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Centre of attention

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RUTH.BONNEVILLE@FREEPRESS.MB.CA [Enlarge Image](#)

Lee Holleron, 46, Pollock Hardware Co-op on Main Street, art programming manager at Red Road Lodge, Grace Street. "If the city wants to see how to develop downtown they should look at one block of Main Street. What needs to happen are these (focused) community, grassroots revitalizations."

From Merve Pritchard's front window, he can see all of Winnipeg.

"I can see City Hall. I can see MTC. I can see the tall buildings downtown and the river and the park," he says.

Pritchard, 58, has lived in his condo on Waterfront Drive for three-and-a-half years. He moved there despite some people's best efforts to dissuade him.

"There is that group of people that questioned, 'What's he doing? It's not a safe place,' (but) it's been the best thing I could have done," he says.

To a lot of Winnipeggers, downtown is a place to visit — for the theatre, the shopping and maybe a restaurant. But live there so that you can simply walk home after taking in the nightlife? That's not even seen as an option.

"Generally, people think it's unsafe, scary and noisy," says John Giavedoni, chairman of the Residents of the Exchange District. "If we get more people living downtown, most of the problems go away."

Pricing is a major problem when it comes to living downtown, says Stefano Grande, executive director of Downtown Biz.

"There are more people who want to live downtown who can only afford at market (the average of what people can afford in terms of housing prices)."

The city is aware there is a big gap between cheap housing downtown and the expensive condo developments. It's trying to work towards a more affordable residential downtown.

"What we want is opportunity for choices," says Barry Thorgrimson, manager of economic development for the City of Winnipeg. "We still believe our downtown is the heart of our city... and we want to make it a complete and sustainable community."

Lee Holleron, 46, has lived in various places downtown for five years and now lives in South Point Douglas with his partner Annie Bergen and their eight-month-old daughter. He says there are still a lot of scary things about living downtown that the condo developments haven't been able to change.

And, he says. "I lost the flavor for living in that part of (The Exchange)."

He sees downtown right now as home to two types of people: the affluent condo owners and the displaced lower-income residents.

"We love this city and we love downtown," Holleron says. "We're not hiding and I'm happy to help, but there's such an imbalance."

This is why Amanda Brown moved away from Hargrave Street.

"When I first moved in, I was just so excited to be living away from home," she says. "But downtown is deserted and dark at night... there are people prowling, and a lot of drunk people stumbling around. Most nights I would jog home in an attempt to get home as quickly as I could."

Three months after Eve Dutton moved to her downtown apartment on Webb Place, she was mugged. Dutton, 31, was approached by a group of girls at night while she was trying to cross Portage Avenue at Vaughan Street. She says once they discovered she didn't have any money, they beat her. A bus driver, who witnessed the attack, helped Dutton and called police.

The attack left Dutton shaken, but it didn't deter her from saying that her neighborhood's still safe.

"Now, I just make an effort to be safe," she says. "It's like anywhere. When I lived in the suburbs there

was crime there too."

She says if anything it's an illustration of how the community is there for one another. In the suburbs, she says, the bus driver wouldn't have been there to help.

"There's that sense of community of people who live downtown," she says. "People should come and just see downtown. Try it out.

Come and take a look before you dismiss it. That's how I started my love affair with downtown."

On Bannatyne Avenue where Steve Porter, 43, and Deborah Zanke, 42, live, they say they feel safe, walk everywhere, and love being a part of the flow of the city.

"It's noisy and busy, but we would live nowhere else," Porter says.

"Everything is just at our fingertips."

David Noel has only lived downtown for five months, but the 21-year-old student says it's the perfect place for young people, even if his mom wasn't keen on his Edmonton Street apartment at first.

"She didn't fall in love with the place," he admits, "but it was my decision."

"I'm enjoying it now because I'm young," he says. "I like the noise.


I like when things happen. I like that feeling of being in the middle of things."

For Merve Pritchard, as he looks out his front window, this vibrancy is what downtown is all about. He wants to be a part of the redevelopment of the city centre and says living here is helping to achieve that.

"I've got to do my part," Pritchard says. "There's so much potential here."

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