

Warehousing Living

Converting old buildings into living spaces is not common here but a few are doing it.

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The makings of an entire house are strewn about architect Paul Schwam's living room. Planks of wood, sawhorses, sheet metal and tools occupy the space, though there is plenty of room left. Enough so that Schwam sometimes pulls in his front-end loader. Yes, into his living room. But Schwam's living room is a bit different than most: It's tucked inside the brick walls of a 6,000-square-foot downtown warehouse. "I've always kind of wanted to live in a warehouse," Schwam says. "It's a perfect reflection of me and who I am."

Schwam is seen as a model by city officials because he illustrates the potential of converting warehouses not only downtown but throughout the city. Such recycling of alternative spaces is not common in Tucson, but there are a few trailblazers like Schwam illuminating the way.

Renovations such as Schwam's and Metro Realty Partners' Ice House Lofts, near South Park Avenue and East 16th Street, are being watched closely, says John Updike, city real estate administrator. The Ice House Lofts offer a variety of units, priced from \$252,000 to \$443,700.

"Paul brings the work-live space to the area, and the Ice House project is more the condominiumizing of such spaces," Updike says Schwam learned about his building, at the corner of Sixth Street and Stone Avenue, behind the former Foree Tire Company, about five years ago. The structure, owned by the Arizona Department of Transportation, was about to be condemned. He signed a lease for the warehouse and applied his know-how as an architect and builder to make the necessary renovations. After the heavy work was done, Schwam "slowly started bringing in creature comforts." Living in the space was not part of the original plan, he says, but it started to make a lot of sense.

"I needed it for a work space and I also needed to work long hours, so I ended up just moving in here because I could work here until 2 in the morning making all kinds of noise." The neighbors by his Sam Hughes house, on the other hand, would probably not have been too fond of such work practices. Purchasing a space for renovation, especially for those who are not construction savvy, adds additional layers of potential complications.

When Janelle Curry set about converting three warehouses in Dunbar Springs nearly nine years ago, she found the process difficult. "We had no idea what we were getting into," Curry says. She bought the buildings with her husband, Kevin Mills, to convert them into two living spaces and 12 artists' studios. The largest warehouse in what is called The Splinter Group Studios, 901 N. 13th Ave., is roughly 10,500 square feet. Mills and Curry lived in a Splinter Group loft for five years. One of the biggest hurdles, Curry says, is obtaining financing. Curry and Mills, a sculptor, purchased their warehouses with financing provided by the owner. "I have had my project for eight-and-a-half years and I still cannot find a lender (to refinance)," says Curry, a real estate agent and part-time student.

Joe Skinner, who is converting the former OK Market at 600 S. Fourth Ave., also obtained owner financing. "It's either owner financing or you have deep pockets," Skinner says. Skinner's plans involve repairing the dilapidated 1926 building into living spaces – perhaps two apartments and a studio - and selling it. "What I'm doing is basically getting it ready for someone," Skinner says, adding that he is putting on a new roof, installing air conditioning and

preparing the adjacent lot for gardening. "They can't see the forest for the trees. You need to cut down the trees for them," he says.

Since renovations necessitate permits and approval via Tucson's Development Services Department, anyone doing work such as Skinner's necessarily becomes familiar with the office at 201 N. Stone Ave. Skinner says that he has had no problems working with the city. "Because I'm following the rules," he says, chuckling. "There's a lot of rules, but it's rules that are advantageous to anybody buying property."

Curry, however, encountered many difficulties in renovating her 100-year-old adobe structures, saying that her experience with the city was "a nightmare, a total nightmare." She files all such stumbling blocks under lack of understanding. "When I was looking for expertise to help me, I realized there was no expert. At least in my circle, there was no one to help me," Curry says. But Curry was among the pioneers, so she remains optimistic that the process has gotten easier. So much so that she and her husband plan to renovate another space if they find the right building.

A potentially helpful policy, which was adopted by the city two years ago, is the Tucson Rehabilitation Code. Under the code, the process of renovating older structures, which were built according to now-outdated codes, can be simplified, says Ernie Duarte, director of development services. "If you want to redevelop and resurrect an existing building, there may be situations where we could look at the proposed work you're doing to make sure it meets the current code, without having to do extensive work to the rest of the building to bring it up to current codes," Duarte says. "Sometimes the building codes are pretty black and white. The rehabilitation code allows for some gray."

Only a few projects have utilized the code, such as the 1928 building on South Scott Avenue downtown that now houses the Morris K. Udall Foundation. A separate consideration is rezoning, if, for example a building is zoned for industrial use and a person wants to live in it. Rezoning involves an application, which is reviewed by the mayor and council. Building codes for residences include elements such as plumbing and electricity, and a way out is needed in rooms such as bedrooms (operational windows, emergency exits, etc.). This can be challenging for individuals, and Duarte advises working with professionals.

Schwam, of course, is a professional. A good thing, because his warehouse required major work. The biggest issue was the weathered roof. So, Schwam's first project was to redeck and reroof the building. He then immersed himself in two weeks of serious cleaning, including sandblasting and pressure washing the interior. About 80 percent of the electrical work was outdated, so Schwam uprooted some 300 pounds of wiring. Next came numerous skylights and the centerpiece of the warehouse: a 16-by-16-foot hole cut in the roof. This opening, which is covered with plastic in the winter, allows for an upper deck made cozy with a hot tub and couch, and the penetration of sunlight to an interior garden, where Schwam nurtured a producing banana tree. Jasmine creeps up some 12 feet to a second-level office space, past bedrooms and a hot pink-and-chartreuse kitchen. A 3,000-gallon cylindrical rain collector extends past the 18-foot-high roof and feeds the many plants in the garden.

The final tally of renovations to the building, Schwam estimates, is somewhere in the \$100,000 range. And he remains on a month-to-month lease. "I would love to buy it. If I had a chance to buy it, I would," says Schwam, who is viewed as the caretaker of his space. He cannot purchase the building at this point because the city is

in the process of developing a cohesive plan for the many ADOT-owned warehouses. But he is not nervous being on a 30-day lease. Schwam is, it seems, just too darn happy with his surroundings. "It's inspiring to me to have this kind of open space. As a designer, it's like having a canvas ready to go," Schwam says. "After living here, a white picket fence would be boring."

FOR INFORMATION

Building code permits, re-zoning applications and answers to most questions pertaining to renovating an existing structure can be obtained at:
Development Services, 201 N. Stone Ave.