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## Meet the folks who call downtown home

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June 11, 2009

**By MARISSA AMONI For The Beacon News**

Glance up at window panes above street-level shops, pass a building that is set back in an alley or follow Aurora's tallest building up its 22 floors, and you'll likely wonder who lives in downtown Aurora.

You might be surprised to learn that a local pop-rock musician occupies the second floor of a commercial building, and that downtown developer Dan Hites has turned the old Stolp Woolen Mill Dye House into his family abode.

These glimpses into who and where people are living in downtown Aurora will be offered on Sunday, when the Aurora Downtown Association presents its first ever Living Downtown tour.

The self-directed tour leads the curious past decorative cornices and renovated facades to 11 residential sites throughout downtown. Ticket holders can walk from building to building or jump on one of the trolleys that will be circulating downtown for the event.

Benjie Hughes opens the door to his tucked-away music studio, Backthird Audio, at 67 S. Stolp Ave. Hites, Hughes' landlord, restored the old Aurora Woolen Mill Factory into a mixed-use space. Hughes has occupied the space for six years and originally lived in part of the studio.

Now the space works well as a full-time recording studio. The high ceilings, exposed brick walls and ductwork give the rooms an industrial feel. Wood floors and corrugated wall dividers add contemporary appeal.

Hites' own living quarters are behind the Metropolitan Business College building that he owns. The brick, two-story home at 20 W. Downer Place served as the Woolen Mill Dye House and dates back to 1858. Simple with an industrial, European essence, the home looks out over the river.

Farther east on Downer Place, contemporary downtown living is on display at the Downer Place Lofts at 200 E. Downer Place. Part of the Chapman Block, the four-story building was built in the late 1800s and was rehabbed into residential lofts in 1995.

Sherry Brookner has worked at the lofts for 12 years and lived there for five years.

"I love it. You are close to everything. You can walk to events downtown or walk to the train station," said Brookner, who has lived on the East Side for 62 years.

A lot can be missed if you only drive through downtown, said Jennifer Grobe, who works for both downtown development and the preservation commission.

"You don't see the life behind these buildings," she said.

One such building is at 60 S. River St. Hites is renovating the 20th century three-story that is part of the Frazier Block.

"I come up here and look at the potential," Hites said while standing outside on the third-floor deck. He is in the middle of the restoration, which involves nine energy-efficient residential units.

The "green" units boast 15-foot ceilings, in-floor heating, solar-heated water, superior sound insulation and lots of recycled and salvaged building materials.

"I fell in love with the architecture in this area," said Joe Dispensa, 71, who owns two buildings that he restored on LaSalle Street in Aurora's Historic Auto Row. He leases out three mixed-use spaces in the Theiss Building at 74 S. LaSalle St. to not-for-profit groups who enjoy the open floor plans of the building, which first served as a Buick dealership.

Other tour stops include a second-story apartment at 64 E. Downer Place, an upper loft that used to house carriages at 36 W. Downer Place, David Lewis' project to restore the old Holbrook Mill at 121 W. Benton St. and luxury living at River Street Plaza.

Fox Island Place (the historic Leland Towers) and North Island Apartments (the old Aurora Hotel) will showcase modern living in buildings with a wealth of history.

"It's a totally different perspective from here," Grobe said while looking out a window of an 18th floor apartment in Fox Island Place. "It makes Aurora look totally different."

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The views expressed in these blog posts are those of the author and not of the Sun-Times

News Group.

jmg434 wrote:

I just walked through a new loft conversion on W. Downer that is going to be a part of the tour, and it is so unexpected! Enormous! Great views of the river!

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