

The live/work concept evolves to fit the needs of a new brand of consumer

Whether it's living where you work or working where you live, proximity to public transit is an integral component of new loft and mixed-use construction

By Carolyn Dempsey

Rafael Olivas is a technical communications designer and artist who moved into his first San Francisco live/work space more than 20 years ago. "It was an unconverted loft," he recalled, "raw lofts aren't really available anymore in this city anymore, but you can still find some unconverted live/work spaces in the East Bay," Olivas said.

In the almost two decades since San Francisco passed an ordinance allowing the conversion of unwanted buildings in industrial zones into affordable live/work units for artists, urban change and the march of time have continually transmogrified the live/work concept into its present-day form. In addition to the artists for whom loft zoning was originally created, live/work also now includes mixed-use developments that combine living spaces with retail, restaurants and service businesses, as well as transit-oriented development (TOD) housing near BART stations and other public transportation alternatives to automobile commutes.

"There's a lot of new loft construction in recent years: big living spaces in split-level designs," Olivas noted, "but it's more programmers, engineers and professionals who are living in them. The idea of the live/work loft has become more of a building style rather than an artist lifestyle."

The expense of San Francisco real estate, and the relative dearth of land in an area dominated by maritime bays have pushed many builders out past city limits for development opportunities in the eastern and southern parts of the Bay Area.

Seeing live/work with fresh eyes

John McMorow, president of Silverstone Communities in Redwood City, is currently

constructing new live/work housing called Park Broadway in downtown Millbrae. When completed later in 2008, this four-story mid-rise will have condominiums on the upper floors and 13 lofts fronting the business and shopping thoroughfare of El Camino Real at street level.

"We wanted to make the building a bit more livable than some of the traditional, hip loft spaces," said McMorow. "We identified a few things we thought were missing. We made the kitchen into more of a cook's kitchen in a U-shape. There's a pantry with storage space and a pass-through bar to make it more functional."

"The lofts have direct access to a secure garage and outside there are additional parking spaces," he added. "Each live/work comes with extra storage in the building for the owner."

Two architectural aspects McMorow did retain are soaring ceilings up to 25 feet in height and floor-to-ceiling windows that will suffice the units with the airy spaciousness revered by live/work adherents. He pointed out, however, that, "Loft bedrooms are traditionally open to the downstairs and the outside windows. We've made it possible to close off the upstairs to both the big windows and the lower-level living area, by designing sliding-curtain walls to close off the bedroom. Owners can choose whether they want fabric or wood, but the materials will slide across the floor to add more flexibility to the space."

Another big plus is the multiple-use space upstairs. "From the bedroom across the main wall, we added a 20-foot-long, 8-foot-wide flying bridge way," McMorow explained, "where people can put a large-screen TV, entertainment center and a sofa, or an office with room for a desk, files and a wall gallery."



PHOTO COURTESY PACIFIC CANNERY LOFTS

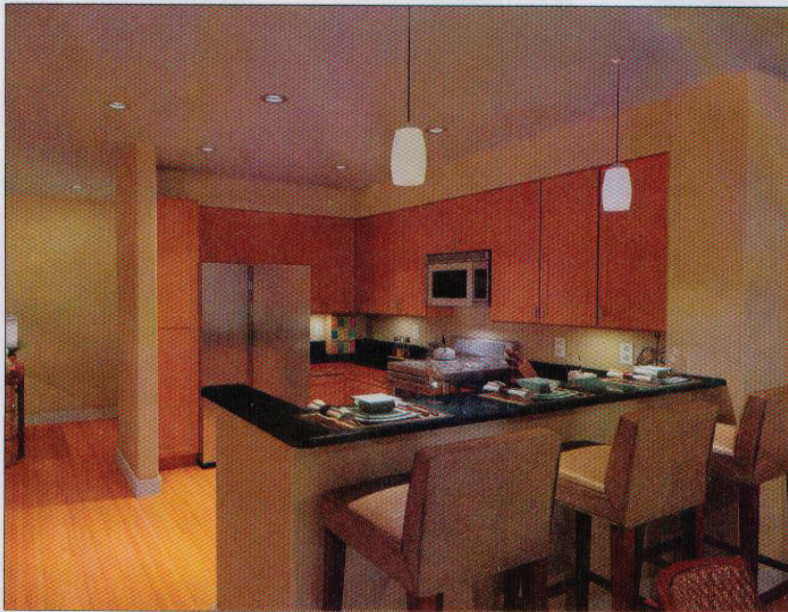


PHOTO COURTESY SILVERSTONE COMMUNITIES

Above: A support column from the original cannery building becomes a functional design feature in this bedroom at Pacific Cannery Lofts in Oakland. Left: A U-shaped kitchen, like this one at Park Broadway in Millbrae, is an updated alternative to the galley kitchens found in older lofts.



Above: An office-door partition swings out from the wall to cordon off personal space upstairs during business hours. Right: An industrial-style kitchen with track lighting at Pacific Cannery Lofts.



PHOTOS ABOVE BY NANCY HOLLIDAY

Park Broadway live/work lofts will range from 1,319 to 1,441 square feet in size, and pricing will start in the low \$800,000s.

Redevelopment redux

In the East Bay, Holliday Development is currently redeveloping an old cannery building near the West Oakland BART Station. Rick Holliday, president, praised the TOD benefits of Pacific Cannery Lofts as he pointed out, "There are 271 trains hitting the West Oakland BART Station daily. There are trains every minute and a half during commute times."

This is important, he rationalized, because, "It's far greener to move closer to places you need to get to in your life and to cut down on the miles you drive, than it is just doing sustainable wood flooring — which is also good. We're recycling the building, which has been empty for the last 50 years," Holliday said. Pacific Cannery was designed by David Baker + Partners Architects, and is Build It Green certified.

Holliday described the community's Velo Lounge as a serious bike repair center with

how-to classes sponsored by the East Bay Bike Coalition.

"Pacific Cannery owners can pick their lighting, flooring and built-in closets and storage units," Holliday said, "which can be included in the mortgage as rolling upgrades." One space-saving option is to have the office desk added as built-in furniture, with high-tech entertainment center shelving and storage on the opposite side. With the available Lazy Susan option on the top surface, a large computer screen on the desk can swivel 180 degrees from the office area, around to double as a video media screen facing the living room sofa and dining area.

Another neat idea is a business-door partition that stores flat against the front-door wall during non-business hours, and swings out from the wall to cordon off the office area downstairs from the staircase leading to the private, upper-level quarters.

According to Holliday, prices for Pacific Cannery homes will range from \$350,000 to \$550,000. "Oakland city workers or residents qualify for a special mortgage incentive," said Holliday. "With an income limit of \$60,000, they're eligible for a down-payment loan of up to \$125,000 with a 3-percent deferred interest rate."

Benefits and challenges of live/work

Sculptor Susan Marie Johnson lives and works in a g2 loft in Potrero Hill, where she is also the building's HOA president. Having lived there for 12 years, she and her husband Dave Holsonback are both working artists who live at their 636-square-foot loft, which is also Johnson's studio.

"Having an open space to work in and a large wall are benefits of working in a loft," Johnson said. "As a studio artist, I need big spaces for designing commissions. I created one for Bistro Ralph in Healdsburg here. Most furniture in my loft is on wheels, so I can push it back against the wall and out of the way to do art design, and the I can roll tables over to seat 10 guests for dinner. I like things to have multiple uses for a really efficient use of space."

A major challenge with live/work arrangements is that it's important to be organized in smaller home quarters, especially when personal space doubles as an office or studio.

"We've had fun designing furniture for our loft. It's only in the past few years that I've had enough money to build out the space, but in a way it's kind of good," said Johnson, "because it gave me a lot of time to get used to it. I'd recommend for anyone moving to a small space like this to live and work in it a while before decorating. Figure out where the dead space is, for example, and then put storage there. Learn how you want your space to function and then make it all multipurpose."

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— John McMorow, president, Silverstone Communities



PHOTO BY DAN DION

Susan Marie Johnson kicks back in her live/work loft. Much of her furniture is on wheels to maximize the use of space.