



Thomas Dolan Architecture : Planning Issues

New Construction vs. Existing Buildings

New construction live/work was first built in the U.S. in 1987. Before that it did not exist as a named building type. All live/work prior to that time were made in renovated buildings, mostly warehouses, factories, and a few schools, armories, etc. In an effort to help artists and to re-use abandoned buildings, numerous cities passed ordinances in the 1980's permitting live/work conversion of existing buildings under often relaxed planning and building regulations. Such regulations have had mixed results. As measured against the standard of number of affordable units for artists created under such regulations, the record is fair to dismal. Many of the most viable live/work artists' coops were built prior to the adoption of the codes. Some have legalized, some have not, and even fewer have legalized and stayed affordable.

Were one to measure the success of new construction live/work from the standpoint of demands being met, housing units created, and development activity generated, both San Francisco and Vancouver would come down resoundingly on the positive side. Using live/work regulations to create what is essentially a housing product, thousands of "lifestyle lofts", or --as described in Vancouver "lawyer lofts"-- have been created in response to huge demand. Most are condominiums, selling in San Francisco for \$300 per square foot and up.

New construction live/work is a response to several factors:

The supply of available, viable buildings for conversion has been depleted by prior development.

In many cities there is a plentiful supply of very inexpensive vacant land, usually zoned as commercial or industrial.

Demand for entry-level housing in numerous cities, e.g. Vancouver,



Portland and San Francisco, is far outstripping supply.

In those cities where new construction live/work is permitted, the regulations governing it are less restrictive than those placed on housing, both from a zoning and building code standpoint.

Where there have been problems, displacements and protests over new construction live/work, the primary issue has been location. Locating new construction, condominium housing-- as these spaces are conceived and marketed-- adjacent to existing, viable commercial and industrial concerns is asking for trouble. On the other hand, deciding where lifestyle lofts belong in a city (such as Oakland's Jack London Square) and planning to provide for an orderly transition from an industrial district to a mixed-use housing district, while employing strategies such as nuisance easements and buyer/tenant disclosures-- that is a way to revitalize a downtown without sacrificing a city's commercial/industrial vitality.

It is simple urban economics that formerly industrial land which then permits housing, will rise steeply in price, to the point where the only viable development on it will be housing and industry will be forced out.

It is also simple economics that new construction is generally more expensive than renovation of existing buildings-- all things being equal. Factors that can tip the balance the other way revolve around how close a given structure is to the desired end product. If in an earthquake-prone area, does it look like an expensive retrofit? Is the building such a massive volume that it will be difficult to get natural light into much of its interior? Is the column bay spacing too close (say 15 feet or less)? Are there too many property line walls, which won't permit the addition of windows? Is it too close to a freeway or other source of objec-



tionable noise or odor? There are many factors that might suggest looking at new construction.

As shown else where on this website, Thomas Dolan, Architect has originated a new building type, the new construction live/work courtyard community. Conceived in response to many of the above factors, this new type responds to the particular needs of live/work, especially as outlined on the community page.

When Thomas Dolan and Bruce Beasley began working on their first building in 1985, nobody had ever done new construction live/work. The slate was blank and they were able to ask themselves "what do artists, or other people who live and work in the same place want and need that is unique?" Thus was born this new building type.

Virtually nobody would argue with the wisdom of converting existing underutilized commercial and industrial buildings to live/work. It has been done for 30 years and continues to be a viable building type. Some cities, such as Oakland, California, have chosen to go more slowly on permitting new construction live/work in manufacturing zones-- although they have always permitted home occupation in any residence without the usual restrictions on square footage devoted to work space. Oakland, having seen some of the problems that have occurred in San Francisco from her vantage point across the bay, intends to learn from that experience and-- acknowledging that its real estate values are far lower and its commercial and industrial vacancy rates far higher-- decide soon what kind of new construction live/work is suitable where, and perhaps designate some places where-- particularly as market rate condominiums-- it may not be suitable at all.