

From WAREHOUSE to THERE HOUSE

By Jeff Swenerton

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Lorraine and Mike Miller, longtime suburbanites, left behind Berkeley's Elmwood for loft living in a one-story converted gasket factory in West Oakland.



FROM HUMBLE BEGINNINGS AS EMPTY INDUSTRIAL SPACES TO MULTI-MILLION-DOLLAR PENTHOUSES, EAST BAY LOFTS ARE ALL GROWN UP TODAY.



Until November 2006, Mike and Lorraine Miller were living the suburban story. They had a big house in Berkeley's Elmwood neighborhood. He was a cop and commuted an hour every day. She is a radiology nurse who is often on call. Between them they had three kids from previous marriages. But when their son went off to San Francisco State University for college, they traded in the big life for something a little smaller.

"My whole life, I always wanted a loft," Mike Miller says. "My dream since I was a kid was always to buy a building with the warehouse that you drive into and live on the top floor, like Dan Tanna in *Vega\$*." Lorraine Miller also liked lofts for their big open spaces and modern furniture, their combination of new and old with no yard to keep up. So they began hunting. ►►



Spaciousness, modernity and limited yard maintenance were among the factors that attracted the Millers to urban loft living. Their urban abode is a 1,980-square-foot building with high ceilings, skylights to let in natural light and an enclosed outer parking area. The bedroom and bathrooms are roomy, lending a luxurious feel to industrial living.

"Most real estate agents didn't get it," Lorraine Miller says. "They kept showing us big houses with pools. And we said, 'We've been there before; we want something different.'" Without knowing much about the market, they figured they'd have to buy an empty shell of a warehouse and do all the renovation work themselves. After two years of looking, including being outbid on an old creamery building off 42nd Street, they finally found their perfect space. It's a one-story converted gasket factory and parking area surrounded by a high wall, with room to park their two cars. Just a few blocks off West Grand Avenue, the 1,980-square-foot building

has wide, open skylights, an enormous room with bedrooms on the periphery, a kitchen in the middle, restored hardwood floors and even an original walk-in wall safe encased in concrete that they use for storage. They searched for artwork that would fit the new space and found photographs by a mixed-media artist who used to have his studio around the corner. They're now three blocks away from Mike Miller's current business as a military contractor, and he can walk to work. "My friend who owns a Prius was getting on my case about having a [Toyota] Sequoia," he says. "I said, 'Man, I don't burn two gallons of gas a week living here.'"

OAKLAND CREATED A UNIQUE "RESIDENTIALLY ORIENTED LIVE/WORK" ZONING CLASSIFICATION IN 1999 THAT WAS THE FIRST OF ITS KIND IN THE COUNTRY.

NEW YORK CONNECTION

If lofts are known today as spotless showrooms of urban living, they've come a long way in the last 50 years. It should come as no surprise that New York City is attributed with starting the loft craze in the 1960s, with artists, craftspeople and the work-averse cast of *Rent* moving into former industrial buildings in SoHo. Alternately cast as heroes for bringing new life to abandoned buildings or squatters for living in drafty illegal units, loft dwellers nevertheless found that the wide-open spaces were the perfect answer to cramped apartments in denser parts of the city, because they offered room to spread out. And until the mid-1970s, when the zoning issues were resolved and "live/work" units became legal, the outlaw quality of living in an illegal warehouse added an attractive bit of cachet for working artists.

It was also terribly romantic. Who hasn't fantasized about living in a loft in the city, gazing out the 20-foot-high windows at the traffic and bustle below, the wide, gray sky a canvas on which to paint your life's masterwork? From *An Unmarried Woman* to *Flashdance* to *Ghost* to *Big*, movies have always understood that lofts come preloaded with a generous pathos—part gallery and part stage, fraught with concrete and metal spaces carved into the industrial heart of the city. What better place to launch a new life or become the person you always wanted to be?

Or, more likely, to display that beautiful Arco Floor Lamp. Loft lovers today are experts at showing off their spaces with enough modern furniture and art to make Frank Lloyd Wright burst from the parched Arizona ground in joy. Because of their enormous walls and spare finishes, lofts make simple designs pop. Tour a thousand of them, and you'll never find a shabby couch or busted wicker end table. That's because the unspoken Loft-Dwellers Manifesto mandates spare modern design, large artwork and at least one midcentury modern item of furniture, be it a Herman Miller chair, EQ3 coffee table or Room & Board couch.

Rhonda Bethea rented a Potrero Hill loft but bought her own, a 1,700-square-foot unit in The Sierra, an upscale Jack London Square development.



THE CENTER OF IT ALL

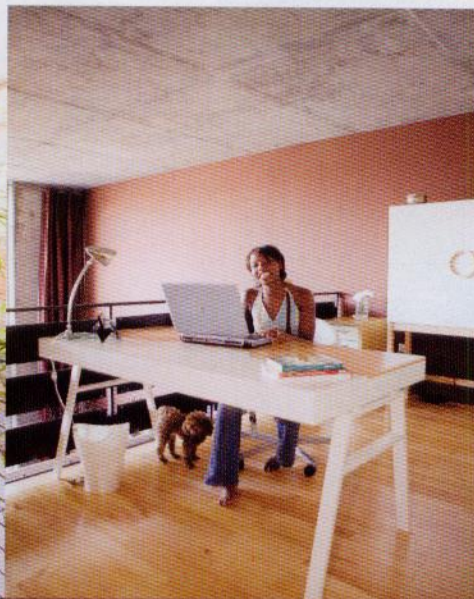
Part of the allure of loft living, besides the excuse to go on a shopping spree, is that live/work units are usually close to the white-hot center of urban activity. As the hinterland becomes built out with webs of new subdivisions, and people begin tiring of their three-hour-long commutes, cities begin looking inward for new development locations. This “infill” begins with converting former industrial buildings to residences and then often moves to include office buildings and industrial areas on the city’s edges, which are still closer to transit and jobs than, say, Pleasanton. Urban planners call this “smart growth.” Specifically, smart growth means creating, within cities, housing close to transit while encouraging the next wave of development—grocery stores, restaurants and shops—to move into and serve the

neighborhood. Both downtown Oakland and Jack London Square are examples of how this works in practice, and soon West Oakland will follow with Central Station, a series of housing developments in the neighborhood around the historic Southern Pacific 16th Street Train Station that was damaged in the 1989 earthquake.

So lofts, like most urban housing built these days, often attract the kind of people who want to live in a bustling place and don’t mind the lack of a backyard—either city workers without kids who enjoy urban lifestyle or retirees who trade their big houses with a pool and a dozen empty rooms for smaller, better-located digs. Melody Hultgren, a real estate agent with Urban Bay Properties who has been doing a brisk business in West Oakland and the Jack London Square area, knows her demographic. “I’m finding

that more people are opening up to the loft concept,” she says. “I would say if you have small children, or if you needed some kind of an enclosed space, then that might not be the property for you. [I see] the young, urban-minded creative crowd, but also I’m seeing a lot of empty nesters; younger couples and single professionals, but not a lot of children.”

One of those single professionals is Rhonda Bethea, who bought her 1,700-square-foot loft in The Sierra, a luxury loft building at Jack London Square, in December 2005 after renting a loft in San Francisco’s Potrero Hill neighborhood. When it came time for her to buy, she was dismayed at San Francisco’s high cost. “I was renting because I loved having all that space. I looked around at what I could afford in San Francisco, and it was all too small. And then I came to this place, and I’m close to



Bethea's well-appointed loft is close to BART, enabling Bethea (top right) to cut her San Francisco job commute in half. The Sierra, near Interstate 880, boasts grand views, posh interiors and contemporary conveniences. Developers predict retail outlets will spring forth as the neighborhood, on the edge of Oakland's produce warehouses, matures.

Jack London Square, downtown and lots of restaurants. And when I see my friends who bought a house, they have less space than this." As a lawyer who works at One Market Street in San Francisco, she used to drive the few miles every day to work, and it took her half an hour. Now she walks four blocks to the Lake Merritt BART station, and commuting takes 15 minutes.

NEW VS. OLD

Walk around The Sierra, and the half dozen other new residential buildings nearby, and see the sparkle. You almost get a whiff of new-condo smell. The streets are newly landscaped, and huge, bright floor-plan displays show through the sales center windows. There is a handmade sign

at the end of Second Street pointing new residents unfamiliar with the area to the Interstate 880 onramp. There are few stores open now, mostly small corner grocery stores, a coffee place, a sandwich shop and a dry cleaner, but more will follow as soon as the neighborhood becomes more established, encroaching on the produce warehouses next door that have been there for decades.

Sometimes this close proximity of luxury lofts to heavy industry leads to conflict, as when homeowners are awakened at 5 a.m. on their first morning to the beeping and clanging of trucks and machinery, or when they catch the urban aromas of their neighborhood wafting in through their floor-to-ceiling windows. New

residents presumably check out their new neighborhood before buying, but that doesn't always keep them from complaining.

Thomas Dolan, an Oakland architect who specializes in lofts, calls this "imported Nimbyism" (from the Not In My Backyard concept). Companies are there for decades, he says, "and all of a sudden people move in and start complaining. And it's very real, and it's driven a lot of [companies] out. What we find is that the more people pay for their units, the more they are going to expect quiet—and complain when they don't get it. The industrial folk are there already running businesses, making smells and noises and doing things that district is supposed to allow them to do—where else can they do it?—and folks come in and treat the area like residential, even though they're supposed to be doing work themselves."

Many of the loft buildings built in the last five years are new construction (as opposed to conversions of older buildings) because the city is simply running out of old warehouses. "In Oakland there are very few buildings of any size left to convert," says Dolan. Because they don't start as abandoned warehouses or other industrial spaces that need to be brought up to code, new-construction "lifestyle lofts" (known somewhat more derisively as "loftminiums") can be easier to build.

But for David Baker, the architect of 200 Second St. at Jack London Square, "new construction is not as interesting because you don't have the constraints from the old building. Old buildings can form a collage, like a medieval town. In new construction you have to make it as efficient as possible, as opposed to getting interesting spaces from the pattern of the old space, where you have to solve a unique problem."

The efficiency Baker talks about is a point of tension between architects and developers—architects want to create the best project they can, but developers are the



Emeryville's Rick Holliday, credited with building some of the Bay Area's first lofts, in front of Pacific Cannery Lofts at Central Station.

Jacob Branham and Kris Nations truly use their loft, a tri-level former linen factory, for working and living. He's a carpenter, and she makes jewelry. From this vantage point, they can overlook their workspaces.



Branham's carpentry shop (above) and Nations' jewelry studio (below) are on the ground floor.

ones watching the bottom line. "Developers and land sellers try to make as much money as they can on new construction," he explains, "by cramming as many units together on a piece of land, unlike conversion lofts," where the ceiling height and building footprint are relatively fixed.

So which is cheaper to build? Each project is different. With new construction, everything must be built from the ground up, but at least it's being built right the first time. Conversion lofts are tricky because working around an existing structure can be expensive. For instance, there might be toxic material in the soil that has to be abated; the building might need seismic upgrades, and there can be a lot of complicated demolition to add elevators and parking and to work around the existing masonry. "In many ways, newer construction is preferred by developers because it's much more of a

known quantity. You start with a blank slate; you don't have as many surprises," says Dolan.

LEFT COAST LOFTS

The story of loft development in Oakland began across the bay. In the late 1980s San Francisco city planners, seeing the rise of lofts in New York, enacted the first live/work ordinance that allowed developers to convert abandoned warehouse and commercial space into artist housing in industrially zoned areas. Artists were already squatting in many of the buildings or leaving the city altogether for cheaper space. The city, seeing that the arts were bringing in more than a billion dollars in revenue a year, decided to bring them into the legal fold in a way that also ensured their housing was up to code. By the mid-1990s, when the dot-com boom created a serious





Nations and Branham wanted to put both of their studios under one roof and settled on a West Oakland loft when other property they considered felt more like "loftminiums" suited for living but not industrial activity. The spiral staircase, large windows and multipurpose spaces are hallmarks of East Bay lofts.

housing crunch and lines formed around the block for open houses, developers used the ordinance to go full steam, buying land on the cheap and building expensive live/work lofts while largely ignoring the requirement that tenants be artists. By 2000, according to the San Francisco Planning and Urban Research Association, an urban planning think tank, "more than 2,300 live/work units had been completed, and another 3,000 were in the pipeline." Between 1998 and 2001, "lofts ... comprised more than one-third of all new housing in the city." Residents of areas most affected, like the central waterfront and Potrero Hill, felt the influx of largely dot-com workers who were new to the area and changed the established character of the neighborhoods. "There were people annoyed by the live/work areas; people complained that they were yuppie apartments and that they were living there and not working," says Baker. In attempting to encourage development,

the ordinance sweetened the deal for developers by waiving fees they normally paid for parks and schools, and lifting requirements on backyard space, affordable housing and Americans with Disabilities Act requirements.

The San Francisco Board of Supervisors declared a moratorium on new loft development in 2000, and since 2002 it has been illegal in San Francisco to convert historic commercial buildings to residential. In retrospect, the loopholes to build live/work were big enough to drive an articulating boom lift through, and while many old buildings got a facelift, the law didn't much help the creative class it was intended for. "Even the planners admitted they screwed up," says Dolan.

Oakland took a different tack. Instead of enacting a wholesale ban on what many saw as a perfectly legitimate form of housing, Oakland set the artist requirement aside and saw live/work conversions as a way to give new life to its abandoned



industrial buildings while bringing more people downtown. The city created a unique "Residentially Oriented Live/Work" zoning classification in 1999 that was the first of its kind in the country. It eased the permitting process for loft conversions in old industrial buildings in an area roughly encompassing downtown and the Jack London Square area. Since then, more zoning ordinances were passed that encourage residential development, a direct outgrowth of former Mayor Jerry Brown's 10K Downtown Housing Initiative.

WHAT'S A LOFT ANYWAY?

With all the different ways lofts can be built and converted, the definition has become somewhat plastic. Ask 10 different people to define a loft, and you'll get eight different answers. High ceilings, lots of windows and exposed pipes, of course, but there are a gazillion variations on the theme. Because the first lofts were conversions from industrial buildings, and the bones of older buildings are expensive to upgrade, they often came as a single room with high ceilings. And they were immediately popular. "They hit a raw nerve right at the beginning," says Rick Holliday, the Emeryville-based developer who is credited with building some of the first loft buildings in the Bay Area and is now developing the Pacific Cannery Lofts at Central Station.

Over the years lofts have morphed architecturally from empty cubes to vast three-bedroom, two-story apartments, and they can vary in materials from brick and timber to reinforced concrete. Now loft residents are insisting not only on greater separation of living space, but also on more closet space, better finishes and higher-end appliances—traditional amenities that weren't part of earlier conversions. Developers and architects are building lofts for regular people now, not just artists or, as often seemed to be the case, the architectural press. "The style has evolved over the last 20 years," says Dolan, the architect who has made a business of building and retrofitting live/work units (the Web site for his architecture business is live-work.com). "Twenty years ago we were designing spaces and projects aimed at artists or would-be artists that were located in fairly marginal neighborhoods, and we often didn't do fancy finishes—we'd do a painted plywood floor because we didn't want to charge you for hardwood when you might not want it. And units have

gotten smaller over the years—more like apartments. The amount of space you need to do a 12-by-12-foot painting versus setting up your iBook is obviously different."

Dolan is referring to a dirty little secret of the live/work world—that the vast majority of loft lovers do a whole lot more living than working in their spaces, and they've sought out lofts simply because they like the style. As real estate broker Hultgren says, "People in the Bay Area are recognizing loft living as cool."

A LOFT-BASED BUSINESS

But for Kris Nations and husband Jacob Branham, their 2,200-square-foot, tri-level loft in a converted linen factory in West Oakland is just barely big enough to house both of their small businesses. Branham has his fine carpentry business on the ground floor, where he creates mostly residential cabinets, moldings and furniture. Nations has turned what would have been the dining room into the headquarters for her successful jewelry-design business, Kris Nations Jewels, which is often featured in *Harper's Bazaar*, *InStyle* and *Lucky* magazines. The couple turned to loft living for the most pragmatic of reasons—instead of managing two studios and a home, they tried to get it all under one roof. After growing out of their previous loft space in San Francisco, they went looking for something bigger in 2006, and found more loftminiums than real industrial spaces. "The newer lofts don't really seem live/work; it's just a label," says Branham. "They'd only work for a graphic designer, not real industrial work. For my kind of work, which is dusty, you really need an industrial space." While Branham and Nations see their loft as a stepping-stone—perhaps buying something more traditional and in a better neighborhood in a few years—it fits their entrepreneurial lives for now. Living and working in the same space is not without its downside, says Nations. "I work all the time, whether it's packing something up or getting out the blowtorch in my pajamas. I look forward to the point when this stuff isn't in my living room."

LOFT-LIKE LIVING

If the vast majority of loft owners don't tamp on an anvil or cut mortise-and-tenon joints at home, they still like the look. In the same spirit of appropriated authenticity that makes urbanites buy Land Rovers that never leave the asphalt or REI soft-shell jackets to keep the chill away in line at Peet's Coffee

& Tea, marketers are using loft language to sell regular nonloft condos, describing them as having "flexible space," "open floor plans," "expansive light-filled interiors," even "exposed piping" and "stained concrete floors."

The Web site for West End Commons, a townhouse development designed by David Baker at the north end of the newly reopened Mandela Parkway, describes the units as providing "optimum flexibility of space and a modern aesthetic without sacrificing the essential characteristics that make up a home. Large, open floor plans are paired with well-appointed kitchens and bathrooms ... the perfect combination of elements whether you're building a family or a business." This is a common refrain, loft-like in the ways you want (flexibility of space and modern aesthetic) but without the rough edges lofts are perceived to have (suspended bedrooms or a single tiny bathroom). Well-appointed in the case of West End Commons means solid hardwood flooring, Bosch appliances and bamboo cabinetry.

Now that they're often aimed at wealthier buyers, most of the newer loft buildings also have higher-end finishes, which don't come cheap. This has given lofts, which traditionally have been among the most affordable housing options, a luxe category. Now they appeal to both starters and wealthier clientele. Real estate agent Hultgren sees both. "Lofts are still an excellent opportunity to buy into the Bay Area real estate market, and they're typically found in more industrial areas, so those areas as they are developed represent an opportunity for appreciation and for the first-time buyer to get into the market, ... but there are also super tricked-out, really amazing 4,000-square-foot spaces—we recently sold one for over \$1 million—that definitely represent that higher end."

If lofts have had an influence on condo design overall, it is in creating more space for people, in prioritizing daylight and fresh air over cramped quarters. Lofts have also given us the chance to repurpose our obsolete industrial quarters, bringing new life to formerly abandoned places, stanching some of the suburban exodus while letting people rediscover the advantages of urban living. "They need to develop these industrial spaces, to make room for people who can't or don't want to live in the suburbs or in Victorian houses," says Lorraine Miller, who hasn't looked back on her old life in Berkeley. Whether you are a muralist or a banker, there's something with high ceilings and a wide view of the city out there for you. ■