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# Downtown Kitchener is being embraced by millennials. But who will follow them?

Opinion Jan 27, 2019 by [Luisa D'Amato](/waterlooregion-author/luisa-d-amato/412D649F-ED04-4044-9960-516C14EA31B7/)  [\(/waterlooregion-author/luisa-d-amato/412D649F-ED04-4044-9960-516C14EA31B7/\)](mailto:ldamato@therecord.com)  
[\(/mailto:ldamato@therecord.com\)](mailto:ldamato@therecord.com) Waterloo Region Record

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The book predicted how the children of baby boomers — their "echo" — would become a force to be reckoned with. They would become a population bulge almost as significant as their parents

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That was 15 years ago.

Story continues below▼

The city started surveying residents by age group. What did their ideal downtown look like?

Most responses from those in their 20 and mid-30s wanted a vibrant street life downtown. Bluhm said. They wanted festivals, cafés and restaurants with activity that spilled out onto patios and rooftops. They wanted opportunities to socialize, and events that are held in unusual places, like alleyways and parking lots.

The 35 to 55-year-olds wanted family-friendly events, but were not particularly focused on downtown life. They were largely homeowners raising families in the suburbs.

And those 55 and older, many of whom were selling their large family homes and considering a return to the downtown areas, "wanted a kind of Niagara-on-the-Lake" with a calm, quiet atmosphere, interesting shops and lots of flowers hanging from baskets and in planters.

For its downtown development, Kitchener focused on the youngest group, the millennials.

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Story continues below▼

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The next year, the city started a night art market, with painters, jewelry makers, ceramics and glass artists and that too "was a sea of twentysomethings," Abel said.

"Our focus in those early years was to show what was possible." she said.

As the years went by there were more changes. For a group living in small condos, many of them new to the area, there was a need for places to socialize and to expand their sense of space.

Coffee shops become a place to gather, an extension of a living room. In the summer, a small park can be a welcoming version of the backyard you don't have. A place to socialize after work, like a meet-up group doing something from 5 to 7 p.m., is important for people who live alone. One new downtown condo building currently under construction will have carefully chosen amenities: pet play pads, garden allotments, a rooftop patio and barbecue.

The millennial boom downtown has even changed the face of traditional festivals that usually attract an older demographic.

The Kitchener Blues Festival, for example, is hugely popular, especially with people in their 50s and 60s. But last year, with the help of city staff, the Arabella Park Beer Bar brought a much younger group to the event.

It hosted a pop-up beer garden, featuring cans of craft beer served from a retro Airstream trailer, in the parking lot of an unused building at 48 Ontario St. There were games and the opportunity to make chalk drawings on the side of the building. Patio lights added atmosphere at night.

"It was really fun," said Natalie Schnurr, co-owner and manager of Arabella Park. "People were really excited that we did it."

"The mood was really friendly and relaxed. A pretty cool atmosphere."

Planners are always looking ahead. What's next for downtown?

The millennials are taking longer than their parents did to marry and start a family. Some will move to the suburbs when that happens.

But Abel and Bluhm think that some will stay downtown. They're already thinking about how services will change to include child-care centres and more family-friendly events.

Coming behind the millennials on the demographic survey is a much smaller group. It's the "void" behind the baby boom echo.

Who else will fill the gap?

Abel and Bluhm think there are two groups: international students and baby boomers who by then will be senior citizens.

By then many boomers will be in their late 60s and 70s, but still healthy and independent.

There are already clusters of these groups living close to downtown, in apartments near Centre in the Square and at Arrow Lofts beside the Schneider Creek neighbourhood, Abel said.

It's important to make Kitchener's core attractive to live in year-round, so that these people don't spend winter months abroad and create a ghost-town effect for local businesses. That has happened in some other cities such as Burlington, Bluhm said.

Today's baby boomers didn't have the hard lives their parents did. They're energetic and want to contribute.

For senior citizens, a lecture series such as what's offered by the organization Third Age Learning is an attractive activity. That's something that may be coming to the downtown.

Meanwhile, international student enrolment is rising rapidly at the college and universities. Many of those students will stay on after graduating.

Some have already discovered that downtown Kitchener can offer a little taste of home in shops and restaurants like the East African Cafe or the several Vietnamese eateries in the core, Bluhm said.

They can feel that "there's a piece of my community here."

Many of those places are in neighbourhoods like King Street, east of Frederick street, that haven't yet felt the effects of gentrification. But they will, soon.

The trick will be to keep that taste of home, at rents that are affordable.

The city has responded beautifully to the challenges of revitalizing Kitchener's core. Still, the next stage of planning presents a formidable hurdle.

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(<mailto:ldamato@therecord.com>) Waterloo Region Record



*Construction continues on a building at Frederick and Duke streets. For its downtown development, Kitchener focused on the youngest group, the millennials, Luisa D'Amato writes. - Mathew McCarthy , Waterloo Region Record*

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