

# New Urbanism:



> The lofts at 300 S. Florence.

## Living & working in Downtown El Paso

By Leanne Hedrick photos by Mark Lambie

The hip, industrial coolness of living La Vida Urbana complete with exposed brick walls, concrete floors and chrome kitchen appliances has made its way to El Paso. And developers are banking on the idea that an option for Downtown living will attract the type of buyer who enjoys being able to walk to work, grocery stores, museums and restaurants.

Debbie Hester, a Realtor with ERA Buyers, Sellers, and Associates in El Paso, said that often the first thing professionals moving from out of town ask is about El Paso's urban living. "It's not just young people, but middle-aged and older folks, too. These are people who are used to living Downtown and like the convenience of reading their New York Times on their patio and not having to mow the



> T.J. Karam shows a garage-door style window feature added to each of the nine units at his 300 S. Florence lofts.

lawn. It's a lifestyle that El Paso would like to be able to offer."

But it won't happen quickly, she said, because Downtown still needs to grow support businesses for urban living. "The Downtown area will develop over the next five to 10 years as more services like dry-cleaning and grocery stores move within walking distance of urban housing. Then we are going to see a high demand for these properties. Urban living is the way of the future."

"Right now Downtown has a ways to go to get that really great 'look' that people are looking for. The Mills Plaza project will help tremendously when it opens up."

TJ, Luke and Ben Karam, developers of the First Avenue Lofts, agree with the five- to 10- year estimate. They point out that El Paso is a manageable Downtown at 10 by 17 blocks, so services, industries and restaurants will be closer to the condos than in cities where the downtown is less compact. "Before we started construction on the existing building, we walked all over Downtown and it seemed workable," TJ Karam said.

The Karams' condo project, at Florence and Third, opened in February 2010, and six of the nine existing units have been purchased. Floor plans range from 1,295 to 1,490 square feet, and the units are selling for \$200 a square foot, or \$250,000 to \$288,000. The building, originally a Trost & Trost design built in 1925, was converted into a 4,000-plus-square-foot mixed use retail-residential building, including covered parking, a rooftop terrace and storage units in the basement.

The brothers formed their company, the El Paso Project LLC, in 2008, specifically to start work on creating urban living spaces. Then they teamed up with architecture firm Wright & Dalbin, GECU for construction financing and Jorge Villegas, owner of Cumbre Builders. "Without the support of these companies the project would have never been possible. GECU was the only bank in town to even look at our construction plan, and working with Cumbre we had no problems during construction and came in on budget and on time," TJ Karam said.

Who is attracted to urban living?



> Laura Karam says she'll never leave her loft.



> Glass shower doors give bath a spacious look.



> Stainless steel appliances streamline design.



> Windows offer view of Downtown.



> Sleek fixtures accent the updated bathrooms.

Karam said that, for their product, the type of person has ranged from empty nesters to single entrepreneurs, although there is room for small families. "It's obviously not for everyone, but there are benefits."

Urban living has been touted as "green" in that it reduces a city's carbon footprint with fewer people driving to work and contributing to overall pollution but, Karam said, the lifestyle is also healthy for "body and soul." Living and working Downtown eliminates commutes and adds time to the day to walk or a workout. Children living Downtown have access to museums and libraries.

The building promotes energy efficiency, he said, because it is designed to capture natural light throughout the day. The state-of-the-art heating and cooling are energy-saving, too.

Down the street at Florence and Overland is another condo project inside Union Fashion Plaza. Also designed by Wright & Dalbin Architects and originally developed by then-owner Enoch Kimmelman, the building was sold to National Stores Inc. — the parent company of Falles Paredes Discount Stores — several years ago.

The four-story building houses lofts on the top three floors, and retail fills the street-level space. Ten-foot-high ceilings, eight-foot-high wood entry doors and large windows are the primary features. Intended for use as executive lofts, the interiors are different from the exposed brick and concrete that's popular in urban settings, but gives buyers a different set of choices.

Tenants seem happy with their decision to move Downtown. The Karam brothers' mom, Laura Karam, who lives in the First Street Lofts, said Downtown living offers something different.

"It's wonderful living in the middle of all this activity. I look out my window and see the firemen and sheriffs coming to work — you just see people moving, doing all kinds of things in their daily life. I have children who live in New York and Chicago, and I never thought I'd compare El Paso to those cities, but living Downtown feels very much like those places. It's just so alive."