



Thomas Dolan Architecture : Planning Issues

Summary

Live/work as we know it today evolved primarily from artists' colonization of under-utilized industrial areas, most notoriously SoHo in New York City. Most of these spaces were illegal; the first effort to regulate them involved rudimentary attempts at preserving a modicum of life safety while looking the other way as artists colonized derelict areas. Once it became clear that a trend was emerging, the phenomenon began to attract the attention of real estate developers and planning departments. These artists were onto something, and live/work began to be seen as a revitalization tool in inner urban areas made redundant by shipping containers, capital flight, and the withering of the American manufacturing sector. More non-artists began to see the appeal of "loft" spaces, although many who did so did not work in them at all. Lofts were hip, lofts appeared in Hollywood movies, and lofts were beginning to pop up all over the industrialized world.

Some see live/work as the greatest thing to hit cities since the invention of the skyscraper, or at least since the cities began to empty out after the Second World War. In the 1980s, a new class of consumer -- the yuppie -- began to inhabit so-called "lifestyle lofts," spawning espresso bars, tapas joints and boutiques in these newly gentrified neighborhoods, and attracting tourists from the suburbs and other parts of town. By the 1990's, most cities in North America had loft districts, and the familiar successional pattern of: artists pioneering, yuppie colonization, and finally straight (albeit gritty) residential neighborhoods has become an accepted truth of the urban real estate life cycle. Depending on who you ask, this cycle, which often repeats itself in different neighborhoods, is either feared (by artists and small business owners) or relished (by developers and speculators); planners find it a quandary, although most come down on the side of the latter, calling it "revitalization." New York's once pioneering SoHo arts district is now home to Pottery Barn



and numerous bed and bath outlets. Tribeca, sparsely populated by SoHo refugees in the 70's, now sports baby carriages and pediatric clinics, while the artists have fled to Williamsburg, Long Island City, Jersey City and Hoboken.

True, neglected neighborhoods have been revitalized and, illustrating a basic axiom of urban real estate economics, essentially residential development has replaced or displaced commercial and industrial land uses. Fortunes have been made, headlines written and a new building type invented. Along the way, new buildings have begun to be purpose-built for "live/work" (usually hardly that), often in industrial districts, and artists and small business people are being displaced.

A Case Study

In San Francisco, lifestyle lofts have become a potent force in the real estate market. Their construction -- clearly in response to a real demand combined with lax enforcement of the city's artists' live/work ordinance -- has increased tenfold in the last year. Property values in industrial areas have erupted, making it impossible for small businesses to buy or expand. Most of the "live/work" buildings are new construction, built without benefit of design review, setbacks, open space, or other residential amenities, yet surveys show that only 15% of owners (they are all condominium) work in their units.

Meanwhile, significant numbers of businesses (the exact numbers are debated hotly) are succumbing to the complaints and harassment of "imported NIMBY's" (the "not-in-my-back-yard" attitude of many new live-only loft residents toward the fully legal and pre-existing industrial and commercial activity of their neighbors). Leaders of the city's fabled \$2.2 billion multi-media industry have recently organized to fight back. The city planning commission is finally beginning to listen, and to



introduce some balance into the mix. After ten years of lackluster enforcement of an ordinance originally written to protect and encourage live/work for artists and small business, some limits are being placed on what is clearly a residential building type being built in industrial areas.