

LIVE
DOWNTOWN BROWNSVILLE

This section explores Downtown Brownsville as a place to live. It highlights existing housing conditions, recent and planned residential development, and affordability considerations. The section describes how new housing investments, adaptive reuse projects, and mixed-use development are contributing to increased activity and long-term Downtown vitality while supporting a more diverse and connected community.

DOWNTOWN HOUSING OVERVIEW

Introduction of new housing into the study area emerged as one of the central themes of the Downtown planning process. With the decline in the demand for commercial space, especially in the Downtown Core, the influx of new residents can help sustain existing commercial activity and add vibrancy to Downtown streets.

A few decades ago, significant residential development was not considered a viable strategy for revitalizing downtowns in mid-sized and smaller cities. Downtown living only recently gained popularity in larger Texas cities like Austin, Dallas, Houston, and San Antonio, cities with challenges such as unproven markets and limited comparable projects, leading to skepticism from financiers. Residential development was not initially seen as central to downtown redevelopment.

Brownsville faced similar issues, with limited new housing despite efforts by the Housing Authority and local developers. However, the 2022 Brownsville Unified Development Ordinance removed barriers to infill and multi-family housing around Downtown, sparking renewed interest in urban living.

Downtown Brownsville offers historic architecture, an emerging restaurant scene, cultural venues, and compact urban blocks but faces challenges including concerns about safety, insufficient pedestrian amenities, and limited grocery options. The area's distinct border location, multicultural heritage, and arts community help define its character, and leveraging these strengths will be key to creating a vibrant, round-the-clock Downtown. Public feedback during this Master Plan process highlights strong local identification with these assets.

The Brownsville Market: Constraints and Opportunities

Given these assets and the opportunities they present to attract individuals interested in residing in or near Downtown Brownsville, there is clear potential for housing demand in the area. However, market conditions indicate that policymakers must implement strategic measures to foster this market and effectively respond to existing circumstances as the housing sector progresses beyond current challenges.

An analysis of Brownsville's housing market suggests that Downtown currently captures less than 10% of regional housing unit growth. With an estimated baseline increase of approximately 2,000 housing units over a 10-year period, it is reasonable to expect demand for 120 new Downtown housing units during that time, averaging 10-15 units annually. Although relatively conservative, this estimate offers an achievable starting point for a downtown housing initiative. It is important to note that this projection does not account for potential additional or induced demand resulting from new Downtown development or other economic initiatives. Experience from comparable cities, particularly those with minimal prior downtown residential activity, shows that the introduction of new downtown housing frequently generates supplementary demand, especially when incorporated into well-conceived and well-designed district development programs. The formation of a nascent residential district often attracts further interest from prospective residents.



New housing developments in specific and appropriate areas.



Adaptive reuse of existing downtown building.

No marketing strategy for downtown housing is more effective than rapid occupancy of newly available units, which stimulates demand and anticipation for subsequent developments. Therefore, setting a goal of 100 to 150 housing units is pragmatic and may well be surpassed.

Furthermore, regardless of market size, it is essential for a residential housing strategy to offer a diverse selection of unit sizes, styles, locations, and price points, thereby providing options for a broad range of individuals interested in Downtown living. Some communities have experienced stagnation in their downtown housing markets due to early success with limited project diversity, followed by repetitive subsequent developments. Such scenarios often result in over-saturation of specific market niches while leaving other segments underserved. Fortunately, Downtown Brownsville encompasses several distinct sub-markets that should be prioritized to minimize such risks and ensure balanced growth across all market segments.

Opportunities for moderate residential growth, and potentially a somewhat increased pace of development, are present; however, providing an adequate supply to meet this market faces considerable economic challenges. Overall housing values in Brownsville remain relatively low. While this benefits local residents by increasing accessibility and mobility within the housing market, it presents a significant barrier to Downtown housing development. The costs associated with downtown residential projects typically exceed those of suburban developments due to factors such as complex site assembly, higher land costs per square foot, increased expenses for rehabilitation or reconstruction, smaller lot sizes, parking requirements, greater costs related to vertical construction as opposed to horizontal, and extended development timelines. In a market like Brownsville, these additional expenses cannot be fully recovered through sales prices, and often must be absorbed entirely. Therefore, if the community wishes to prioritize Downtown housing, it is essential to establish robust public/private partnerships that implement effective strategies to mitigate these cost barriers. Additionally, these incentives should be proactively marketed to qualified development entities.

Downtown Brownsville benefits from the presence of the Brownsville Housing Authority within and adjacent to Downtown. The City is also undertaking a citywide Housing Study Plan to better understand future housing needs, affordability challenges, and market opportunities. Downtown housing strategies should align with the study and support both market-rate and affordable housing through infill development, adaptive reuse, and public-private partnerships.

Affordable Housing & Bougainvillea Redevelopment

Downtown Brownsville benefits from the presence of the Brownsville Housing Authority and the proposed redevelopment of the Bougainvillea Housing Development. The approximately 5-acre project is envisioned as permanent supportive and affordable housing designed to promote independent living, community integration, and long-term housing stability. Potential amenities being explored include accessible units, community spaces, supportive services, and improved connections to healthcare, transportation, and Downtown destinations. The redevelopment is intended to strengthen the Jefferson Corridor, expand inclusive housing opportunities, and support long-term investment in Downtown Brownsville.

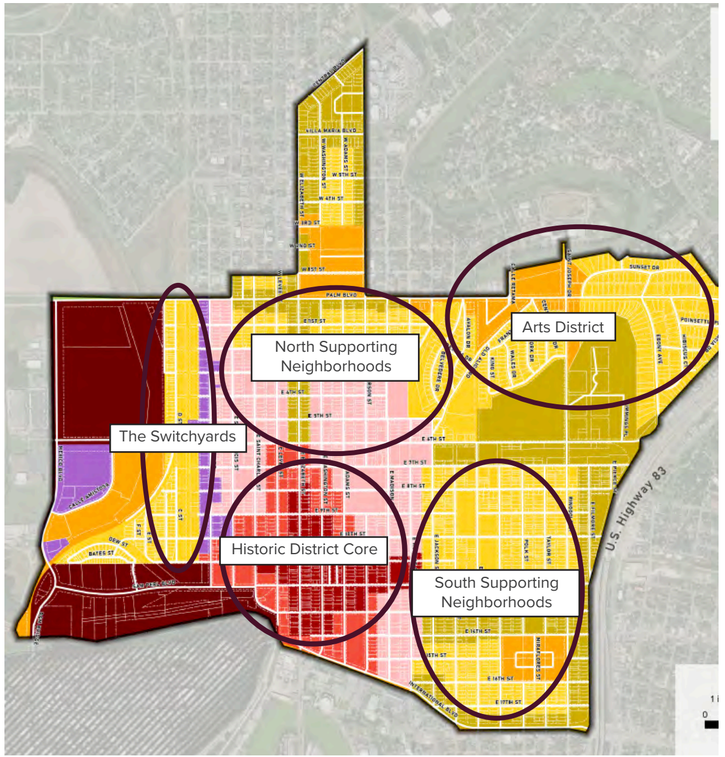


SUB-DISTRICT PRIORITY RESIDENTIAL AREAS

Although the core of Downtown Brownsville is relatively compact in terms of geographic area, it has a number of sub-districts within and around Downtown that can provide attractive and unique residential neighborhoods, each with its own particular set of location characteristics and amenities. More importantly, each can contain residential units with somewhat different styles, layouts, sizes, and price points, so that they can complement rather than compete with one another. Finally, there are near-term opportunities within each sub-market that could result in product coming onto the market relatively quickly, and in conjunction with other Downtown initiatives either underway or proposed as part of the overall Master Plan process.

The recommended Downtown Brownsville Sub-District Priority Residential Areas are the following:

- **Historic District Core:** Primarily between Adams and Levee Streets and 7th Street and International Blvd.
- **North and South Supporting Neighborhoods:** North and east of Adams Street to Tyler Street and west of 6th Street to Palm Blvd.
- **Arts District:** Along Palm Blvd and Los Ebanos.
- **Switchyards/Riverside Park:** South of McNair Family Street and Amigoland Mall.



Map 14. Map of Downtown Brownsville Sub-District Priority Residential Areas

HISTORIC DOWNTOWN CORE

Elizabeth and Washington Streets in Downtown Brownsville between 7th Street and International Boulevard have retained a remarkable character, despite challenges related to vacancies, disrepair, and underutilization of a number of the buildings along this stretch. While the border crossing still brings shoppers into Downtown, it does not see the traffic that it once did. An influx of residents in the Downtown Core would help support existing Downtown businesses and, with continued growth, create demand for new businesses to cater to these residents. However, there are some challenges to residential development which are unique to the Downtown Core and which are explored in this section.

Preserving historic and heritage buildings

The Downtown Core is home to many of Brownsville's historic and heritage buildings, which are an important part of its character and identity. The character and detailing of many of the historic properties that remain could never be replicated by new construction, and as a district it exhibits a strong future potential, under the right set of circumstances. While the market for many of these buildings, especially the upper floors, is poor for office and commercial uses, the massing and location of many of these properties make the same space extremely marketable as adaptive use for residential purposes. The size of the buildings make them attractive redevelopment projects as well; they are generally modest in size, allowing a steady number of units to be introduced to the market without oversaturating the Downtown residential market. The attractiveness of this as a high priority Downtown development initiative is two-fold: 1) it provides excellent residential units in historic properties, which is generally in demand for those interested in Downtown living; and 2) it restores significant historic properties that are currently vacant, underutilized, and/or deteriorating. The result is a physically improved historic core of Downtown.

In such an approach, a building-by-building approach is warranted. Any building that is considered "high" or "medium" in the most recent historic resource survey map that can be rehabilitated for residential purposes, whether resulting in 2 or 3 units, or 20 units, should be both encouraged and supported with appropriate incentives. However, buildings that have not been identified as having historic and cultural significance could be candidates for removal and redevelopment in a way that is compatible with the historic character and scale of Downtown.

Prioritize vacant lots and corner buildings

Vacant lots and existing corner buildings are the best candidates for residential infill and adaptive reuse since they do not require demolition of existing structures. However, when existing buildings are no longer economically viable for commercial use, and there is market demand for new housing, they may be candidates for "retrofit" which may include partial or total demolition of non-historic structures in order to accommodate a building form that is conducive for residential use.

The unique challenge of Downtown buildings

One of the biggest challenges to introducing new housing in the Downtown Core is that nearly all of the buildings were built for commercial uses which may be difficult to adapt to residential use.



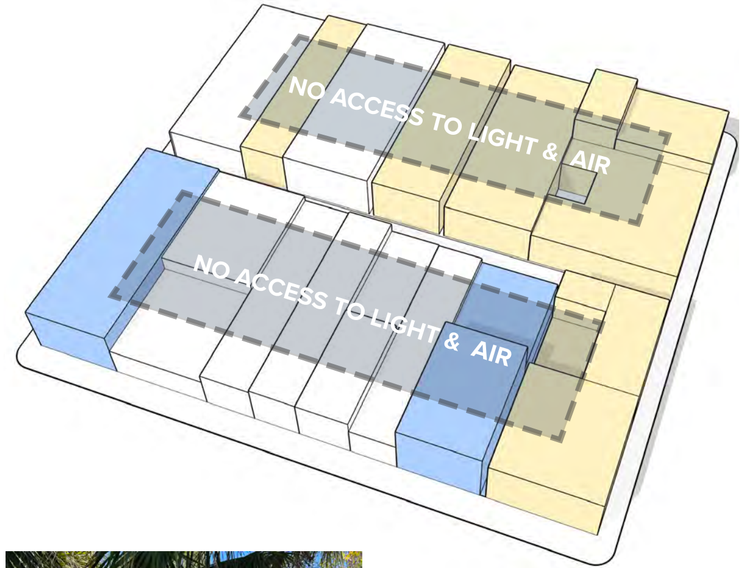
The new Botica Lofts is an example of a successful adaptive reuse of an existing building at the corner of Adams and 11th Streets. Corner buildings are well-suited for residential use because they have two window walls which better accommodate apartment layouts.



Specifically, this is due to the depth of the buildings which extend more than 100 feet from the sidewalk to the alley, limiting access to natural light, ventilation and emergency access that is required for living spaces and bedrooms. Corner buildings are more easily adapted because of their access to windows along side streets. For buildings that are interior to the block, another approach may be needed.

Solution: create “micro-open spaces” to augment residential development

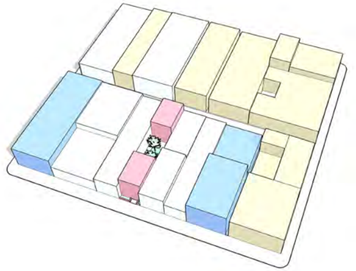
For buildings and lots that are interior to the block, one strategy is to create new open spaces in the form of courtyards, paseos, and patios that create more exterior wall area for windows and doors. These “outdoor rooms” may be carved out of existing buildings, or incorporated into the design of new infill projects. In addition to facilitating residential uses on an urban site, the open spaces provide Downtown residents with a shaded, cool space as an alternative to the street and sidewalk. There are already examples of these types of spaces in Downtown Brownsville, and their expanded utilization could make Downtown more comfortable in hot summer months.





Above: In the example block above, yellow buildings represent buildings identified as “Historic Sites” and blue buildings represent “Heritage Sites”. Buildings in white may be considered to be contributing from an urban form standpoint, but do not have architectural significance.

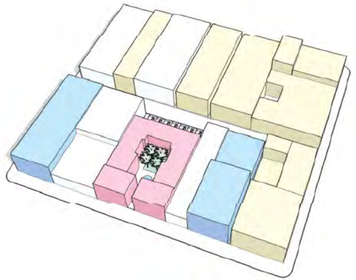
Left: Example of a small open space at the Stillman House which serves as a good model for creating new open spaces to accommodate residential uses in the Downtown Core.





Interior Patio:

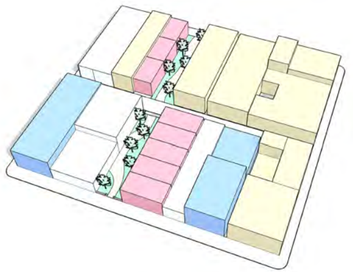
A small interior patio can be incorporated into a single building lot which provides additional exterior wall area for windows and creates an inviting, private, outdoor amenity for residents.





Courtyard:

Several buildings and lots may be combined to accommodate larger residential buildings which can cluster housing units around a shared courtyard.





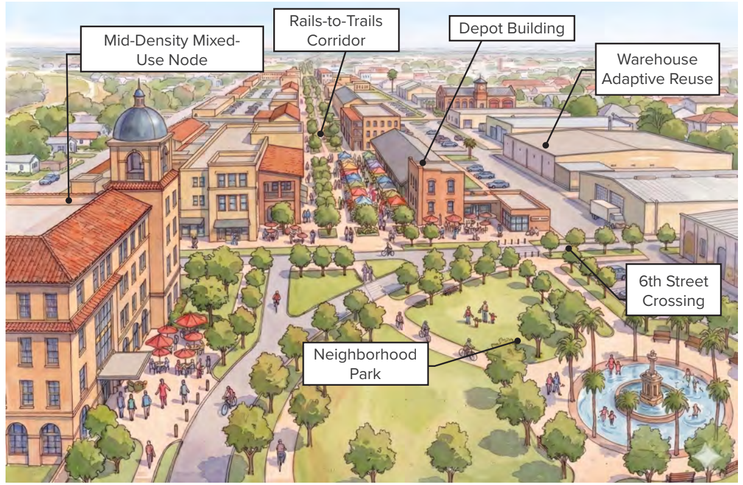
Paseo:

Where buildings and lots align across a block, a paseo can be incorporated to provide exterior wall frontages for residential units and to enhance pedestrian connectivity through a block.

SWITCHYARDS

The former Switchyards is an abandoned railroad corridor located between Palm Boulevard and Sam Perl Boulevard to the west and south of McNair Family Street. It is largely owned by the City and county and has the potential to be redeveloped as a new urban neighborhood with a linear park that connects Downtown Brownsville to future redevelopment of the Amigoland Mall.

This former abandoned rail corridor has the potential to become a linear park which can become a catalyst for the creation of an urban neighborhood with a range of housing types, scales, and densities. Given the disconnect from the waterfront due to the border crossing, an investment in a major green space would provide the public frontage that is needed for new housing. The development of this new neighborhood along this Switchyard Park would be a long-term, phased project given the need to grow the market. However, the public sector, as part of any public-private partnership, will need to ensure that development is appropriately scaled to support the long-term establishment of a comfortable, pedestrian-oriented residential character in the area.



A zoom-in of the conceptual rendering of the Switchyards redevelopment area



Example of medium-density housing



Example of high-density housing

NORTH & SOUTH SUPPORTING NEIGHBORHOODS

These are the neighborhoods in and around Downtown, generally north of Adams Street and west of 7th Street. The existing residential blocks are generally intact, but existing uses and buildings range from some newly constructed and renovated housing to dilapidated/ abandoned structures, to auto-service and other commercial uses sprinkled throughout the neighborhoods. The recent adoption of the City's Unified Development Ordinance which rezoned a lot of this area to the Traditional Neighborhood zoning category which allows a range of 'missing middle' housing types. This recent change has seen modest infill projects (mostly townhomes, duplexes, and quadplexes) over the last three to four years. The goal is to continue to facilitate such projects and review the design standards to ensure better neighborhood compatibility with some of the historic elements of the neighborhood.



South supporting neighborhood



South supporting neighborhood



North supporting neighborhood

ARTS & CULTURE DISTRICT

The northern gateway into Downtown Brownsville is home to many of the area's key arts and cultural destinations, such as Gladys Porter Zoo, Farmers Market, Mitte Cultural District, Children's Museum, etc. This area is emerging as a highly desirable area for new lodging including investment in new short-term rentals.

Many cities have had success in establishing "creative" districts in downtowns, both large and small, and these districts indeed create their own set of induced demand, not only for potential residents, but also for arts-related commercial uses, small entrepreneurial businesses that flourish in creative physical environments, and boutique style retailers. Such districts often include a mix of historic buildings, new infill construction, warehouse spaces, public art, and industrial users, and often have within them one or more "funky" types of public spaces, typically those that had traditionally been thought of as residual useless kinds of space.

Such a new residential neighborhood would likely consist of a mix of units in rehabilitated historic properties and contemporary new units to be constructed on a number of the vacant parcels or surface parking lots within the district. This mix of new and old, if each respects the scale of the other, will both make for a much more dynamic neighborhood and also provide a range of styles and options for potential new residents.

Over time, this area has the potential to evolve into a strong cultural district that attracts residents and visitors to Downtown. Future investments, such as a trolley connection linking the Downtown Core to the Cultural District, could further strengthen this role. The area can build on Brownsville's arts assets, with connections expressed through a range of strategies—from public art programs and temporary installations to the encouragement of informal "guerrilla" art.



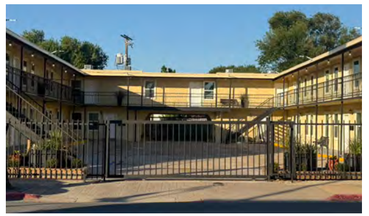


Source: City of Brownsville



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DOWNTOWN HOUSING STRATEGIES

The description of the sub-districts of potential housing for Downtown Brownsville suggests that at the proper size and scale there appears to be a strong—though not necessarily deep—demand for attractive, interesting, well-designed housing. In addition, given this modest demand, it is important that any strategy that is developed address the following:

1. Encourage a mix of projects and products to be developed. Avoid multiple projects that compete with each other for the same market at the same time.
2. Developing, then selling or leasing one building that is not part of a larger strategy is good for the developer and possibly for his tenants, but it may not be the wisest investment as public policy; and in fact may inhibit future efforts. Think of each individual project as one piece of a larger puzzle, and encourage those efforts that positively affect the longer-term goals.
3. Seek out a relatively short-term project in each of the sub-markets that can "seed" the area and serve as a model for the type of residential neighborhood that is envisioned. Develop incentives and public-private partnerships to support the success of initial projects. Public investment should remain flexible, rather than tied to a single, rigid program designed primarily to ensure returns from a specific project.
4. Make sure that public improvements, particularly infrastructure improvements, are designed with a residential population in mind. Time such improvements in conjunction with potential residential projects. Digging up a street in front of a building just as it comes online will have more to do with the success of that project than the size of its marketing budget.
5. Seek out ways that the public sector can help establish a residential base; this is especially critical in terms of property that the public owns, controls, or can help assemble.
6. Given the current economic uncertainty, seek out projects that have some flexibility in their development, so that the project can adapt to both the financial conditions and market considerations at various points in the development process. Mixed-use projects are excellent in this regard since uses within a project can be shifted as necessary. Projects that start out as rental units, even if they are designed to convert to eventually to ownership, should be encouraged.
7. Seek out market opportunities that can help seed a project or the district's identity.
8. Considering the unique challenges posed by housing development in the Downtown Core, review existing historic guidelines and zoning regulations to ensure that they accommodate creative solutions to building configuration, including the incorporation of "micro-green spaces."
9. Update regulations to support Downtown housing, including single-stair provisions.
10. Enable three- to eight-unit buildings through IRC or by-right zoning.
11. Pilot project to demonstrate catalytic public realm improvements and test strategies for future Downtown revitalization.