Exceeding great expectations in downtown Mesa

In just over 2 years, ASU and city of Mesa's MIX Center partnership has made downtown the place to live, work and play

By Annie DeGraw, ASU News
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Anyone visiting downtown Mesa over the past couple of years has a lot to rave about: The bevy of restaurants, unique local shops, entertainment venues and inviting spaces that beg for attention from pedestrians soaking up urban ambiance or families gathering on lush greenery to watch movies projected onto an outdoor screen.

However, Bob Nelson, longtime downtown Mesa business owner, recalls a time in the not-so-distant past when that was far from the scene.

Nelson once owned The Anthology Cafe, a coffee shop located in the heart of the district near Main and Center streets. After not finding an audience and perhaps being a bit before its time, it closed after three years in 2005.

If he had opened the cafe in the past few years, however, Nelson believes it would be thriving among the explosion of commerce sparked by small, local business owners landing in the one square mile that the Mesa Arts Center and Arizona State University's Media and Immersive eXperience (MIX) Center call home.

Nelson doesn't believe the connection between the MIX Center's debut and recent economic growth in downtown Mesa is a coincidence.

"It's been a long time coming, and this piece has given it that extra push. ... It encouraged other developments," says Nelson, director of communications for the Mesa Chamber of Commerce. "Compared to back then, it's really night and day."

When talks about ASU coming to downtown Mesa started brewing, it created a buzz long before the building opened in fall 2022.

The MIX Center's reach across industries encompasses emerging technology, virtual and augmented reality, and arts and media production with the presence of students of ASU's Herberger Institute for Design and the Arts and The Sidney Poitier New American Film School.

But students and faculty are just part of it. A lineup of formal and informal recreational and educational programs that have drawn community members to ASU's newest addition has given residents more reasons to hit downtown during their free time.

As ASU's footprint in the area continues to grow, a new name for the larger zone — the ASU Mesa Center for Creative Technology — reflects its role as a business driver where budding entrepreneurs and their ideas are jump-started and fostered.

In 2024, 222 events attracted over 22,000 individuals to the MIX Center. Community-building and entrepreneurial events and a popular co-working space called The Studios at Mesa City Center, which serves more than 500 users — nearly three-quarters of which are community members not affiliated with ASU — are other magnets that contributed to exceeding expectations of the initial five-year plan by the end of year two.

This organic life has been a powerful catalyst for the recent boom spanning retail, residential, food, beverage and entertainment, turning the downtown into a true neighborhood, Nelson explains.

"Developers that are bringing people to live downtown definitely are encouraged when hearing there's an ASU presence here and a place for people to gather," Nelson says.

As manager of urban transformation for the city of Mesa, Jeff McVay gives tours of downtown to potential investors, developers and business owners curious about the area. His first stop is always the MIX Center.

"While explaining what's happening here, it amazes me how many eyes go wide because they had no idea about what's going on downtown," McVay says. "Having that daytime and evening activity plus the additional cachet of business, people want to live close by."

An investment that benefits the community, economy

Proof of the partnership's developmental impact is in the numbers.

Since 2020, 397 apartment units have been developed in the city's downtown with an additional 867 units under construction across four new apartment complexes, according to city data. Another 1,868 units are planned in the area. In contrast, between 2010–2020, that area saw just 245 new apartment units.

Habitat Metro, a firm that specializes in developments involving multifamily and hospitality components, is responsible for some of that with the luxury and sustainable apartment complex Eco Mesa, a 102-unit community located on Pepper Place, east of Robson Street and north of Main Street.

With higher education, public transit and a nearby arts scene, the area checked all the ideal boxes for a successful market, says Habitat Metro principal Tim Sprague. Five years ago, Sprague's intuition told him that downtown Mesa was going to be the next big hot spot, and his firm started to take a serious look at developing there. That vision has come to fruition.

"Downtown Mesa will truly be enhanced by ASU's expanding footprint there," Sprague says. "We saw that happen in downtown Phoenix and believe that we are on the same path here in Mesa,

which is why it is the site of our next multifamily development. The inclusive nature of ASU extends to the ways they engage with the community, and we see that clearly at play here."

The missing piece, or leg

Years ago, when Sally Harrison, Mesa Chamber of Commerce president and CEO, went into work on the weekends, activity was sleepy at best.

"I'd leave the office and it was like a ghost town," Harrison recalls. "Now, there's a lot going on. It's nice to see activities up and down Main and on the side roads, and it's cool to see people on the sidewalks, laughing and going places."

In December 2024, Harrison met with a business owner who used to live in downtown Mesa and now is interested in opening a hotel there. The Azure Hotel, located on the eastern end of downtown near Pioneer Park, already plans to add additional units in preparation for demand, Harrison says.

A 2018 intergovernmental agreement kicked off this partnership, with Mesa investing $63.5 million and ASU $33.5 million in the MIX Center, plus additional investment in The Studios, a nearby park/plaza, and related infrastructure.

McVay recalls a time when consumers drove in to patronize the retail and restaurants that have been longtime destinations, like Milano Music Center and Mangos Mexican Cafe. Then, they'd leave.

When the light-rail came through in the summer of 2015, hopes were high that it would bring more traffic and business to the area. But that took longer to take hold. Even sizable investments by the city in the Mesa Arts Center weren't enough.

McVay explains that most of the pieces were there, but one key component was missing, like the third leg of a stool. Then, ASU came into the picture.

"ASU was the tipping point, the straw that broke the camel's back," McVay says. "That's what kept people investing. It gives them a lot more confidence that they are investing in a place after someone else has invested in the groundwork."

The momentum created from the concept, McVay believes, played a role in the downtown area losing only one business through the pandemic and gaining 21 new businesses since 2020.

Former Mesa city manager and 40-plus-year Mesa resident Mike Hutchinson knew that no matter how huge the Mesa Arts Center was, downtown needed more to fulfill its potential.

When word got out that ASU was looking to extend its presence further in the East Valley, Hutchinson seized on it.

"Whenever you have an institute like that, it becomes a talking point," says Hutchinson, the executive vice president at PHX East Valley Partnership.

“People have always been interested in making downtown Mesa vibrant. We always thought there’d be a great benefit of a partnership with ASU, and the partnership with downtown was a natural fit.”

The light-rail that connects Mesa to the Tempe and downtown Phoenix campuses was another influential aspect, says John Lewis, president and CEO of the PHX East Valley Partnership.

Lewis was at the MIX Center’s opening night and has hosted several East Valley Partnership events there. Recently, he took an out-of-town visitor downtown, and the MIX Center immediately drew the attention of his guest, who wanted to know what that “cool building” was.

“Education is one of the greatest synergies when trying to grow, and the work-live-play aspect and synergy of education in the downtown area is a huge factor,” Lewis says. “From a buzz perspective, the buzz number is very high.”

A rare, game-changing partnership ‘worth replicating’

While this kind of impact may be new to many in Mesa, it’s familiar to Rick Naimark, associate vice president for program development planning at ASU. He saw this ripple effect more than a decade ago in downtown Phoenix after the university expanded to the area.

Over his nearly three decades in the Phoenix city manager’s office, he saw downtown Phoenix transform from a two-restaurant neighborhood where most people didn’t want to be after sunset to an energetic destination packed with restaurants, bars, event venues and housing.

“Downtown Phoenix was emerging but challenged,” Naimark recalls. “ASU, the light-rail and the convention center expansion gave it a shot in the arm.”

Downtown Phoenix had sports and arts attractions that drew audiences that preferred to have dinner elsewhere before or leave immediately after. Naimark saw this was the case in Mesa.

There were other parallels: A historic downtown; buildings with good bones; opportunities for both new development and redevelopment; and enthusiastic willingness to support arts and education.

When approaching Mesa, ASU had a proven commodity with downtown Phoenix that business owners and investors could see and touch rather than just visualize in a rendering. Mesa Mayor John Giles saw this and wanted ASU to help chart a course similar to that of Phoenix.

“Usually, universities and cities work independently. It’s not common at all for cities to have buy-in and go all in,” Naimark says. “With Phoenix, it was the first time a city and university did something like this, and Mesa saw that it was worth replicating.”

The start of a powerful future

Plans to adaptively reuse a nearby mid-century post office and host an expanded lineup of programs for students and community while harnessing ASU’s vast technology resources promises a continued beneficial evolution.

The goal is to fully realize how ambitious this project can be as a permanent feature of downtown that serves as a community hub that can spark future economies, explains Nicholas Pilarski, interim director of the MIX Center.

Expanded programs that introduce technologies to audiences from kindergarten to adulthood are part of a plan to develop education at the community level. The fabrication lab at the MIX Center is the first of its kind in the Southwest that is open to the community.

“We refuse to be an ivory tower. Our goal is to continue to make sure community members have access to the space in a way that enriches them,” Pilarski says. “You step into the MIX Center and you get a taste of what the future is going to look like.”

The anticipation of graduates opting to stay close is also appealing. Nelson talks about conversations within the business community about the prospect of students bringing their talents to area businesses and one day starting their design, graphic effects and other production shops right there to fuel the local economy.

“Ten years from now, this institution is going to produce a workforce that powers the entire Valley,” Nelson says. “That’s the real power that ASU brings — the power of the future.”

This story originally appeared on ASU News.

Main image



View of the MIX Center in downtown Mesa. Photo by Samantha Chow/ASU

Text image(s)



Community members attend the launch of the ASU Mix Center in downtown Mesa. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News