

HOME & GARDEN SHOW 2007 LIVING THE

HIGH LIFE

Spacious lofts entice people to move Downtown

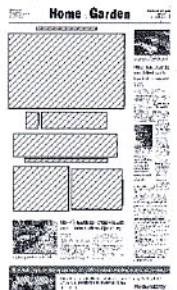
By Lee Stratton
THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Paul DiMeo has lofty ideals for city dwellers. The carpenter on the TV series *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* has converted a number of commercial and industrial buildings in New York and Los Angeles into loft residences.

"We saw some of that kind of development going on in Columbus" when the show visited, DiMeo said.

The cast and crew came to the city in late November to record a segment of the ABC reality show. The production, in conjunction with M/I Homes, built a new house for the Jason Thomas family in Whitehall. Thomas was one of two former Marines who helped rescue two police officers from the rubble of the World

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Trade Center on Sept. 11, 2001.

DiMeo will return to Columbus on March 3 for noon and 2:30 p.m. appearances at the Central Ohio Home & Garden Show. The event at the Ohio Expo Center opened yesterday and will run through March 4.

After moving to New York in 1980, DiMeo applied his carpentry skills to loft residences that friends and others were creating in vacant buildings in the East Village, Greenwich Village, Harlem and Brooklyn.

He and Kelly, his wife of 20 years, lived in lofts in New York and Los Angeles, their home since 1997.

"Our first home in Los Angeles was the second floor of a 1926 firehouse in downtown L.A.," he said.

"We lived there in 2,400 square feet. It was one big space with great old maple hardwood floors. I put walls on casters so they could be moved. There were no doors in our loft. I built a big kitchen."

Loft living was sparked by artists and young adults in search of affordable housing. They bought space in the empty buildings and created their own homes, he said.

Later, as those neighborhoods continued to improve, more-affluent people bought and remodeled the lofts, he said. Lofts are now a trendy choice for young professionals, corporate executives and empty nesters.

In contrast, most Columbus lofts are being created as upscale residences from the outset by professional developers as part of the Downtown revitalization backed by the city government.

Nine Downtown buildings are being converted into loft residences, and 15 others have been completed since 2002, said Amy Taylor, a spokeswoman for the Columbus Downtown Development Corp.

Exposed brick, 12-foot-high ceilings, an urban ambience and a 10-year property-tax abatement attracted Karen and Louis Stabile to the Hartman Lofts building at E. Main and S. 4th streets.

"A brick wall is a work of art in itself," Mrs. Stabile said.

Those features, plus the exposed ducts, industrial sliding doors and a sweeping view of Downtown give the 1,500-square-foot corner unit the New York or Chicago ambience they wanted, Mr. Stabile said.

The Stabiles sold their home in Powell and were the first residents of the building, a 1902 hotel being converted into 60 loft-style condominiums.

The couple share the space with Callaway, their 230-pound English mastiff.

The two-bedroom, fourth-floor residence features an open, L-shaped floor plan for the living room, dining area and kitchen.

"The view at night is amazing," Mrs. Stabile said. "We always feel like we're on vacation."

Considering the glut of offices and the lack of industrial development, converting existing Downtown buildings into lofts and condos makes sense, said Lee Goodman, a buyers agent with RE/MAX Achievers.

"The highest and best use is a loft building," Goodman said. "There's been a high demand for it."

The Columbus approach eliminates one of the major obstacles DiMeo and his friends encountered — obtaining the necessary zoning changes to allow residential development in areas designated for commercial and industrial use.

"Once you have that, you are a step ahead of the game," he said.

Today, people who move to Down-

town lofts are looking for a different lifestyle rather than affordable housing, he said.

Lofts typically have significantly less space than a single-family house. The open space and industrial look appeal to young professionals.

"Most people are not going into a loft with two or three kids," he said.

If you have 1,200 square feet in a single room with an adjacent bathroom — that's a big room.

"Brick walls are nice, too. How often do you have exposed brick walls inside your home? They are great for big furniture and big pieces of art. You can build a free-standing wall that you can move here and move there. It gives you a lot of options.

"It makes for great entertaining, especially if you have 16- or 18-foot ceilings," he said.

Downtown loft living offers some distinct advantages and disadvantages.

Mr. Stabile traded his suburban garden for houseplants. Keeping up with the yardwork is no longer a worry when he travels in his job representing a company that produces and imports Italian food.

The Stabiles gave up their garage for a gated parking lot, but they gained a property-tax abatement.

"We can't just open a sliding glass

door and let Callaway out," Mrs. Stabile said.

Three city parks, a Kroger store, Macy's and a number of restaurants are within walking distance.

"In Powell, you might know the neighbors on either side of you," Mr. Stabile said. "Here, we've met all of our neighbors."

The owners association conducts monthly "condo hops" — a progressive dinner in which participating residents open their doors to their neighbors.

DiMeo pointed out a few other features of loft living.

A cavernous room with high ceilings can make lofts a rugged experience in the winter, he said.

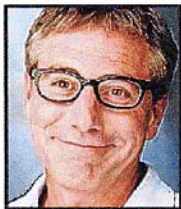
He recalled mornings spent huddled around a heater built into the wall in one of his former loft homes.

"If we walked away from the heater, the rest of the space was 48 degrees."

An option would have been an industrial-type natural gas heater with big blowers, but the fuel "can cost a pretty penny," he said.

"Unless you are going in there alone, privacy can be a drawback. If I want to play the piano and my wife wants to watch TV, that's pretty much impossible. If you are cooking with curry or garlic, everybody knows it."

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Paul DiMeo

"Lofts offer huge open spaces with a lot of light. A lot of these old buildings have floor-to-ceiling windows — either glass block or diamond-plate glass with wire running through the glass."

PAUL DIMEO | *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* carpenter