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A Second Wave

By Jim Douglass

Light-Lofts and Faux-Lofts Are the Newest Trend



Seasoned Boston Realtors Sebastian Diessel and Onnelly Parslow have watched the first wave of condominium loft conversions come and go as owners of www.loftsboston.com. But the second and newest wave features a number of twists that stretch the very meaning of word *loft*.

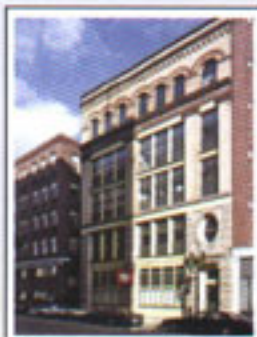
Traditional lofts constitute the bulk of the healthy loft market, but Diessel says he is witnessing a new breed of buyer, who is looking for what could be termed a *light-loft*. The light-loft has some of the open spaces traditionally associated with a loft, but more enclosed bedrooms and bathrooms for privacy, along with fewer architectural details, like brick and beams.

Building on the light-loft trend are new developments that include the word *loft* in their names but have even fewer loft-style features. These newest developments are such a departure from the standard definition of a loft that they could even be considered a *faux-loft* by purists, says Diessel.

In the first wave of conversions in the early 1990s, Diessel relates, spare warehouse space was converted to lofts that consisted of mostly open space and not much more. "In order to get a certificate of occupancy, the developers had to [minimally] abide by the City of Boston rules, which meant they had to provide only a bedroom and bathroom," he notes.

This bare-bones approach continued through the initial boom and the ensuing dot.com crash at the end of the decade, Diessel says.

Diessel marks the start of the second wave from about a year after the dot-com crash, when



At this traditional loft at 107 South Street in Boston, below, the heavy timber columns with their original cast iron lintels recall this unit's industrial past.



high-tech companies that had inhabited warehouse space finally ran out of money and decamped from their warehouse spaces. With the square footage formerly occupied by the defunct firms now available, developers began the second wave in a condominium market that had matured and was appealing to more discriminating buyers, says Diessel.

"In the first wave, the build-outs were relatively basic—basic kitchens, nothing to fancy.... The buyers out here [today] have... been educated in what they want, and they've seen a lot of condominiums. Now there's more of a move to two bedrooms and

two bathrooms, if size permits," he comments.

In many of the second-wave lofts, including an ongoing conversion at Lincoln Plaza in Boston, architectural details like exposed brick will be Sheetrocked over and cement columns will be painted for a "cleaner, more polished look," says Diessel. Some new lofts are covering exposed beams to dampen sound, he adds.

In a more significant departure from the traditional loft ideal, Diessel is also seeing new condominiums with loft-like features and names, but which he says are not technically lofts. "A lot of developers are build-



Cheaper Lofts Ringing Boston

Prices for lofts in Boston proper are now sky-high, but newer conversions in the suburbs and outskirts are available for prices that many first-time buyers can afford.

Dana Schaefer says buyers who want affordable lofts can find them in East Boston, Chelsea, Lynn, and Dorchester. Condominiums in Lynn recently sold for prices ranging from the low to high \$200,000s, and condominiums under \$300,000 "can definitely be found," says Schaefer. For that price, amenities are few and buyers tend to be singles or young couples without kids, she notes.

Many of the buyers who shop in outlying areas are "pioneer" types, who are willing to move into transitional, developing districts before those areas attract the shops and restaurants that make a neighborhood trendy, says Schaefer. "There's a certain breed that says, 'I'd like to move out a little further, get a little more for my money. This is an investment for me because in five years, when this comes in, my property is going to be worth so much more than if I paid to live in the South End, which is an already established neighborhood.'"

Areas even farther outside of Boston in which affordable lofts are available include Salem, Lowell, Dorchester, and Worcester, says Schaefer.



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ing new buildings and calling them lofts, probably because they're saving extra bucks by not having to build walls.... But they're not really lofts because they're new construction and they've only got nine-foot ceilings."

In other loft conversions, says Diessel, existing structures are converted to traditional lofts, but then developers are adding new floors on top of the existing buildings or wrapping new sections around them. In the new sections of the piggybacked or mixed loft developments, ceilings are low and traditional loft features are minimal or nonexistent, says Diessel. Lafayette Lofts in Chinatown and the Channel Center in the Seaport District are both examples of this trend, he says.

Dana Schaefer, of Paragon Properties of Boston, says she has seen faux-lofts in the South End in new construction like Wilkes Passage, Laconia Lofts, and Gateway Terrace.

Schaefer says she has seen a mixed development at 485 Harrison in Boston's South End, where the first three floors are in the old converted building and the two floors above it are new, and at Brookline's Cyprus Lofts, which are 90 percent new construction. "I think some of the

Newer loft conversions, like these below, have softened the traditional look by lowering the ceilings or opting for sculptured concrete treatment.



A Loft Glossary

TRADITIONAL LOFT

With roots stretching back to warehouse or factory space, which was subsequently taken over by artists, traditional lofts have high ceilings that allowed various dry goods to be stacked sky-high. In line with the artist's income, which allowed little for redecorating, traditional lofts were left pretty much as they were found—with bare bricks showing, posts and beams exposed, and miles and miles of open space. Often the bathroom in the traditional loft was separated from the main area only by a flimsy curtain.

LIGHT-LOFT

In a light-loft, the large space is partitioned into two bedrooms and two baths to customize the space for those who prefer more privacy and want the loft-like feel to only extend to one room—a combination dining, entertainment, and living area. In a reversal of the current remodeling trend in traditional houses and condominiums to knock down walls to create a lofty great room, the owners of light-lofts are enclosing much of their space to leave what could be considered an oversize great room.

FAUX-LOFT

Much like fake fur, the faux-loft may share the name loft but not share the essence of the original. Typically, faux-lofts are not older buildings converted to new purposes, but brand-spanking-new construction in which the word *loft* in the building's name is used to attract buyers. The ceilings in a faux-loft may be only nine feet high, and some walls may be left out—a move meant to save the developer money as much as to project a loft-like feel. New faux-lofts can also be constructed to enclose traditional lofts, as when newer units are piggybacked onto older warehouse or factory space.

buildings that they are saying are lofts might be stretching the meaning. I guess the true, true sense of a loft is an old industrial building with high ceilings and period architecture. But I think that now there are a lot of buildings in which they've done a wonderful job and [they] are loft-like. I would definitely call them lofts," she says.

Despite watering down the term, Schaefer says the light-lofts have found a place in the market. "They're definitely selling. People are buying them," she says.

Diessel agrees that newer, less loft-like condominiums are selling well, compared to older first-wave lofts. In Boston's Leather District, says Diessel, a group of four new developments compete well with older loft conversions in the same area. One example of this comparison is a 1,620-square-foot first-wave condominium at 121 Beach Street that recently listed for \$679,000. Says Diessel, "What I find is that someone will come and see 121 Beach, which is priced at \$679,000, which is a good price per square foot. Then they'll go

next door to the new development and pay more—maybe \$100,000 more—for something brand new. The buyers are coming down and buying the new product."

The reasons for opting for new over old range from practical to psychological, says Diessel. "I think it's partly the new appliances. Something new [is] psychologically appealing. Buyers say, 'I won't have to worry about repairs for a number of years. I figure I'm going to be here five years, and because it's new, I'm not going to have to worry about maintenance.'"

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Many new lofts, like this one at 72 Cornwall Street in Jamaica Plain, are new construction added onto older existing buildings.

Schaefer says market imperatives are also driving the development of light-lofts that are less than robust in their dedication to open space: "I get phone calls from people who want private, enclosed spaces, and traditionally lofts are not like that. I think lofts are high in demand but the new types... appeal to people who like the idea of lofts but want two bedrooms. I think the new constructions are helping people...who love the open space, but still kind of need the private space. I think that helps [lofts] appeal to a wider market." 🏠

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