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For business and young professionals, a new way of life in downtown Roanoke

There's a blossoming urban lifestyle in downtown Roanoke that is changing the way businesses do business and young professionals view the city.

By [Jenny Kincaid Boone](#)

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Late last month, Jennifer Bryant filled up her car's gas tank for the first time since November.

She saves a significant amount of money each month on gas because she lives in an apartment on Church Avenue in downtown Roanoke. Bryant rarely drives her car during the week, except to the grocery store or to Valley View Mall, a mere five minutes away.

"I work a block away from my apartment. I'm pretty centralized," said Bryant, 27, a senior projects manager at Park Roanoke. "I can be anywhere in downtown in five minutes."

Bryant sought out an apartment downtown when she moved to Roanoke in 2006 from downtown Blacksburg.

First, she lived in Eight Jefferson Place, an apartment building near the Hotel Roanoke & Conference Center. Three years later, she moved to a newer apartment on Church Avenue. In a few months, she's moving again, to another Church Avenue apartment that is part of a new project called Sixteen West.

Bryant is one of hundreds of people who are shaping downtown Roanoke's flourishing population.

Map: [Apartments and condos in downtown Roanoke](#)

A decade ago, Roanoke's downtown largely was a place where people did business by day and drove home to sprawling suburbs by night. Apartments and condominiums were scattered above a few office spaces and storefronts, but the streets mostly were reserved for work and entertainment, not day-to-day life.

Fast forward about 10 years.

Lights shine brightly at night from the windows of some of downtown's historic structures. Young professionals walk from their loft-style apartments to work each morning. People stroll the streets and parks with their dogs on leashes.

Welcome to a new way of life in downtown Roanoke, a blossoming urban lifestyle that is changing the way businesses do business, developers choose projects and young professionals view the city.

Between 2000 and 2010, the number of people who lived in apartments and condos -- largely in renovated historic structures -- in Roanoke's downtown shot up more than 1,600 percent, according to new U.S. Census Bureau figures. Fewer than 50 people lived in downtown Roanoke in 2000, compared

with more than 600 people as of April 2010.

The census does not designate a specific downtown Roanoke district, but these figures include the core of downtown and an area that stretches west to Sixth Street and southeast to Eighth Street. They do not include the more traditional neighborhoods bordering the city's commercial core.

Of the downtown Roanoke residents, approximately 89 percent are white, while about 7 percent are black, according to the census. Hispanics and Asian residents account for smaller percentages of downtown's population.

The desire to dwell within walking distance of entertainment, restaurants and art galleries has sparked the influx of residents. Seeking a walkable way of life, they are leasing apartments or buying loft-style condos fashioned by a host of developers. With state and federal tax credits as financial incentives, along with Roanoke's real estate tax abatement program, developers are finding new life for some dilapidated and historic warehouses and large retail spaces.

Also, downtown advocates claim that growth in the district's cultural attractions and amenities, from new restaurants to the Taubman Museum of Art, have helped generate excitement and entice more people to experience downtown life.

This wave is building momentum, with several large-scale apartment projects set to open this year. They include 134 apartments at the former Patrick Henry Hotel on South Jefferson Street, 72 apartments fashioned inside a Salem Avenue warehouse and 16 rental spaces on Campbell Avenue Southeast, above the future home of Community High School.

"It's a really novel concept for Roanoke," said Lucas Thornton, a Botetourt County native who opened the 25-apartment Lawson Building East in 2009. "We see there is an incredible demand."

Evolution of a life downtown

Before 2000, the slim numbers of people who called downtown Roanoke home resided largely in barely seen apartments and condos above office spaces and storefronts.

That changed in 2002, when Eight Jefferson Place, downtown's first large-scale apartment building, opened its doors. With 87 rental spaces inside a former Norfolk and Western office building, this structure revealed a new world of downtown life to young professionals and others who wanted to dwell among the city's tall buildings and concrete sidewalks.

From that point, a surge to renovate old spaces and devise an upscale urban living style revved up with high-end condominiums.

Ed Walker, a Roanoke native and well-known developer, was one of the leaders in 2004 when he designed a condo project on nine floors of the former Colonial Arms building at the corner of Campbell Avenue and South Jefferson Street. The unfinished spaces sold for \$350,000 and higher.

Several blocks away, the State and City Building opened with seven floors of condos.

Meanwhile, some Richmond developers had their eyes on downtown Roanoke. One in particular, George Stanley, left downtown Richmond's saturated residential market to help reshape Roanoke's urban history. Through his company, Stanley Shield LLC, Stanley purchased a

building on Campbell Avenue across from the police department, where he fashioned 15 loft-style condos on the upper floors. Campbell Garage Lofts opened in 2006 with prices starting at \$155,000.

Stanley Shield then bought a former candy factory and distribution building at 324 Salem Ave., now the Candy Factory Lofts. The structure houses 15 one-bedroom condos with exposed brick walls, granite countertops and oak floors.

Bill Chapman, another Richmond developer, also swooped into Roanoke and in 2007 opened the Fulton Motor Lofts, a former automobile showroom at 400 Salem Ave. that now houses 22 high-end condos. The units went on the market for \$160,000 to \$239,000.

"Sometimes it takes people from outside the area to come in and see what the potential is," said Brian Townsend, Roanoke's assistant city manager.

Walker and Stanley have worked together on other downtown residential projects, with Stanley's company as general contractor.

But in 2008, downtown Roanoke's residential landscape took a different turn.

Obtaining financing for condos became too difficult for both developers and buyers in the midst of the national real estate meltdown and economic crisis.

As buying slowed, apartment rentals took off.

With a direct appeal to young professionals seeking a vibrant nightlife and city amenities, Walker and business partner Scott Graeff opened the 58-unit Hancock apartments in 2008 inside a Campbell Avenue building that had housed numerous retailers in its past.

The next year, Walker pulled downtown's residential development farther west to Sixth Street, where he led renovations of the Virginia Mills Cotton Products plant for 108 apartments, renamed the Cotton Mill Lofts.

In 2009, Thornton expanded the city's urban living footprint to the east with the renovation of the H.L. Lawson & Son building near Norfolk Southern's East End Shops. The building now houses 25 apartments.

New apartments on the horizon

Three more significant apartment projects are poised to open to tenants this year.

For more than a year, Walker has led a \$20 million renovation of the historic 10-floor Patrick Henry Hotel on South Jefferson Street. The Patrick Henry soon will house 134 apartments, with 56 reserved for students at the Jefferson College of Health Sciences. Move-in is expected this summer. As of earlier this month, 43 apartments were still available, said property manager Michelle Rose.

Farther west, Chapman is spending \$7 million to renovate an old storage warehouse on Salem Avenue, beside the Habitat for Humanity ReStore. His new Lofts at West Station will house 72 apartments on several floors. The two side-by-side buildings -- one standing four stories, and the

other two -- are 60,000 square feet total. Chapman expects to open the one- and two-bedroom units in December.

He's also seeking a restaurant to open on the bottom floor of the two-story building, though he has not yet begun to market the 2,500-square-foot space.

Chapman said his success with the Fulton Motor Lofts, where all condos were sold in 2009, inspired him to seek out more development opportunities in Roanoke. And warehouses work well because they are flexible and lack many ornate details that must be preserved.

"We like downtown Roanoke because it is a compact downtown," he said, explaining that the district is attractive because of its bookends at the farmers market area and the YMCA on Church Avenue. "All of downtown is walkable."

Wells Fargo, Chapman's lender for the project, performed extensive market analysis and determined that strong demand remains for apartment dwellers in downtown Roanoke, he said.

Just east of downtown, on Campbell Avenue near the Lawson project, renovations are moving quickly on a former grocery distribution warehouse where Thornton plans to open 16 new apartments by early summer. Community High School will move into the building's lower level in August. The apartments will span the second and third floors, and some have pine wood floors, exposed beams and large windows showing off views of downtown, the Taubman and Mill Mountain.

Innovative Educational Partners purchased the 30,000-square-foot building for \$550,000 last year from the Taubman. Thornton is a partner in the company.

Thornton, 28, said the success of his apartments at the Lawson Building East are an indication to him that downtown's potential for apartments remains strong. Downtown apartments generally appeal to tenants between the ages of 25 and 35, he said.

"It changes the complexion of downtown," Thornton said.

Although apartment projects are booming in downtown, some interest remains in condos. One Roanoke developer, John Garland, said rather than fully designing residential spaces at first, he is creating spaces for buyers who will pay to design them. That is less risky than selling finished condos speculatively, he said.

Garland and a business partner own buildings at 108 Campbell Ave. and 209 First St., where they are developing seven condos total. Already, three of the condos on Campbell Avenue have buyers, with prices between \$300,000 and \$400,000, including build-out, Garland said last week.

The success of new residential projects is evidence that downtown living is growing, but the saturation point for such homes only is as strong as the number of large buildings that are left in the district and are suitable for rehabilitation, Townsend said. He named two South Jefferson Street structures -- the Boxley Building and the former Heironimus storefront -- as potential sites for historic renovations. But developers already have tapped into many of downtown's best warehouse and historic spaces, he said.

"The big ones are what give you the critical mass and start pushing the needle," Townsend said.

Meanwhile, Bryant, who is single, said she plans to live downtown until her personal life stage changes. She enjoys walking to restaurants, playing poker at Corned Beef & Co. and visiting art galleries, all just blocks from her apartment.

"Until I'm ready to get married and have babies, I think I'll always live downtown," Bryant said. "You get this big-city feel in a very small city."

Staff writer Matt Chittum contributed to this report.

Map: Apartments and condos in downtown Roanoke



View [Living in downtown Roanoke](#) in a larger map

Map by Ryan Loew and Jenny Kincaid Boone | The Roanoke Times

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