

For lofty appeal, builders add amenities to the mix

The success of downtown loft apartments and condos offers incentive to build them in other areas, with added attractions.

BY JEFFREY TOMICH
Of the Post-Dispatch

When the Downtown St. Louis Partnership held its Living Tour last weekend, the star attractions were the dozen-plus loft apartment and condominium buildings that have taken shape along Washington Avenue and nearby streets over the last decade.

After all, the rehabilitation of crumbling warehouses and manufacturing plants into gleaming upscale dwellings has been central to efforts to lure young professionals and empty nesters from the suburbs back to the city and revive St. Louis' urban core.

Not to be outdone, developers are building a new breed of suburban loft projects across the metro area — from Creve Coeur to St. Charles and Belleville.

Among them is the Lofts at the Highlands, a two-building, 200-unit loft development across Highway 40 (Interstate 64) from Forest Park, which just began leasing. Units will go for \$1,000 to \$2,000 a month, with the first residents to move in after July 1.

Like downtown loft projects, the units at the Highlands will have

open spaces and exposed ductwork as well as 7-foot partitions separating bedrooms from living rooms instead of floor-to-ceiling walls.

Aiming to increase the appeal, St. Louis-based developers Brown Balke Associates have added underground garage parking and carpet or tile floors in the units instead of wood or concrete.

"Being downtown is a little bit edgier, but it's a different segment of the customer base," said Don Land, senior vice president of Balke Brown. "There's a certain segment of the customer population that wants brand new construction — and not the typical garden-variety apartment found out in the suburbs."

Loft apartments began to gain popularity in the 1960s when artists in New York's SoHo district took advantage of cheap rents and converted old warehouses and manufacturing plants into living space. Since then, the concept has been more broadly applied to apartments and condos with common characteristics, such as high ceilings, large windows and few partitions.

Many of the lofts in St. Louis also incorporate granite countertops,

walk-in closets and sunken bathtubs to increase their appeal — amenities that loft purists might spurn.

The popularity and variety of lofts has spawned terms such as "hard loft," usually meaning a raw, unfinished space in an existing building; "soft loft," a finished unit ready for occupancy; and "faux lofts," or newly constructed lofts.

Tim Busse, the architect at New Town at St. Charles, a New Urbanist development on what used to be farmland in St. Charles County, said developer Whittaker Homes has yet to commit to lofts but is considering building 50 to 100.

"We'll do what the market tells us," Busse said. "We're very market focused."

And to those who say lofts don't belong in the suburbs, Busse said the concept shouldn't be limited to rehabilitation of crumbling manufacturing plants and warehouses in downtown.

"Lofts can be radically different," he said. "There's a variety of types."

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The lofts available along Washington Avenue in St. Louis are examples of "soft lofts," finished units ready for occupancy. Developers have started to build similar spaces in more suburban areas.

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