

# Steeltown comes to downtown to sell Hamilton's advantage

A pop-up consulate in downtown Toronto will showcase why Hamilton has re-branded itself as 'the ambitious city.'



By **TESS KALINOWSKI** Real Estate Reporter  
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It's about 60 kilometres from Hogtown to Steeltown, but for years the psychological distance was far greater.

That, of course, has changed. Now Hamilton routinely invites comparisons to the artistic renaissance of Queen St. W., in the 1970s or even Brooklyn, a vibrant alternative for young New Yorkers seeking an alternative to Manhattan's slick expense.

On Wednesday, the Hammer comes “a-courtin’ ” Toronto. It brings its trademark grit and fresh gusto to The Burroughes on Queen St. W., near Bathurst St. for a two-day pop-up called [the Hamilton Consulate](#).

The event is a chance for the city west of Toronto to showcase its biomedical sector, technological innovation, fashion and lively arts scene without having to entice business people down the QEW.

This is not about persuading Torontonians to move to Hamilton, says Glen Norton of the city’s Economic Development Office.

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“We’re there to talk about jobs, about collaboration between companies and investment by Toronto companies. That may be a branch plant, it may be their next expansion,” he said. “It may be when they get to a point where they can’t stay in Toronto for whatever reason, we’d just like them to know that Hamilton is an option.”

It’s a serious trade mission, but Norton doesn’t deny his city of about 750,000 people, is taking a lighthearted, even “cheeky” approach with sessions ranging from music and film to speed dating.

The latter is a city-building exercise rather than a romantic opportunity: it will put the people who are reinventing Hamilton face-to-face with those who want to know more.

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The headline event is called Reinforced Steel. It features Hamilton Mayor Fred Eisenberger and former Pittsburgh Mayor Tom Murphy talking about how a city with heavy industrial roots can become a mecca of modernity, thriving industrially and culturally.

“Pittsburgh took some dramatic actions when steel went into decline to diversify their economy. It’s a swapping of stories,” said Norton. “We as well have diversified. We still make steel but we make it in a very different way and we’ve done a lot of other things to earn us the title of Canada’s most diversified economy.”

“Hamilton is not Pittsburgh, it’s not Brooklyn,” said Richard Joy, executive director of the Urban Land Institute (ULI), which is co-organizing the event. “These comparisons help people get into the idea, but Hamilton’s story is unfolding in a unique way.”

Events and tours of Hamilton are typically sell-outs with his association’s substantial young cohort of planners, developers, architects and academics.

While other municipalities around Toronto are urbanizing with denser, high-rise and mid-rise development and better transit, Hamilton has an established city centre ripe for revitalization along with its own pending plans for an LRT.

“As much as 905 communities are re-imagining themselves as a more urban frame, Hamilton is a deeply entrenched urban city. A big piece of it is the existing building stock. It has a rich architectural heritage. It has a degree of character that can’t be found elsewhere,” said Joy.

Hamilton is emerging at an interesting moment for developers and urbanists. After 10 years of seeing the city’s potential, it is finally realizing that promise, he said.

Investors looking for a bargain basement entry point may have missed their chance. But there’s still opportunity, said Joy.

“The future escalation of real estate in Hamilton is still a long way to fruition . . . As high a price tag as it may seem, you probably haven’t seen anything close to the peaking of assessment or price growth,” he said.

Developer Brad Lamb, a panelist at the city’s pop-up, says that Hamilton’s success is within its grasp but there is hard work ahead to realize its promise.

He is developing three projects in Hamilton, each worth about \$150 million to \$300 million, each 300,000 sq. ft. or bigger, and he expects to do more — potentially up to \$1 billion in development in the next five to 10 years. The first, Television City, is a condo tower at the old CHCH TV building.

Lamb likes the doubling of [Hamilton real estate values](#) over the last four years. But to attract higher end retail and restaurants — rather than variety stores and car dealers — they have some distance to go.

“Hamilton’s prices for ground floor retail are \$10 to \$15 a sq. ft. They need to jump — and people who are currently in leases on main streets in Hamilton won’t like to hear this — they need to jump to the \$20 to \$25 range to be able to properly develop their retail scene,” Lamb said.

“Hamilton is in the situation where all of the fundamentals that a city needs to achieve high retail rates — condo development, office development — are all being put in place,” said Lamb.

To create the kind of 21st-century city it is aiming to be will require politicians, civil servants, and importantly, citizens to support development, which won’t always be easy, he adds.

“It’s like the story of Goldilocks and the porridge. What a city wishes for is development that is perfect. But you can’t have that. You’re going to have the excesses. You’re going to have things that make citizens nervous and unhappy.

“On the way to getting there there’s going to be people upset that 40-storey towers are happening in their neighbourhood,” said Lamb.

“Neighbourhoods don’t like towers, but they’re going to have to have them.”

### **Branching out**

Hamilton’s steel and food processing industries continue to thrive. But the economy west of Toronto is also diversifying, says Glen Norton of Hamilton’s Economic Development Office.

Here’s a sampling of some of that newer vitality:

### **Synapse Life Science Consortium**



Alex Muggah, director of Synapse, a biomedical consortium, at the Innovation Factory in a converted Camco appliance factory in Hamilton. (J.P. MOCZULSKI)

Founded about six months ago, Synapse is a co-operative effort by Hamilton's life science community — hospitals, universities, colleges, companies, the city and the Innovation Factory, Hamilton's innovation incubator — to facilitate the commercialization of its science.

All those players spend \$460 million annually on the work of 1,500 researchers.

It's critical that Canada take that work to market. Otherwise we've invested in developing a vaccine or other product that gets manufactured in the U.S. or elsewhere. Then Canadians end up buying back what is essentially their innovation, said Synapse director Alex Muggah.

What would surprise Torontonians about Hamilton? It's the city's collaborative spirit, he said.

“We are big enough to have world-class assets and capabilities. But we're still small enough that we're able to help out everyone as if we're a small town.”

**Harry Stinson**



Harry Stinson at his latest development, Beasley Park Lofts in Hamilton, where he is converting an old iron foundry into loft condos. (J.P. MOCZULSKI)

The former Toronto developer describes his first Hamilton project, the loft conversion of an 1894 schoolhouse that opened four years ago, as “climbing Everest.”

“It was a very tough battle to convince the locals that such a concept had validity,” he said. “Why would people make the lifestyle choice to buy a box versus a house?”

Now the city’s historic downtown is teeming with loft conversions.

Stinson himself has two more in the works — Gibson School Lofts, opening in about 18 months, and Beasley Park, the 1830 Cannon knitting mill, which he says is almost sold out.

Finally, Hamilton and Burlington residents are seeing the value in condo living in downtown Steeltown, he says. The other buyers for his architecturally dramatic conversions are Torontonians looking for affordable homes in a place that has its own urban vibe.

Developers looking to score a rock-bottom deal are already too late, said Stinson.

But there’s still an upside to those who want in now: a demographic shift from bottom-market buyers to those willing to invest heart and sweat.

“Now we’re seeing people buying, living, fixing it up. That shift in demographic has been critical to the higher quality of buyer.”