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Lofty goals

Young professionals and empty-nesters are exchanging big houses for compact convenience

By Bob Sylva -- Bee Staff Writer

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Robert Barrientos represents a species of inhabitant heretofore nonexistent in Sacramento, a town religiously devoted to the propagation of single-family homes; the manic cultivation of enviable lawns; the stupor of plodding, aggravating commutes.

Loft dweller, circa 2005.

Traits: Has cash. Eats out a lot. Abhors Tuscan style. Knows valet parkers by first name. Folks at Mikuni think he has stock in company. Likes to party.

Barrientos, 35, is the new urban professional. He's a cool guy with a very cool place. He lives in a corner loft above Mikuni on the fourth floor of the Elliott Building, once an auto dealership, now the reigning prototype of smart, metropolitan renewal. That rave cocktail of retail and residential mix that urban planners are pounding down like meteors.

"I have friends in the City," he says, waving a hand about his premises. (Note: All cool people have friends in San Francisco.) "They look at Sacramento as a country town, a place without culture. But they come up here, and they can't believe it! They can't believe that there is a loft like this above a restaurant like Mikuni. They can't believe the view."

The view is utterly believable.

What's unbelievable is the price.

Barrientos pays \$4,100 a month in rent, which makes his 1,100-square-foot loft, his floor-to-ceiling windows on the world, his champagne aerie, perhaps the most expensive bachelor pad in Sacramento.

But it is spectacular. It has a polished wood floor, modern furnishings from Limn, concrete countertops, a Bang & Olufsen sound system and not a single drapery in sight. It also has a catwalk deck outfitted with a gas grill and a treadmill.

It suits his lifestyle. "If you want to party, you don't have to drink and drive," he says. "After the bars close, we come here. We finish the night out. I can play my music as loud as I want."

Barrientos, who owns several companies here and abroad, says, "Sacramento is coming around. We're getting better restaurants. I think Mason's (at 15th and L streets) can compete with any restaurant in the City. But I think the average person doesn't know what's going on downtown."

That's because the average person doesn't live downtown.

But what's going on downtown are lofts.

Enough lofts to shelter a new generation.

According to City Councilman Ray Tretheway, who prefers to live in bucolic Natomas, about 3,000 lofts are in the planning stage for downtown. Such projects as Plaza Lofts with 225 lofts at Ninth and J, Library Lofts with 300 lofts at Eighth and I, L Street Lofts with 92 lofts at 18th and L, and the Upper East Side Lofts with 135 lofts at 65th Street and Folsom Boulevard.

"It's healthy," says Tretheway. "But my main question is: If we are going to have a brand-new neighborhood in downtown Sacramento, something that hasn't happened since the turn of the century, where are they going to buy pet food? Or a bottle of milk?"

"We're going to have to think of (more) neighborhood services," he adds. "But we're also going to have new voices talking about the livability of downtown Sacramento after 5 p.m."

A few of those voices may be yelling "Shush!"

Michael Ault, head of Sacramento Downtown Partnership, points out that K Street is dotted by spacious loft projects atop existing retail. "Lofts present an interesting development opportunity," he says. "We're seeing an increased interest in urban living from people who want added amenities."

Before we all sell our boring homes and move downtown, let's get a much-ballyhooed term straight, namely:

What is a loft?

" 'Loft' has become another way of saying apartment or condominium with a certain style, a certain quality of space," says Ron Vrillakas, an architect who has designed several loft projects. "The quality of space is more interesting, more invigorating. It's large and flowing, with windows that look out on an active street."

Lofts, too, typically feature exposed beams, ducts, conduits and trusses, harkening back to their first, less-stylish use as industrial buildings. With rents ranging from \$1,200 and up, lofts are apparently not the solution for affordable housing.

Why are lofts so popular?

"For a lot of reasons," says Mark Friedman, whose company, Loftworks, has developed a number of projects, including the Elliott Building; O1 Lofts; and F65, a project at Folsom Boulevard and 65th Street that combines lofts and retail.

"First and foremost, it's an urban product. There is a cry and demand for something that is

sophisticated and urban. It's really a product that attracts urban pioneers. People who are willing to take a risk."

The typical loft dweller, says Friedman and other observers of the subculture, comes from two demographic groups: young urban professionals with no kids and couples 55-plus with empty nests, eager to enjoy the city's growing attractions.

All are seeking less reliance on the car.

No one wants to manicure a lawn anymore.

David and Jennifer McLean fit the mold. Both are 30; he's an architect; she's a sign language interpreter. But they're also an anomaly in that they have a baby. That would be Caden, 6 months, who has reddish-brown hair, big brown eyes, and who skitters like a bug atop a carpet over a childproof concrete floor.

Two months ago, the McLeans moved into F65. Their loft boasts a soaring 18-foot ceiling, a steel spiral staircase, a mezzanine; one bath, a tidy kitchen, plus a loge balcony with a commanding view of a parking lot, a SMUD substation, the light-rail tracks and, quite often, explosive sunsets.

"I like lots of light," says Jennifer McLean. "I like concrete floors."

In the beginning, the two city natives did the traditional thing and bought a 2,000-square-foot home in West Lake, Natomas, for \$342,000. "It was the American dream for a while," Jennifer says. "Until all the bills came. It was a gated community with a pool, a lake, etc. We didn't grow up that way."

So they sold their home for a sizable profit and downsized into a loft. With a three-year lease, they pay \$1,400 a month. Their only complaint is a severe lack of storage and convenient parking.

"I like the fact that it's not typical," says David McLean. "That it's not your standard suburban feel. Being a designer, that's important to me. That's what drew us here. Why not?" He laughs, adding, "We're young. Let's do it while we still have the knees to climb up the spiral staircase."

A more typical loft dweller would be the McLeans' neighbor, Heath Kastner, 27, a commercial real estate broker with CB Richard Ellis. Kastner grew up in Lincoln and unhappily owned a home in Rocklin. "I made quite a change," says Kastner. "This is a unique style of living. It appealed to me."

In fact, just about everything crucial to Kastner's well-being is within reach at F65. He says, "Where else can you live and get a Starbucks coffee, a Jamba Juice, and what I think is the best burrito in town, at Dos Coyotes? I'm a busy guy. I need to have access to all the things I need. There's even an ATM machine in the project. Plus it's close to downtown."

Living in a loft has built-in appeal for a charming single guy. "People ask me where I live," says Kastner, who frequents all the downtown watering holes. "I tell them I live above a Starbucks at the corner of 65th and Folsom. They know what I'm talking about. Everybody wants to see the place."

Chris Lango, 41, lives in an alley loft behind Zócalo, a popular restaurant on Capitol Avenue

at 18th Street. The building was once an auto dealership, which suits the former Motown native just fine. Lango is a sports producer at Channel 3 and sounds like your typical Oscar Madison type: an affable slob.

"The whole thing is a work in progress," he says of his loft, which is loosely decorated. "I'm not a designer, I'm a sports producer. But it's got a great vibe and feel to it. People who come in here all have the same reaction: 'Ah, this is cool!' "

Robert Barrientos, whom we left at the top of this story standing in loft splendor, is a Paso Robles native who once owned a home in Serrano, a place in El Dorado Hills widely regarded as the penthouse of suburban living.

"I liked it," he says, a bit unconvincingly. "It's a different world up there. I lived there for four years. What I really liked was that it was peaceful at night. You could go out and look at the stars."

Yeah, but how many stars can you look at?

How many times can you dine at Masque?

So, he sold his 3,200-squarefoot home for a ton of dough, and moved downtown. "It's really convenient," he says of his loft. "I can take the elevator down and I'm at Mikuni. I know everybody at Mikuni. The joke is that Mikuni is my living room!"

And if he's too engaged to take the elevator, he calls Mikuni, and they send up a sushi party tray.

Barrientos, who is considering renting an adjacent loft for his office, finds himself driving less than ever. And if he does drive, he pulls up to the Elliott Building and tosses his keys to the valet parkers, who then stash his car for him.

Now that's urban living!

"Everything is within walking distance," says an amazed Barrientos of his fast, slowpaced lifestyle. "My life has definitely changed for the better."

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