

Editor's Notebook: I'm not cool, but I know it when I see it, and Downtown is close



Downtown Kansas City exudes a different kind of coolness than the River Market and Crossroads Arts District. This view of Downtown comes from the WeWork space at Corrigan Station.

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I've never been cool. I was a skinny, nerdy kid, and any hope of adopting even a mantle of coolness came to an awkward halt in high school with the purchase of my first car: a yellow Ford Pinto.

But coolness is creeping closer — geographically, if not attitudinally.

In the office building where I've worked now for more than a dozen years, a new tenant is on the way. This tenant is a recognized symbol of corporate cool: WeWork.

Yes, the floors immediately above my old office (and 20 floors below my present daytime digs) will be filled with entrepreneurs, techies and people who work for corporations — but refuse to be trapped in a world of cubicles, ties and routine. In space where numbers once were crunched and deals put together, these coworking cowboys will be having creative collisions and plotting schemes to disrupt industry.

Sure, there have been other coworking spaces in the larger Downtown for a few years now. But the highway loop might as well have been a barbed-wire fence meant to keep out authentic coolness. In the River Market and Crossroads Arts District, there were funky coffee shops, craft brewers, chef-owned restaurants. Inside the fence, there were chain coffee shops and the Kansas City Power & Light District. Outside, small architecture firms and ad agencies inhabited — working and some also living in — rehabbed buildings. Inside, corporate types and government workers waited in towers until the clock hit 5 and they could hit the highways.

The fence guarding the loop still stands, but openings have emerged — or been blown open by the streetcar — in spots. But the coolness of the loop is more urbane and upscale.

New apartment projects promote sleek lines, rooftop pools and quartz counters instead of the exposed wood and concrete of early lofts in the River Market and Crossroads. They appeal to those not so much escaping convention as breaking free from the car-dominated confines of suburban cul de sacs.

Bringing cool to offices is more of a challenge, partly because of the cost of real estate and partly because changes to large office towers have to be made a couple of floors at a time so as not to lose the existing tenants.

Consider the challenge of the building where my office is. The new owners of Lightwell (formerly City Center Square) are working to make the boxy, 30-year-old tower more hip by sanding down a few corners, tearing out a few drop-panel ceilings and sprucing up a fourth-floor deck. They'll appeal to larger companies that want and, importantly, can afford to tap in to a young, creative, hip and tech-savvy employee base drawn by Downtown.

I suspect that'll be the case with WeWork's offices in the building. They may house fewer early-stage, local entrepreneurs and more regional employees of large companies. The open space and changing cast of officemates will appeal to workers, and companies will have flexibility with their space needs.

It's a different kind of cool, but it fits the bill.

Being in the same building won't make me cool, but it's probably as close as I'm ever going to get.