

# 08/25

## How to save your CBD

### Kansas City

A once-declining Midwestern city has bucked the national trend and breathed new life into its downtown area – attracting a fresh wave of entrepreneurs along the way.

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“I’m originally from Los Angeles but the answer wasn’t there for me,” says Brian Kim, who runs a string of successful coffee shops in Kansas City. Kim has called the Midwestern metropolis home for more than 10 years. He tells MONOCLE that he chose to base himself here because it offered him “breathing room” to get his ideas off the ground. “That’s partly down to the cheaper cost of running a business,” he says. “People here also have a lot of enthusiasm for local things.”

Kansas City sits almost perfectly in the middle of the US, straddling the Missouri-Kansas state line. For a long time it had an unenviable reputation. During the mid-20th century, its downtown became a place that was almost exclusively for doing business and residents were gradually edged out to the suburbs. The city centre became a drive-in, drive-out area where the car reigned supreme; by the early 2000s, the downtown population had dwindled to a mere 13,000.

Over the past 20 years, however, there has been a steady reversal of Kansas City’s fortunes. Today it has one of the fastest-growing city economies and downtown populations in the country, and is being talked about as a model of urban renewal. According to the city council, more than 122,000 people now work in the greater downtown area and office occupancy is at about 85 per cent. This compares to a nationwide average across major metropolitan areas of about 50 per cent. At a time when even the great coastal cities are



1. In good hands
2. Nicole Satterwhite, co-owner of design agency Willoughby
3. Model from Kem Studio
4. View of the Kauffman Center
5. Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art
6. Kansas City skyline



Relocate to a rising city

facing the existential threats of desolate office blocks and crime-blighted downtowns, Kansas City can offer a few pointers.

Things began to change when the state government and private investors decided to invest more in the city’s downtown and its housing stock. Since 2002 it has poured more than \$10bn (€9.8bn) into the central business district and many of those moving to Kansas City end up living and working in the centre, which boasts the largest residential population of any Midwestern city. Over the past two decades, more than 50 office buildings have been converted into roomy apartments, showing that this can be done successfully, while former industrial areas such as the Crossroads district have had many of their 20th-century brick warehouses transformed into mixed-use developments comprising housing, creative offices and independent shops, bars and restaurants. Meanwhile, the light-rail streetcar system, launched in 2016, is being expanded and is scheduled for completion later this year.

Raven Space Systems, a start-up based in the central West Bottoms neighbourhood, is developing capsules that can be used to shuttle cargo back from space and has won





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### Why the Paris of the Plains is back

The simple principles that turned around Missouri's biggest city.

- 1. Invest in downtown**  
Kansas City leaders poured money into upgrading the housing and commercial stock in the CBD and were unafraid to turn unused offices into spacious apartments.
- 2. Keep historic, family-run businesses close to home**  
Historic department stores such as Halls have remained part of the fabric of downtown, taking advantage of a growing footfall.
- 3. Get people moving**  
Investments in a new light-rail network in 2016 have paid off, with people getting out of their cars.
- 4. Make old buildings work harder**  
The revitalisation has been guided by the idea of "reuse and restore".
- 5. Put those who live there in the driving seat**  
Some of Kansas City's best ideas came from citizen-led initiatives, from enticing entrepreneurs to set up shop to making the city centre more liveable.

contracts from Nasa and the US Air Force, among others. Its co-founder Blake Herren recently secured millions of dollars in funding and was lured to Missouri from Oklahoma by an initiative that provides financial support, office space and mentorship to early-stage technology entrepreneurs for a year if they move to Kansas City. The scheme is run by the Downtown Council of Kansas City, a private, nonprofit body that has driven much of the change here in recent decades. "It's about making the city a place where people feel welcome to come and try out ideas," says Tommy Wilson, who oversees the programme. The citizen-led group's "Imagine Downtown KC 2030" blueprint involves creating more green spaces and enhancing the urban core's public transport and walkability. "We're Kansas City residents ourselves," says Wilson. "It's far easier to be motivated when it's your home that you're improving."

As a historic crossroads for agriculture, Kansas City has a long history of affluence that's reflected in the skyline. Rows of art-deco brick buildings were erected during the boom years of the 1920s and 1930s, when the city became known as the "Paris of the Plains"

1. Full of beans
2. Longtime Kansas City resident Cecilia White
3. Sculpture at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art
4. Brutalist wonders
5. Brett Pearson of Kem Studio
6. Inside the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art

due to its profusion of contemporary architecture and riotous jazz scene. These buildings have been given a new lease of life as shops, a gallery, a wine bar and a brewery. Kyle Evans runs Penrose, a hole-in-the-wall espresso spot. "I left Kansas City in 2013 but, after almost 10 years living in the Bay Area, I decided that it was time to come home," he says. "When I got back here, I wanted to drink good coffee but also do something meaningful."

Once one of the world's largest cattle-trading hubs, the West Bottoms district is now known for a range of trades. Inside a modernist building is Kem Studio, an industrial design and architecture firm. "This is a city that takes design seriously," says Jonathon Kemnitzer, who co-founded the studio in 2004 with Brad Satterwhite. He tells MONOCLE that they considered basing themselves in a larger city but Kansas City won out. "It's so easy to meet with civic leaders here and make things happen," he says. The studio's team is now revitalising swaths of land on the banks of the Missouri river. "More than ever, there's a sense that it's empowering to be in the Midwest," says Satterwhite. "There's space to think here, as well as land to develop." — M



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