



OPINION

Bringing workers back downtown won't make Toronto great again. But making it fun might

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Downtown Toronto continues to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic. But its office buildings are far from full, and alarming numbers of storefronts remain vacant. On Fridays in March of this year, [office occupancy](#) in downtown Toronto was just 40 per cent of what it was before the pandemic. How does it compare with other cities' downtowns and what can be done to revitalize it?

First things first: Downtowns in North America will never return to the way they were. Remote work is here to stay; while the percentage has continued to fall since 2020, Statistics Canada [found](#) that 20 per cent of Canadians still work most of their week from home.

But Toronto's downtown continues to lag in another crucial way: as a place not just to work but to shop, go out, have fun, live and raise a family, according to a recent [survey](#) of more than 26,000 people in 90-plus downtowns around the world in 53 cities, by the architecture firm Gensler. Downtown Toronto ranked 60th globally as a place to work, but trailed even further as a place to eat out (64th) and discover new things (65th). It fared even worse as a place to live (76th) and meet people (77th). This is worrying, because the downtown of the future will be less about working and shopping and much more about living, socializing and consuming experiences. "Downtowns must deliver opportunities for fun, discovery, and beauty to appeal to a broad audience of city dwellers," the Gensler survey found.

Downtown Toronto not only stacks up poorly against other cities' downtowns, it lags behind its own midtown, which ranked 16th globally and first among North American

cities as a place to work; second globally and tied for first place in North America as a place to discover new things; and 15th globally and tied for first place in North America as a place to live. In fact, midtown Toronto ranked first among North American downtowns on five of the 10 activities the survey covered and in the upper half on nine of them globally, while its downtown ranked in the bottom half for nine categories. Troublingly, though, both districts do poorly as places to start families and raise children. Downtown Toronto came in dead last globally, with just 16 per cent of respondents saying it is a good or excellent place to start a family; it ranked third-to-last as a place to raise children. Midtown Toronto ranked 42nd globally as a place to start a family and 46th as a place to raise children. Making downtown Toronto more family-friendly with bigger apartments, more parks and family-oriented amenities should be high on the city's list of to-dos.

What would it take to entice more visitors to come downtown? Safety is far and away the most important concern. More than a quarter (28 per cent) of survey respondents said they would visit downtown more often if it were safer, and 35 per cent said the same for midtown. Urbanists might blanch, but parking continues to matter a great deal: A quarter of Torontonians surveyed said they would spend more time downtown if it had more parking, and 27 per cent said the same about midtown.

While some business leaders and management thinkers believe more workers will come downtown if offices are made more attractive and inviting, having better places to work didn't actually matter much at all for Torontonians. Only 8 per cent of survey respondents said they would visit downtown more often if it were a better place to work. Work was even less of a concern around midtown, with just 6 per cent of respondents citing better places to work as a factor that would bring them back to the neighbourhood. Interestingly, workers, including those who work remotely, say that they like coming downtown to work in third places such as cafés, restaurants and coworking spaces, and the survey found that workers would come downtown more often if it offered more of these kinds of places.

What it all comes down to is that work is no longer the No. 1 reason people go downtown. If it hopes to thrive as a great city in our new era, downtown [Toronto](#) must become a safer and more balanced place to live, raise children, and, most of all, to experience new things and connect with others.