, said Tampa can work around its vacant acres. She suggested improving the streets linking its far-flung residential centers by widening sidewalks and installing shade in the more barren areas.

"Maybe it doesn't need to have as high a density as New York or Boston or Chicago," Bassett said. "It doesn't necessarily mean that you max out every single parcel."

Empty spaces create room for farmers markets and impromptu activities that can boost city living, she said.

Bassett led the (Re)stitch Tampa project. Like Buckhorn, she sees the Riverwalk inspiring growth inward toward the heart of downtown, but only if the city works on the streets leading toward Ybor City and Channelside. She refers to those streets as "the stitches."

For now, though, Tampa's downtown residents have to figure out how to live among the empty spaces.

Loftus, 26, says the answer is simple: drive from her Channelside apartment through downtown to the grocery or drugstores in Hyde Park.

"For people who are used to city living, it's a huge adjustment," she said.

Parsons, 67, isn't afraid to strike out on foot from his apartment at The Slade to get dinner downtown or visit Curtis Hixon Waterfront Park.

"I'm a 200-pound guy, so it's not uncomfortable for me," he said. "But if I was a woman, it would be very uncomfortable."

That said, he added, the routes into town — Kennedy Boulevard and Jackson Street — can be nerve-racking. A stretch of eastern Jackson lacks a sidewalk.

Peter Grimsley, the Slade's concierge, has his own philosophy for living downtown.

"You can't meander," he said.

kwiatrowski@tampatrib.com (813) 259-7871 Twitter: @kwiatrowskiTBO