

# Top 10 Downtowns 2012

## About This List



Photo: Fort Collins Convention and Visitors Bureau  
Downtown Fort Collins, CO

Begun more than a decade ago, a downtown district renaissance continues across American cities with restaurants, shops, offices and residential development popping up within city centers hollowed during the era ruled by shopping malls and suburban development from the '60s to '90s.

To pick our Top 10 Downtowns for 2012, we started with our 500 Livability.com cities, then looked for insight to help further narrow our focus. With scores of downtown success stories these days, we needed a perspective to help us decide what sets apart the best downtowns from the merely good downtowns.

We contacted Christopher Leinberger, director of the Center for Real Estate and Urban Analysis at George Washington University, who told us the best downtowns not only reflect the 21st century "knowledge economy" by the types of businesses and services located there, but also have solid plans to succeed in an "experience economy" – what many urban planning scholars believe is the next redevelopment opportunity for America's downtowns.

In this new experience economy, people will value most the memories a place creates above its other qualities, so a downtown's activities, aesthetics and overall atmosphere will be more important than ever. With that in mind, we set out to identify downtowns especially poised to offer the best experiences to residents and visitors, show signs of economic growth, and have community leaders with clear plans for continued improvement to these districts.

We first considered what would be the optimal population for a "best experience" and took a middle-of-the-road, Goldilocks approach of "not too big or small." That way, we narrowed our list of cities to those between 100,000 and 300,000 people.

Then, to assess the current success and potential for these downtowns, we analyzed economic growth, unemployment and downtown vacancy rates, the distance between homes and downtown amenities, and residents' average income levels. Our sources include the U.S. Census Bureau, the U.S. Department of Labor, Areavibes.com, Walkscore.com and Yelp.com.

For more on great downtowns across the United States, check out our [best downtowns in 2011](#).