



GG ([00:00](#)):

Let's be honest, realtors face an ever-changing industry with emerging tech, growing trends and a booming market, it's vital to keep up. Join me, Gilbert Gonzalez, CEO, for the San Antonio Board of Realtors. As I get real with experts on what REALTORS® need to know in this industry. It's time to get real.

GG ([00:19](#)):

Hey there, everyone, and welcome to episode 34 of our Get Real podcast. Our guest today is Matt Brown, president and CEO of Centro San Antonio. Matt oversees San Antonio's nonprofit placemaking organization that works to create a more beautiful, welcoming and playful downtown. Welcome Matt.

Matt Brown ([00:35](#)):

Thank you.

GG ([00:37](#)):

Thank you for joining us.

Matt Brown ([00:38](#)):

Every time I hear welcome Matt. I think okay, it's with two t's, it's not the one on the front of a door.

GG ([00:42](#)):

<Laugh>, no one's stepping on your here today, sir. <Laugh> no one

Matt Brown ([00:45](#)):

That's what you say. <Laugh>

GG ([00:47](#)):

<Laugh>. So tell, I think it took me a while to figure out what a placemaking organization is. Can you define that for people who don't know like myself?

Matt Brown ([00:56](#)):

Yeah. So at the kind of high level, placemaking is about improving the quality of life for the people that live and visit and work in a geography, right? So it's always geography bound. And for us, we have a pretty expansive view of placemaking. Often what you might see it as is what's called clean and safe. We have a program like that and we can talk more about that, but it's like, how do you keep just an area clean, sweep it up, power wash, get the grime off the streets. There's that kind of thing. Then another sort of typical type of placemaking you'll see is events and activations. So often when you're, if we're downtown, so let's just say you're in downtown anywhere, downtown San Antonio, downtown Phoenix, Topeka.

Matt Brown ([01:56](#)):

If there's an event going on, there's a good chance that that event is funded by the property owners in that downtown. Cuz most downtowns like us have a public improvement district. And so, while the cities often are running events and obviously if an event is like in a hotel, that's a hotel. But if you go to a park or in our case, we currently manage much of the activations that happen at Travis Park. So we're doing that, not the city or well, in combination, let's say actually in combination of the city, not the city, but in combination. But we handle the bulk of it and they help fund that work. So they fund us, and then we manage it on the city's behalf.

Matt Brown ([02:53](#)):

And then the city runs a couple projects directly. We also have an area called Peacock Alley, which we just took over an alley that our landlord has. And then we hired a couple cool muralists. They put these cool murals up and then we activated. And now it's more like an event space. So now we have people from all across the city run their own events there. And like today, we just had our first Topo Chico event, and also it was gonna be an afternoon, Tuesday afternoon thing going on, but we'll have jazz on the week on Friday nights. We had a pinata festival like in the fall we had guayabera festival. It'll be the third annual one coming up. So there's all kinds of different events and activations, and they're all a hundred percent homegrown. And so they're, I don't often use the word authentic, but actually this is the right use of the word, it is authentically San Antonio.

GG ([03:53](#)):

I mean, the idea to have a guayabera third annual event. Like where do those ideas come from? Where do you get these people to start this initiative? Is this y'all or are y'all partnering with somebody?

Matt Brown ([04:06](#)):

It's a combo. When we started it, we do our own brainstorming, try to get some things going, and then we ran some brainstorming sessions with creative folks from around the city. It's all about bringing more play downtown. And then, and then as Peacock Alley started to get operational, we do outreach. So last year, and we did again this year, we used mostly our social media to have a submission program where anyone can submit for an idea like the guayabera festival. And then the ones that we select, we help fund. So we have like a little bit of cash we can throw at each one of these things. and like that one came from Javier, who has these incredible designer and clothing maker, and he's got a shop in our building. He's like, I want to have a festival and we're like, great <laugh>, like do it. And so the third annual came from him.

GG ([05:11](#)):

And the goal is to get people downtown.

Matt Brown (05:13):

The goal first is for the people who live there. I focus first on people who live downtown and around downtown. Then it's for people who are either visiting or we're like, "hey" come on downtown. And what's cool about Peacock Alley and inviting and investing in creators and makers and entrepreneurs from across the city is they bring their friends along. So we've had people from all over the city and it was great. So when you come to Peacock Alley on any particular event, so often you get to see folks and you're like, "where do you live?" Like all over the place, <laugh>, so it does bring people downtown, but first and foremost, it's always about the people who are living there already and then enhancing life of people who are, working and visiting.

Matt Brown (06:09):

So and then, just to loop back, the clean and safe and the kind of activating a particular space, like a park on behalf of the city or something that we just run ourselves on with a property owner. Like our placemaking also includes public art. So we have this public art initiative called Art Everywhere. And we've now have a, I think 60 pieces of art in the last two and a half years, which is an incredible transformation. And it's incredible for the artists. Like all those artists have all been, paid and supported and they help, they tell their stories and they bring the San Antonio culture more visible and more to life. And we started a small business economic development group during Covid, cuz there was no one helping all the micro small businesses those real "mom and pop" main street businesses.

Matt Brown (07:05):

So we do that and we have a homeless assistance program that we had on our own. Now it's through Corazon Ministries and we have a marketing group. So last year we generated, I think \$4 million worth of earned media for come Downtown. Like, look, all this cool stuff that's going on. And we have an advocacy group that helped advocate in 2017 for the, I think about an allocation, about \$200 million worth of bond funding for things like Hemisphere and the Broadway corridor. And we did it again this past bond cycle and in partnership with our council member and the city staff, we were able to get TURs money and bond funding for more projects. So for us, place making is a, we have got a big view of it and it really breaks down into clean and safe advocacy. And then the other place making, which is the art and the, and the activations, the economic development and landscaping. We have a thousand pots and baskets all around downtown <laugh>.

GG (08:12):

I mean, the amount of things that you touch is amazing. I was talking about going downtown and just seeing Centro on the art, seeing Centro on the front of a building that was going to have a popup. Seeing the staff Centro keeping all of San Antonio clean. I mean, with all these things going on, what does the future of downtown look like for you? Where do you want us to be? One year, five years, 10 years.

Matt Brown (08:39):

Well, I'll start by saying I want us to be where the community wants to be, so, Yeah. I'm all like-

GG (08:46):

Where does the community want us?

Matt Brown (08:47):

Yeah, so where the community wants to be is a complete neighborhood. That's what we heard loud and clear. We spent last over a year and a half doing research in the development of a new strategy. We call it downtown Tomorrow strategy. It's almost ready to see the light of light of day. But doing all that work and preparing for, in developing or like downtown 2.0 type of strategy, it, it became crystal clear that from the residents to the stakeholders, the property owners, to the city staff, political leaders, the mayor. The mayor was very clear he's like, "I want to see a complete neighborhood." And so that's what we are gonna channel into this strategy that's gonna come out. And then we really need to enlist hundreds of people from across the city and enterprises and organizations to rally around to make it happen.

Matt Brown ([10:00](#)):

Like it's not what Matt wants, it's not what Centro wants, it's what we've heard the community wants. And so we're gonna bundle it up and then we have to work with the community to pull it off. And if it does, if we can do it, I believe I'm always optimistic. It's gonna be hard. It's gonna be a major heavy lift. It's gonna take a ton of effort. <Laugh>, Let's not be shy, get real. It's gonna take a ton of effort, a ton of willpower. It's gonna take a lot of investment in like money and time and blood and sweat and tears to do it. But to do it would be then to have a downtown that, in like the essay tomorrow plan, it fulfills the vision of essay Tomorrow Plan where it's vital, it's walkable, it's completely, it's completely integrated, it's completely full.

Matt Brown ([10:57](#)):

It's inclusive, it's equitable, right? It is a place that is, singular in the experience of it. It's singular in its importance to San Antonio because to use an old refrain. All great cities have great downtowns, and it's actually a downtown that the rest of the city that more and more people can feel connected to and feel that it's valuable to them, that they can enjoy it. That it's a place that even if they go down once a year, they're like, yeah, I like going down there. There's, there's this thing I do every year. I go to the ice rink every year now with my family or my grandkids. And I love when I get down to that ice rink. It's such a wonderful memory. It's such a wonderful experience. Or I go down there every day to go to work and it rocks. And I love going there before work and hitting the gym or hitting the yoga studio or drop my kid off at daycare and then going on to work. And I love hanging out after work and going out with my colleagues or inviting my friends over on the weekends. So downtown's not able to fully do that yet.

GG ([12:14](#)):

What is it missing though? So if we're trying to make it into a neighborhood, what is it missing?

Matt Brown ([12:20](#)):

Well, first and foremost, it's missing a lot of housing so that a lot more people could live downtown.

GG ([12:28](#)):

I'm guessing it's all kinds of housing.

Matt Brown ([12:31](#)):

All kinds of housing, yeah. And because this, particularly the central business district, because of the competition for the land there it is expensive. It's expensive land it's expensive to build. So it's just the nature of the beast that that part of downtown is going to need to be built for, people closer to the AMI, like a little bit below, a little bit above. It's just how the economics are gonna work. But when you take

the old regional center yeah, well, all kinds of different socioeconomic, and I certainly hope it's all kinds of like, ages and genders and races and like, everything. I hope it is just completely just a complete, like wonderful quilt of humanity. But we need housing and we need then as that comes along, we need to add in the amenities so that it's easier for people who move in to get the things they need without having to drive.

Matt Brown ([13:44](#)):

And that will just ladder itself up over time. Because if we look at like, amenities right now, there's not a hardware store kind of within eye shot of downtown or if you live on a north side downtown, there's no full service grocery store that you can bike to or walk to. So these are some of the sort of standard amenities that as the downtown gets more complete, right? It fills in and some surface parking lots get converted over into much higher use or old, buildings or underutilized spaces get converted over into higher density, higher value use, then those amenities will have to flow in and that's big. Number two is UTSA and UTSA is the most catalytic initiative going on downtown.

Matt Brown ([14:52](#)):

So we can build lots of housing and people can come and that'll incrementally go. 300 main looks beautiful. I can't, it's amazing. It's just a skeleton, but every day I'm like, wow, it's like another layer up. I love it, right? But that's not, that's not catalytic. It doesn't accelerate change. And it doesn't fundamentally sort of transform the nature of downtown and all that it needs to be complete, but UTSA does. UTSA's and Taylor Amy's vision of 15,000 students living and milling around downtown, both on the west side of downtown and down the core. And then now they also they acquire the Southwest School of Arts. So they have their own art school.

Matt Brown ([15:41](#)):

They have, you know 14 acres over on the, the east side of hemisphere. The vision and hopefully I know Taylor and his administration they are working super diligently, super hard, super urgently on this. I mean, we could see thousands of students in the next couple of years and that is transformative, that's catalytic. Because when that happens and thousands and thousands of students living in downtown over time, what happens is many of them stay, right? They stay and they start new companies. And that's entrepreneurship. Or they are great feeders to companies that wanna hire you. See, you need to have, people trained and skilled in all kinds of different, domains. And that's phenomenal.

GG ([16:36](#)):

Now, because, so here's my question though, cuz you're like, they stay and they want to.

Matt Brown ([16:39](#)):

And a bunch will leave, but a handful will stay.

GG ([16:42](#)):

And I hope they stay. Yeah. But I think when, when I hear that I feel like San Antonio and you have to tell me if. If, if we're reluctant to change, and I will use we, because I've lived here all my life, but I feel all the things I've heard was San Antonio is great for raising families. San Antonio is not Austin, San Antonio's not Houston. Do you find like there's this tension point where people say, well, Matt, I don't know if that's San Antonio people live in downtown, or, I know you said the community's asking for this.

Matt Brown ([17:16](#)):

I don't, I don't hear that kind of tension. I see, I hear a lot more of the optimism. Like I'm sharing that the investment into UTSA growing out its campus and having more and more students downtown that it is reasonable to anticipate that then amenities will come just for them as well, right? They will, they'll be dance clubs, like whatever, right? What do students need? Those things will get built. Cuz that is a natural outcome. I know you guys know this better than me, but it's like retail follows rooftops, right? So that's another type of rooftop, students living downtown, that's a rooftop. So amenities will come in and that'll make it more attractive. And then I know they're working on or considering like an innovation district, which is a model for building out again, a sort of geography that encourages and entices students to stay and grow businesses or for businesses to relocate or start there and then take advantage of that that incredible resource.

Matt Brown ([18:42](#)):

And if I just go back in time, I mean, I'm not saying that anyone wants this place to become Silicon Valley, but when Stanford started, that was a bunch of like orange groves. I mean, my grandpa lived out in Sunnyvale and that was just in orange groves and lemon groves and Stanford started, then Hewlett Packard started and they combined, and Stanford started like a computer program because Hewlett Packard was building computers. And then they started, a programming thing cuz Hewlett Packard needed that. It's not that change is like gonna be overnight. It's that that investment and that insight of bringing a college town into downtown and it growing year over year, incrementally the change will happen. And everyone in San Antonio doesn't have to get on board with it. Lots of people are like, I don't care about it, but all you need is the critical mass to care about it and I'm confident it will grow and grow and grow and grow.

Matt Brown ([19:45](#)):

And you're right, lots of those students will they'll move, they'll go to other places, but guess what? The world will also come here, right? And many people will come from all over to be there. And people that's melting pot is a beautiful thing. And some of 'em will come, they're like, you know what? I had no idea how awesome San Antonio is, cuz you hear that all the time. And they're like, all the time, you know what this place surprises me. This is awesome and I'm gonna stay. So I feel very bullish on that catalytic product in project and its ability to create the positive change on prosperity, on beauty, on opportunity, on equity, on all kinds of measures.

GG ([20:32](#)):

And how do you convince the, you mentioned like, I know not everyone would see it, but how do you, how would you convince 'em the why, why is this important? I mean, aside from it making San Antonio to continue to prosper, to continue to flourish, to bring in those high paying jobs, which makes everything better for the community. How would you convince people that why this is important and why we need to get on board with this?

Matt Brown ([21:00](#)):

Why, why UTSA?

GG ([21:01](#)):

Why just downtown? UTSA is a catalyst for the downtown you want to see, right? The downtown that the community's asking for, for folks who maybe I don't get why we would do that.

Matt Brown ([21:12](#)):

Well you have, okay, we can appeal to different kinds of folks. So one is economic so downtown is the most valuable investment in the city. So for every dollar invested in downtown, you get a seven to one ROI. The next best is about a four to one ROI. So if you just go like, I wanna make the best possible investment of like, of our community dollars downtown delivers the most in return on...

GG ([21:47](#)):

Tourism, business-

Matt Brown ([21:49](#)):

Tourism, well tax contribution. Cuz that all goes back to US employment, you name it. But it's an economic, that's one economic factor. Another one is that on total dollars downtown is the second largest regional center in the city and coincidentally it's also incomplete. Like imagine if it were complete, how powerful an economic engine it would be for our city. So it's not like there's the individuals and yeah, downtown can be a place where people to have jobs and they can be, there's, there's high paying jobs and there's minimum wage jobs and we're the, we're the largest destination for tourism. And a lot of the hospitality is on the lower end of the pay scale. So you have all pay ranges and, but if it becomes more complete and there's more economic output that goes to the tax roles and that can get reinvested back everywhere in the city.

Matt Brown ([23:01](#)):

so I can talk about its economic power and value to continue to invest in it because it has the best ROI and the best return and it'll get more contribution for everyone in the city. And then on the emotional side, well it's where the city was founded, right? I mean the Native American community, they put the roots deep down along the San Antonio River and then the Canary Islanders go like, I'm gonna pop myself right down here, right? And now you have, the Alamo, you have San Pedro Creek, you have the San Fran Cathedral, it's the epicenter of the history and culture, right? The chili queens to today at Hopscotch, with phenomenal world-class immersive art in an old bank building. It's great. It's amazing. So if you care about history and culture and the future of culture, like how will San Antonio's culture evolve and grow and express itself?

Matt Brown ([24:16](#)):

Downtown is a place that you wanna invest. I mean, you wanna invest in the east side of the west side you wanna invest everywhere, but for sure you want to invest in downtown. Cuz that is the epicenter of it all. And I love when I hear, particularly I hear different representatives, council members, like, no, we got, we're the center of culture on the west side. And he says, great, that's friendly competition. But I'm here to say empirically there's things about downtown that are absolutely foundational to the entire city. So it can appeal to your mind or to your heart. And in either way, investing in downtown is, I think, vital to the future of what San Antonio becomes or is becoming.

GG ([25:16](#)):

What is this canvas of downtown look like for you?

GG ([25:23](#)):

You've, you've gone into it, this tapestry of every culture, of all kinds of people of art, of events.

Matt Brown ([25:32](#)):

Yeah. I think the tapestry is, one view of it is art's, culture and entertainment. I think that is the flavor of downtown. So it would be wonderful. For example, we've seen the media about the missions and the possibility of a minor league team coming, in or close to downtown, like that would be consistent with us being the sort of center of arts, entertainment, and culture. I would love to see that. I would love to see more, I would love to see more investment and support for the existing facilities like Tobin Center and Samma, these wonderful facilities, but to be able to invest in them, see investments so they can increase their vitality and their artistry that they support, the artistry that they curate.

Matt Brown ([26:36](#)):

So there's that and then there's seeing what we've done with Peacock Alley and also thinking about like art pace, like also like how do we invest in local creators and makers and artists and have a downtown? I would love to have a downtown that had more galleries in it. And more art spaces in it and more, more seemingly spontaneous creative events like more music. I would love to hear more music downtown. That's me but I've been told, cause I'm not from here, there's, people are very proud of the music scene here that I, I'm like, there's this great rock scene and there's all these different types of music that I don't want to name so I don't get them wrong, but in the Hispanic, in the Mexican community, there's all different types of music, but it's all kind of spread around.

Matt Brown ([27:40](#)):

I'm like, man, I would love downtown to have all of it there be everywhere. But like, that's a part of, it's like almost like our own, it's like internal kind of international like, or like interwoven experience of our arts and cultures. I would love to see all the bits that are spread around the city. It'd be wonderful if they were percolating all the time around downtown. So that's a part of the canvas in the quilt of downtown is just this growth of our arts and culture and entertainment. The other is it would be, I think it would be valuable to the city and to downtown to have it become at least a little more diverse. I, I know I hear people talk about our diversity. I think one of the coolest things about San Antonio is it's the largest Hispanic majority city in the country.

Matt Brown ([28:52](#)):

That's awesome. <Laugh>. Like, that's awesome. We don't, I wish they kind of got said more like, that's really who we are. But when you look at the statistics, like just demographic statistics, we're not that diverse. And I suspect that a little more diversity, not a lot, but a little more will benefit the city. When you have people from different cultures, different countries, different states, different walks of life when they're kind of intermingling and colliding with each other, new cool things happen. And so I would never want to see San Antonio not be the largest Hispanic majority city in the country, but it would be wonderful if it was a little more, diverse and I would love to see that happening downtown. I've been the beneficiary of living in some, cities that, and being someplace where those kinds of like collisions and those kinds of interactions happen more frequently. And so I've seen the benefit of it and I would love that for downtown. So that, so the human quilt, that would be be great.

GG ([30:17](#)):

So it is obvious to me that even though you're not from San Antonio, the passion with which you speak of <laugh>, it's you are the right person to take this charge on <laugh>. So if you were asking for help as we wrap this up, if you were asking for help from our members or from realtors, from anyone in the



community, hey, I'd like to be a part of that vision and I'd like to help build it. What's the best way for them to try and help you get there?

Matt Brown ([30:44](#)):

Well number one will be in a few months we will be presenting and going public with the downtown Tomorrow strategy. And as I said, we're gonna need a lot of help when that comes out. If anyone is interested in getting on board and supporting us or working with us or joining, an advocacy group, whatever, that would be great. Two is, yeah, come downtown <laugh>, come on down, check it out. Like, come on spread the word, and I know. We all know it's a bit of a headache right now cuz there's, streets are torn up and it can be a hassle, but there are just so many gems, there's so many cool things to do. There's more on the horizon. But right now there's some like, I always like point out hopscotch cause I'm like man, that I, I'm sure the vast majority of San Antonios don't even know that Hopscotch exists still. And it is amazing.

GG ([31:58](#)):

Real quickly, what is Hopscotch then?

Matt Brown ([31:59](#)):

So Hopscotch is it's an immersive art destination. They have, I think at any time something like 15 different exhibits and it's at Travis Parks, it's in the Travis Park building. And and when you're in it, you could be in London, you could be in New York, you could be in Berlin, like you could be in one of the greatest art cities in the world. When you're inside a hopscotch, that's how good the experience is. That's how good the art is. And it's a, there's so much of that going on downtown, so many of these special gems. That's kind of the thing about San Antonio. One of the thing that's beautiful is like, people are very, like, people are very like modest. That's a beautiful thing. But I think we're kind of like overdone it. Like we've- "last goes to 11," like-

GG ([32:57](#)):

<laugh>

Matt Brown ([32:57](#)):

Pull that back to five modesty, we gotta start saying some more of like, hey, it's cool here. So two is come downtown and three is on the political side and on the staff side. They were working super hard and I'll take homeless assistance and addressing homelessness because we're a part of that, a small part. But the city works super hard at that. And all kinds of providers Haven for Hope being the most famous and the most incredible. But then there's Corazon Ministries and Sam Ministries and Cam and Salvation Army and Goodwill and many others that I'm not naming and they're all working so hard.

Matt Brown ([33:58](#)):

And so I would encourage, I would encourage folks listening to get engaged. Like if there's something that is important to you and you're, and you're often frustrated by it, like why isn't someone like doing something about this? There's actually a chance that someone is doing something about it. And if you reach out to 'em, they could use the help. So I just encourage people, like, if something's frustrating you or you have a passion for something, or you have a love for something you can approach us, you can go to the city's website, you can go talk to your local council member who represents your district and be like, "I want to get involved. I want to help." Cuz because it really, really does take a village to pull this all

off. And I'm finding more and more since my time here, more and more people want to collaborate. They want to work together, they want to try to figure stuff out. It's not always natural, it's not always easy, because trust often has been broken in a bunch of different ways, right? So I, I'm not saying it's easy, but the first step is, reach out to someone and go I want to participate, I want to get involved, I want to help.

GG ([35:17](#)):

Well, I think our members love to get involved and I'm hoping they will. I know SABOR will be happy to help y'all with your plan that's coming out.

Matt Brown ([35:27](#)):

Yeah, thank you. That'll be super helpful.

GG ([35:29](#)):

And I will definitely be attending or going to Hopscotch this weekend. So <laugh>, you sold it, you've sold it. So thank you so much!

Matt Brown ([35:37](#)):

<Laugh>. Great.

GG ([35:39](#)):

So this is gonna wrap up today's podcast and I would like to thank Matt for joining us and sharing what San Antonio is going to look like tomorrow with y'all's hard work. And we greatly appreciate that. So thank you for that.

Matt Brown ([35:51](#)):

Gilbert, thank you so much for the opportunity and here we go!

GG ([35:55](#)):

All right, <laugh>, and to our listeners, thank you for listening to Get Real and we'll see you on the next one.

GG ([36:00](#)):

Thanks for listening to Get Real. Be sure to subscribe for future episodes and share us with your friends on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. More information on this episode can be found at ([sabor.com/getreal](http://sabor.com/getreal)). Until next time.