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Living Downtown- A New Way of Life



By Elaine Corn

Photography By Roy Wilcox

Four people, four lifestyles, four ways to live downtown. Here's a quartet of people enjoying city life in Sacramento's new downtown. Bragging about how little they drive, how much they walk and that they've got more places to eat and hang out than anyone else, they say they love living in the center of it all.

First, there was East Sacramento: an old house with a finished basement. But Julie Shelley doesn't need any of that anymore.

She's downsized from 3,000 to 1,600 square feet. She's found comfort in cement floors, minimalist furniture, lots of sunlight, just enough stuff for her needs and not much more.

That makes Shelley the perfect person to live in a loft.

Stacked three stories tall and tucked into the 1600 block of Q Street, the building, with its metal façade and burnished-wood garage doors, says something architecturally fetching is going on in this neighborhood. In the past, Shelley's new abode might have been called a fourplex. Today, it's a quad of lofts.

Shelley, a real estate appraiser who's inside houses all the time, doesn't care about the precise meaning of the word loft. "It's not a condo or a townhouse. There are no homeowner dues, and I have a property line," Shelley explains of her live/work space. "It has a lot of open space. It's a loft, but I call it my house."

It was an impulsive—and expensive—purchase. Soon after she saw the "for sale" sign, she met with the contractor at The Naked Lounge and bought it, sight unseen, for \$449,000. Her two children, Patrick, 14, and Christine, 18, are along for the adventure.

Shelley says she can breathe here, having divested herself of almost everything in the 1928 East Sac bungalow she walked out on. "You get used to having all that space," she says. "I had to scale way down. I like not having stuff much better."

With her change in lifestyle have come new sights, sounds, foods and furniture. Patrick takes light rail to McClatchy High School, and Christine jumps aboard to City College.

Shelley knew she'd love city life. But it surprised her that having the light rail tracks just outside her back door would be so enlivening. The train's rolling sound rips into a quiet dawn and shimmies the walls. She loves it.

Family meals might start with a walk to buy ingredients at the 19th Street Safeway, the Fremont Park farmers market or the Sacramento Natural Foods Co-op. Shelley's been on a hunt for furniture that suits the loft's industrial interior.

"A lot of it isn't very comfortable," she's discovered. Good thing she didn't get rid of everything that once suited her bungalow. In a nook on the loft's second level is the biggest, lumpiest brown leather chair ever to invade a cubist paradise. Its corpulent arms and cushioned haunch mock the modern space.

This downtown dweller still looks ahead. She's already plunked down a 15 percent deposit for a corner condo on the 12th floor of the Daniel Libeskind-designed Aura, the 38-story tower due to open on Capitol Mall in 2007.

Whether she sells her already appreciated loft (the one next door just sold for more than \$600,000) or keeps it even as she ascends the Aura building, it is doubtful she'll ever live anywhere but downtown.

Josh Bernstein, an ex-New Yorker who works as an investigative reporter at KCRA Channel 3, recalls leaving his residence in downtown Sacramento for a vaguely far-away dinner party.

"It was in the Fab Forties," he says. "You know, the suburbs."

To a downtowner, East Sacramento is for pioneers—better pack a lunch for the trip. It's not the distance, really, that affected Bernstein. Like any New Yorker, he can walk 40 blocks. It was being inside a normal house that convinced him he'd chosen his current quarters well.

"I wasn't used to walls," he says.

Bernstein lives in a loft. His perch is on the third floor of the O1 Lofts on 16th Street between J and K streets. He pays just under \$2,000 a month in rent. His downstairs neighbors? Mikuni, P.F. Chang's and Bistro 33.

His is a proper loft, with no walls except the ones that define a bathroom and closets. Think studio apartment—only with a name that commands higher rent.

Bernstein sweeps an arm around his prized 780 square feet. "This is my simple life."

At the entry to the loft is an L-shaped kitchen area with sleek black countertops, open shelves of twinkling barware and the usual Seinfeldian bachelor lineup of cereal boxes. This kitchen stays clean. Like many city dwellers, Bernstein eats out every day.

Bernstein got rid of a lumpy, historic couch that he used in his former residence and began shopping at Ikea, Limn and the conveniently located Design Within Reach on the ground floor of O1. For the living area, he



bought two Christian Werner “Pop” chairs—one red, one purple—made by Ligne Roset. A low platform bed seems to float in another part of the one-room space. The bed faces a big flat-screen TV that’s always on.

Light pours in from windows that soar 16 feet to the ceiling. At night, Bernstein looks past the immediate view of a parking lot and can tell by the size of the crowd when it’s time to go downstairs for, say, Second Saturday. “This building has laid the groundwork of what urban living in downtown Sacramento is,” he says.

Bernstein’s version of the simple life: Getting up at 5 a.m. to work out, then grabbing a coffee from—where? Infusion? Capital Garage? One of three nearby Starbucks?

“Then,” he says, “I walk over to the Capitol and poke around. I walk over to the courthouse and check my sources. Then I hit City Hall. Finally, I walk over to the office.” (KCRA is on E Street between Ninth and 10th streets.)

For lunch, Bernstein hoofs it three-quarters of a mile back home to walk his dog, Saki. It’s easy having a dog downtown. Doggie poop bags are dispensed free on the Capitol grounds.

Total weekly miles driven: 42. (There are those trips to Ikea in West Sacramento.)

Every day, Bernstein supports nearby restaurants, art galleries and artists. Friends gather first at his place for cocktails or wine. “We sit and talk,” he notes. “Then we go out.”

Not surprisingly, he’s got no shortage of friends who offer to housesit. With work, nightlife, food and drink within reach, and even a place to get his hair cut just two blocks away, there’s only one thing this professional pedestrian needs: a dry cleaner.



With their home in the suburbs and a loft downtown, Michael Heller and his wife, Evelyn, have the best of both worlds.

“Each is better when I have the other,” Heller says of his unique brand of dual citizenship.

But there’s no mistaking Heller’s preference for downtown life. He may be a newlywed with a house in Gold River, but he was not about to give up his corner aerie on the third floor of the O1 Lofts just because he got married this past spring.

Heller and his partners in LoftWorks built those lofts.

Heller’s gray eyes brighten at any opportunity to talk about his part in the rebirth of downtown.

“I was born in Sacramento,” he says. “It was boring when I was young. But I’ve lived in Chicago, San Francisco

and L.A. Instead of complaining [about] what Sacramento didn't have, I decided to do something about it."

His vision for enlivening 16th Street between K and J into what is now the epicenter of loft life in Sacramento came from hitting the developer's bull's-eye. After LoftWorks transformed the Elliott Building at 16th and J from a car showroom into lofts and restaurants, there remained the matter of the weedy parking lot that came with it. The only answer: more lofts.

O1 is a building of the future wrapped in the past. The exterior has the architectural big shoulders of Chicago's Magnificent Mile, which is to say if you drive or walk by, you'd swear the O1 has been there for decades. Inside, the air space contains invisible streams of Wi-Fi and satellite TV.

When O1 opened in early 2006, Heller ensconced himself in a loft of his own: a big one, with 1,000 square feet and a corner view, that rents for \$2,500 a month. He always wanted a "cool urban pad, a live/work space" downtown for meetings, sleeping and entertaining.

From his deck, Heller has a view of the sidewalk bustle outside Mikuni restaurant. "Sometimes, I have people up here for drinks after work, and we just call down to Mikuni or order in Chinese," he says.

Entertaining is that easy. Uninhibited guests can fling themselves into an ocher-colored "Gigi" swivel chair or take a seat along a sleek olive-green sectional that acts as a room divider. On the floor under the sofa is a rusty-orange shag rug.

No effort was made to obscure the building's metal support beams. "That's the anatomy of the building," Heller says with aesthetic pride. Art is everywhere, from a Wayne Thiebaud sketch to a Les Birluson art-cube light sculpture.

Music pumps out of speakers hanging from exposed beams and tucked into every corner. "Something's got to drown out the trash pickup," Heller explains.

A downside to downtown? Heller got over it. "If there's no city noise, then I'm not in a city." Garbage day announces itself at 7 a.m. Valet parking for Mikuni, P.F. Chang's and Bistro 33 is right under Heller's window. Motorcycles charging down 16th Street seem to break the sound barrier.

Heller pays \$125 a month to keep his car downtown. To toodle around, he takes his Vespa or walks.

Check out the spotless sheen on Heller's stainless-steel range. He'd cook if he wanted to, but he has an inexhaustible urge to stroll the streets in search of restaurants and amusement.

"I can have an enjoyable walk to 30 restaurants," he says. "The Park and Mason's are around the block, then I might walk to the IMAX or to the Torch Club for blues."

Heller's current project is four blocks away on 20th Street. His company, Heller Pacific, took the 80-year-old structure that once housed Mayflower Moving and Storage, gutted the inside, left the shell and named it the MARRS Building (for Midtown Arts, Retail, Restaurant Scene). Office tenants are already ensconced; retailers are due in 2007.

Those in Gold River seem so far away.



Trendy cities have trendy neighborhoods. New York has its SoHo, shorthand for South of Houston Street. San Francisco has its SoMa, for South of Market Street. And Sacramento?

Chuck Dalldorf proposes a nickname for his trendy downtown neighborhood: The SoCk, for south of Crocker.

Dalldorf, special assistant to Mayor Heather Fargo, lives in a condo at 200 P St. His patio faces due north toward the lively neon sign that spells A-R-T on the south wall of the Crocker Art Museum.

“I used to say I lived in the financial district,” he jokes, but it’s true. His third-floor residence is located in the heart of Sacramento’s monied institutions: CalPERS, Wells Fargo Center, Bank of America.

The north-facing view from Dalldorf’s P Street patio also takes in Tower Bridge and the Sacramento River.

Dalldorf was way ahead of his time. He’s lived downtown in various locations for 14 years, including as a single father sharing the raising of his son, Peter. Eight years ago, Dalldorf bought his current two-bedroom, 960-square-foot condo at the western terminus of P Street for \$80,000.

“People told me not to buy downtown,” he remembers. “They said I’d just be throwing my money away.”

Any current appraisal would confirm he’s made a sound investment. (Dalldorf says the condo would sell today for about \$350,000.) The tucked-away complex of 190 townhouses and apartment-style condominiums was built in the 1970s with geometric architecture that, like Dalldorf, was ahead of its time.

But he didn’t purchase for financial gain. Dalldorf is a New Yorker. When he was sent here by the Air Force, living downtown just felt right.

He taught Peter to ride a bike on the convenient sidewalks. The two played Brooklyn-style games in the parking lots at CalPERS. Peter attended Phoebe Hurst Elementary and Sutter Middle School and is a recent graduate of C.K. McClatchy High School. He got around through a combination of school and city buses.

Dalldorf waited many years for his neighborhood to come alive. “Weekends used to be so quiet, it was like having a house in the country,” he notes. Now, he’s just blocks from satisfying any culinary whim: Vallejo’s, Il Fornaio, 55 Degrees, not to mention countless places to pop in for a beer.

It’s doubtful Dalldorf would last long in the country. In the 14 years he’s lived downtown, he’s not owned a lawn mower, rake or pruning shears. Living in the SoCk, there’s so much more to do. “Yardwork,” Dalldorf

says, "is sweeping the patio."