

Downtown DIGS

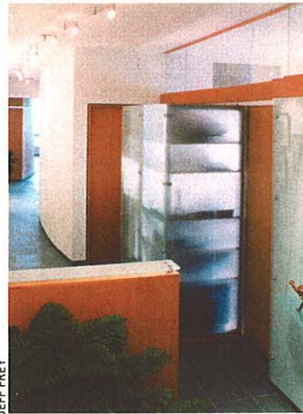
OLD INDUSTRIAL AND COMMERCIAL BUILDINGS ARE GETTING NEW LEASES ON LIFE AS URBAN LOFTS THAT LINK OWNERS TO A BUSTLING CITY LIFESTYLE

By Barbara Knox



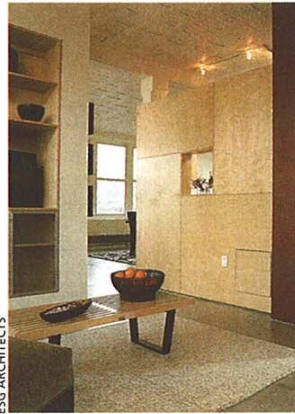
GEORGE HEINRICH

115 North First Street Loft,
Minneapolis



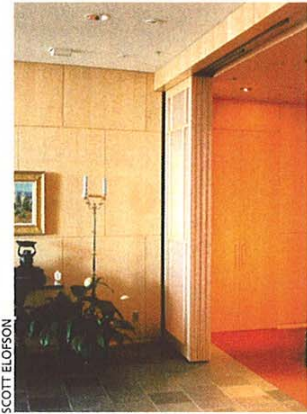
JEFF FREY

Superior Street Loft,
Duluth



ESG ARCHITECTS

9th Street Lofts,
St. Paul



SCOTT ELOFSON

Washburn Mill Loft,
Minneapolis

From the St. Anthony Falls Historic District in Minneapolis to once blighted neighborhoods in St. Paul, crumbling warehouses throughout the Twin Cities are getting a new lease on life as residential lofts. Indeed, this urban phenomenon is even reaching into cities like Duluth.

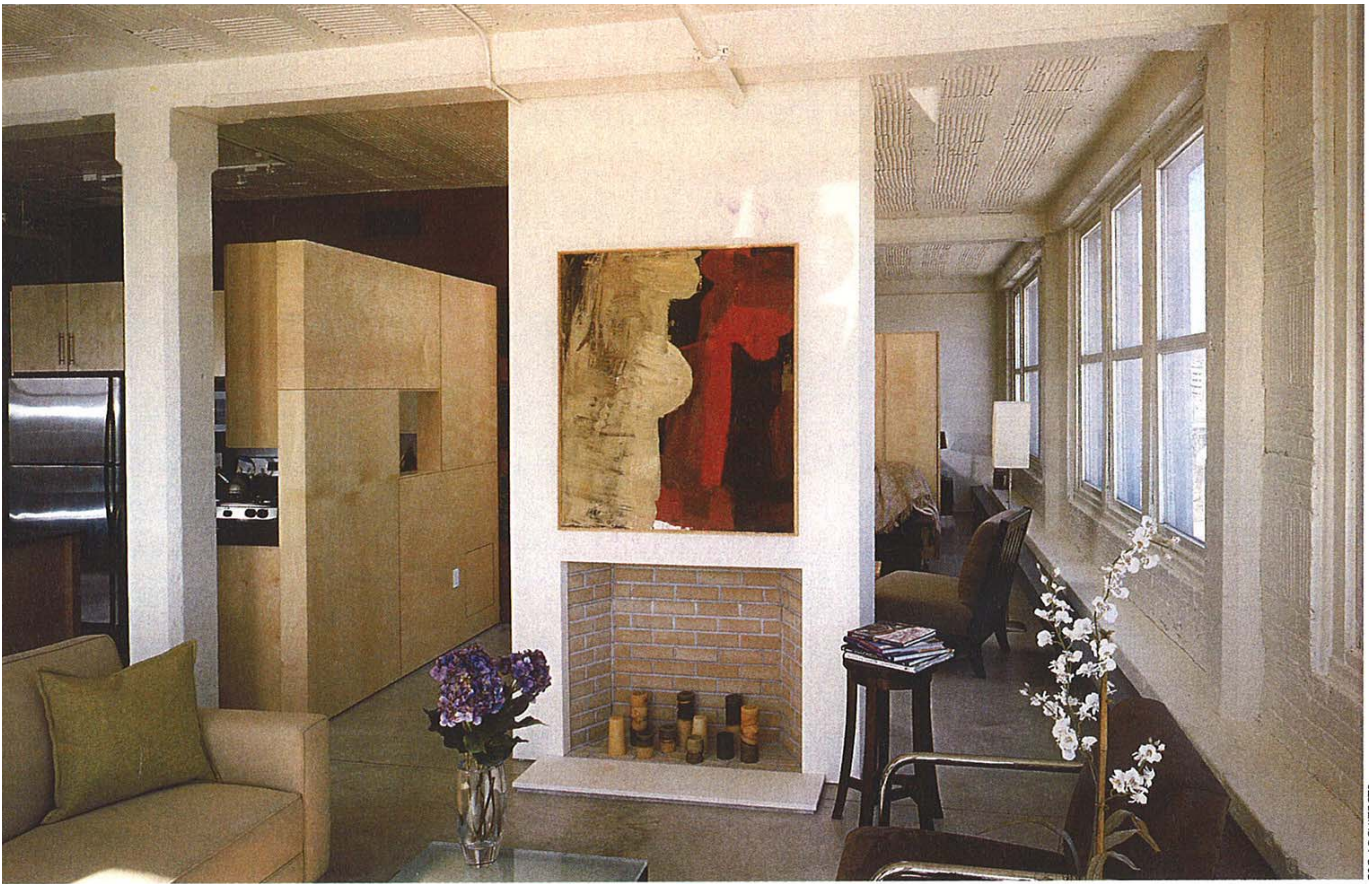
Converting stalwart buildings into loft condominiums has become a boom business for developers like Brighton Development Corporation and the Lander Group, who have bet that young Generation Xers and older baby boomers alike would turn their back on the 'burbs for a chance to live in an energized urban environment in an alternative kind of home. They haven't been disappointed.

"Open floor plans, big windows, high ceilings. . . this kind of architectural character is very appealing," says Tom Melchior, manager of marketing research for the Minneapolis consulting firm Larson, Allen, Weishair & Company. Melchior conducted the original market

studies for Brighton's North Star and Stone Arch loft developments. "The demand is primarily related to the baby boom," he explains, "and while the vast majority will stay where they are, it only takes a small proportion to create a huge demand downtown."

The new generation of urban loft, however, often bears little resemblance to the hard-edged, industrial spaces that started the movement decades ago. Today, the term "loft" is as likely to be applied to a luxury apartment featuring a semi-open plan as it is to live/work spaces that retain the industrial character of the original building.

Whatever their aesthetic preferences, Minnesota's loft lovers are swapping lawn care and snow removal for a chance to live in the heart of the city, within easy reach of community parks, mass transit, neighborhood restaurants and a plethora of arts happenings. It's a formula for living that's appealing to an increasing number of Minnesotans.



ESG ARCHITECTS



Design team (from left to right): Art Bartels, AIA, Pong Khoo, Assoc. AIA, David Graham, AIA, Burt Coffin, Assoc. AIA, Maria Ambrose.

If existing warehouse conversions around the Twin Cities have bedazzled the first wave of loft enthusiasts, a new project in St. Paul offers a twist that may appeal to a new segment of the market. The Workforce Building at 9th and Wacouta is part of a North Quadrant Economic Development project in St. Paul under development by the Lander Group, Inc. Like many other historic structures in the area, the Workforce Building, which currently houses city offices, features heavy concrete construction and large industrial window openings.

"We're working on a conversion that will create 49 open-plan condominium flats," explains David Graham, AIA, principal, Elness Swenson Graham Architects, Minneapolis. "Our attempt is to provide loft environments that will feature open yet very livable interiors within the stout industrial shell. We're looking to find the delicate balance between raw loft and livability."

So how will the 9th Street Lofts differ from some of their counterparts on both sides of the river? "We're developing a flexible kit of components that can be used within these loft interiors," Graham says. "This will allow for a high level of customization, without the high prices typically associated with that approach."

The units, ranging from 800 to 1,600 square feet, will include a fixed core that houses the kitchen and bath; otherwise, the space will flow unimpeded within an industrial shell of exposed concrete and brick. Each owner will be able to pick and choose from the component options, which will include movable storage walls and sliding barn and pocket doors. "With this approach," Graham explains, "we keep the envelope of the space visible, keep that sense of the loft alive, but allow the owner to customize the space to their specific needs."

With a model unit now open and pre-sales reportedly going well, the 9th Street Lofts are expected to open in the fall of 2004. "Because of the more affordable prices, this is a building that will appeal to the entry-level market, as well as to older homebuyers," Graham says. With a new city park in the planning stages nearby and multiple city blocks surrounding the project designated for redevelopment as housing, the 9th Street Lofts look to be a key element in the renaissance of this once blighted area of our capital city.

9th Street Lofts

St. Paul, Minnesota

Elness Swenson Graham Architects

Minneapolis, Minnesota

