

Downtown Hartford Stirs From Slumber

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[HARTFORD](#), Jan. 3 - Decades and different tastes separate Lyndsay Stephenson and Bernie Rosen, but they share what might seem an unlikely address - and an unlikely attitude. Both are thrilled to have just moved from the suburbs into a new apartment building in downtown Hartford.

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George Ruhe for The New York Times

Trumbull on the Park, left, opened to residents in early December.



Douglas Healey for The New York Times

Bernie Rosen, 76, a retired teacher, and a neighbor, Lyndsay Stephenson, 24, in Mr. Rosen's apartment at Trumbull on the Park in downtown Hartford. Ms. Stephenson says she tells friends, "Come to Hartford. I swear, it's fun."

"I love it," said Ms. Stephenson, 24, standing inside the small, glossy lobby of the building, Trumbull on the Park, which overlooks historic Bushnell Park. It opened to residents in early December.

Said Mr. Rosen, 76, his jacket zipped to the chin on his way out the door on a brisk morning, "As I got older I decided I'd like to be somewhere that I could walk to the theater, walk to museums."

Ms. Stephenson, a real estate analyst, prefers partying at the Pour House after leaving her office. Mr. Rosen, a retired school administrator and teacher, would rather wander the galleries of the Wadsworth Atheneum on winter afternoons and attend plays at the Hartford Stage in the evening. But by

simply signing a lease, they have become trailblazers of a sort in a city center once so lifeless it had been called America's File Cabinet - a place where, after 5 p.m., outbound bus stops can still account for most of the street life.

Now, even as Hartford continues to battle persistent crime and widespread poverty, its downtown has become a place where boosters and builders can show hard evidence - from hundreds of new housing units, to the first, happy migrants from the suburbs - that this worn old city's interminable pursuit of a downtown comeback is slowly being fulfilled.

"To me," said Ms. Stephenson, who grew up on Cape Cod, "this is the perfect-size city. With my friends at the Cape, I'm like, 'Come to Hartford. I swear, it's fun.' "

The arrival of young professionals, empty-nesters and retirees is critical to the plan to build a stable residential neighborhood downtown. Told of Ms. Stephenson and her enthusiasm, Michael Kintner, the project coordinator for the Hartford Image Project, a marketing group formed four years ago to fight negative perceptions of the city, said, "I may have to hire her."

The city, after all, needs every advocate it can get, and negative perceptions may be the least of its problems.

More than one-third of its approximately 125,000 residents live in poverty; fewer than one-quarter own their homes; violent crime still sears struggling minority neighborhoods; and the public school system is in such trouble that Mayor Eddie A. Perez recently appointed himself to the school board to put things in order and then was unanimously voted its chairman. Weeks earlier, he joined leaders of other cities to sue the state on the grounds that it was

providing inadequate financing for schools.

After decades of decline and despair, few would declare even a partial victory in the face of so many challenges. But optimism, at least, is no longer limited to marketers paid to profess it. And, with \$1 billion in government subsidies having helped to drive a range of building projects, the physical proof of change downtown is indisputable

About 1,300 new housing units, mostly rentals, have opened, are being built or are planned for new or renovated buildings that are slowly brightening formerly desolate blocks in the city's small central business district. About two dozen new restaurants and bars now stir street life in a state capital known for its insurance industry, and for rolling up the sidewalks at night.

Along the Connecticut River, on downtown's eastern edge, the Connecticut Convention Center, which opened in June, will hold about 330 events in its first 12 months, twice what was projected, and the new 409-room Marriott hotel next door is drawing a steady flow of guests.

One lot over, the architect Cesar Pelli is designing a splashy new science center, scheduled for completion in 2008. A few blocks away, on Trumbull Street, the 403-room Hartford Hilton has reopened after extensive renovations, and the forlorn old mall that fronts the Hartford Civic Center has been transformed with a sophisticated stainless-steel facade and walls of windows that evoke muted Mondrian paintings. A 36-story, 262-unit apartment tower is under construction above the civic center.

That project, called Hartford 21, is being built by a Massachusetts firm, Northland Investment Corporation, which bought its first office building in the

city in 1997, just after Hartford lost the Whalers, its former National Hockey League team.

Back then, few people viewed Hartford as a good investment. Now, Northland has about \$340 million invested in properties, and it has become the largest private property owner downtown.

Lawrence R. Gottesdiener, Northland's chairman and chief executive, said that with "virtually no competition in this market," Northland has amassed a large number of properties at very attractive prices. "The catalytic developer needs to take a long-term view," he said. "We're in what we think is a 20-year business plan and we're 8 years into it."

Mr. Gottesdiener said Hartford 21 would open for residential tenants by September. Earlier in 2005, Northland bought the Goodwin Hotel, the city's oldest hotel. In the spring, it plans to close on the purchase of the Y.M.C.A. tower, just down from Trumbull on the Park. The Y.M.C.A., which had been planning to move before the Northland deal developed, will be replaced with about 200 rental units and 200 condominiums, to be completed around 2009, Mr. Gottesdiener said.

"You start with high-end rentals, you fill in with more affordables," he said. "Then, finally, when people are ready to take the risk, you give them a high-end condo alternative. That's going to be the Y.M.C.A."

At Trumbull on the Park, about 40 of the building's 100 apartment units are now occupied, said Martin J. Kenny, the developer of the project, which cost \$40 million. It received about \$6 million in state subsidies. The building includes a 600-car parking garage, and the rents range from \$950 for a studio

to nearly \$4,000 for a top-floor two-bedroom apartment with views of the State Capitol.

Mr. Kenny said he planned "to hit really hard" to rent out the apartments by the summer, when turnover is higher, and then begin converting an empty office building next door into condominiums.

"Our goal is to stabilize this project before moving to that one," he said. "This is the land of steady habits, so unlike some other markets, I don't think anybody goes crazy in a knee-jerk way. But we're very enthusiastic about this market."

Though housing is quickly increasing, major new stores are absent, as are supermarkets. One project, known as Front Street, which is intended to support the convention center with a range of stores and housing, remains paralyzed, with nothing built but sidewalks and streetlights. But among city boosters, the chorus is "retail follows rooftops."

There is even talk, dreamy for now, of bringing back the Whalers, and of renovating or replacing the coliseum at the civic center, where the team once played. The minor-league Hartford Wolf Pack plays there now, as do the men's and women's basketball teams from the University of Connecticut. A block from Hartford 21, on Main Street, the old Sage Allen department store is being renovated and will include housing for 136 students from the University of Hartford. The idea, to inject the energy, income and creativity of young people into downtown, follows what officials called the successful conversion of another old department store down the street, G. Fox, into the home of Capital Community College.

Along those lines, Mayor Perez noted that part of the Hartford 21 project included tearing down one of several skywalks that link buildings downtown but keep workers inside.

"All that did was turn this into a 9-to-5 office park," he said. "Yes, we saw job growth, but at the other end we sacrificed street life, and we're paying for it in a sense."

Mindful that minorities, often poor, make up the majority of Hartford's residents, the mayor said he does not measure progress by how many outsiders the city lures. He said he is focusing on helping existing lower-income renters in neighborhoods like the North End and along Park Street.

"Three years from now I want to convert them to homeowners," he said. "I'm not looking at just trying to get yuppies to come downtown."

Still, newcomers like Ms. Stephenson and Mr. Rosen are a welcome sight. Mr. Rosen, who grew up in Hartford and later moved out to Cromwell, about 15 miles south of the city, strolls Bushnell Park in the morning, regardless of the cold winds, and likes to dine at the Trumbull Kitchen and other restaurants within blocks of his building.

He is not married and has no children, and he said that some of his extended family, scattered around the state, were concerned that he was moving to Hartford. Until they came to visit.

"Uncle Bernie," he recalled them saying, "this is perfect for you."