

## Hear that buzz: Rochester is poised for a Renaissance

There's still a quiet buzz in the area downtown. You may not notice immediately but its there. It's not coming from the work-week lunch crowd at Midtown or the last second crowd frantically finishing up at Genesee Brewery before heading over the bridge to Frontier Field. No, the typical summer sounds of our region have been muted. If you listen closely though you can hear it. The buzz.

While the rest of the country seems to be on pause, our region continues to buzz along quietly, unaware of the opportunity that we have. Work from home has noticeably affected downtown's vibe. Many who call downtown home five days a week may be surprised to see all that has happened when they return.

Quietly an entire new neighborhood rises off Union Street. Midtown is seeing new steel rise again. Railroad Street has turned into a massive dining room. Some of these positive notes can't be attributed to the recent events — they were in motion long before.

The current climate has caused self-reflection and assessment of everything and everywhere. A silent migration of workers has come home to Rochester from major cities hard hit by the virus and all its impacts. In cities like New York, some workers have been told they won't return back to the office until summer 2021 at the earliest. Seeking relief from the very essence of the city they were drawn to initially, the return to Rochester offers cheaper living options, incredibly accessible natural resources and an abundance of new opportunities. Buildings like the Metropolitan downtown are seeing almost full occupancy of their residential units, many to those returning to Rochester but working elsewhere.

Our region can capitalize on this trend. The virtual workforce will not go away once normalcy returns. Major companies operating in major expensive real estate markets are already taking notice. This raises the question of whether the region should shift its rebuilding efforts to focus on housing and natural resources rather than the traditional job-focused economic initiatives of the past. Why try to become the next Silicon Valley when we already have something unique and desired for the rest of the country? Is high quality of living the new Rochester amenity?

Climate and weather-related incidents around the country are also contributing to this year's shake up. Wildfires and record heat are causing historic damage and unrest along the West Coast. An above average hurricane season is already testing the Southeast and contributing to flooding occurrences from the Texas plains to the Mid-Atlantic. In a September article published by ProPublica, author Abrahm Lustgarten makes the case for the next great migration in the U.S. fueled



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Jason Streb

by climate change. Warming temperatures and rising sea levels will continue to produce costly and devastating natural disasters. Most cities simply do not have the funds necessary to counteract or protect themselves against these incidents. According to Lustgarten, eight of the top 20 largest cities in the U.S (some 50 million people) will be profoundly affected by rising water levels. He estimates that nearly 13 million people will be forced to move from these submerged coastlines. Coastal storms are not the only climate occurrence that will force many to relocate. Major drought is predicted to be the norm from much of the Southwest and Mid-West. Even Southeastern areas like Atlanta, home to roughly 6 million people, will be affected by water shortage. Weather itself will not be the only factor in a potential migration. Insurance costs associated with living and working in these areas is expected to rise.

Lustgarten predicts that the Northeast will see an influx of this migration, with many cities seeing a rise in population by 10%. According to the ProPublica report, "Cities like ... Rochester, Buffalo and Milwaukee will see a renaissance, with their excess capacity in infrastructure, water supplies and highways once again put to good use." Kelly Hannon, a 35-year-old television writer from Los Angeles, recently made a trip to the Rochester region to scout a possible move. Aside from the historically pricey Hollywood real estate market, Hannon cited the intense heat and continued wildfire threat as contributing factors for a move. As a writer, Hannon has been working on scripts out of her one-bedroom bungalow — a trend she sees continuing for the foreseeable future. "I'd rather work and live in an area that's less expensive and doesn't have impending climate change ...." The Rochester region offers an abundance of fresh water and a much more manageable cost of living. Ease of access and low traffic in our area also appeals to Hannon, who cites feeling "trapped" in a big city, especially during the pandemic and natural disasters.

For our region, there are certainly short-term and long-term effects of 2020. Positioning development and infrastructure to account for new ways of working and living will be key. While office and retail space may not be on the rise in the short term, new ways of living will be. Outdoor space and common areas will need to be figured into

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most development plans moving forward. The new sought-after amenities for downtown living won't be the countertops or views. Luxury features will now be in the form of semi-public/semiprivate areas of the overall building. In order to accommodate a virtual workforce, spaces will need to cater to life spent largely in one area or building. A need for community-gear designs that offer a lifestyle beyond a single unit will be the development that can thrive. Companies will also need spaces beyond their traditional office or workspace. As live-work spaces become the norm, companies must reimagine the workspace in order to entice and engage with employees. Culturally, companies will need to think of ways to engage with their employees' lives now and offer spaces that can complement virtual work, like communal and social hubs that offer respite and convenience to employees. Like housing downtown, businesses may want to identify amenities both inside and outside their buildings to remain relevant.

The quiet buzz this summer continues to go largely unheard. Maybe that's how Rochestarians prefer it. Under the radar, self-deprecating and possibly unaware of just how well our region is positioned for growth. If everything needs to be rethought now, how we see ourselves should be a priority. Tunnel vision and trotting along a typical path has been done before. Reclaiming the narrative of our region and understanding its place in the larger context is imperative. For the short term, developing the interstitial spaces in our city to be more humane, personal and public. For the long term, we can't lose sight of the things that make our region special. Self-reflection, awareness of our environment and understanding of our people should be the path forward for growth. Despite our inclination to downplay this area, we all realize it is a great place to live and grow a family. Improving on this for all Rochestarians while appealing to those outside our region have the potential to bring true Renaissance. This time let's make it about who we are and not who we want to be. All we have to do is listen.

*Jason Streb is an architect and associate at CPL and past president of AIA Rochester.*