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Live/work goes suburban New loft projects feature 54 units in Walnut Creek, 18 in downtown Sonoma

[Corrie M. Anders, Special to The Chronicle](#)

Sonoma, the heart of California's Wine Country, is probably the last place that you'd expect to find live/work lofts.

But a couple of blocks off the historic square in this small town, the live/work phenomenon has come to fruition in a two-story building that originally was a dry-cleaning plant and later served as a recreation center for local youngsters.

Yes, the hip, edgy living experience usually associated with rundown industrial warehouse districts and other gritty urban landscapes is moving into suburbia, as evidenced by two vanguard developments:

-- Lofts Unlimited, a San Francisco firm, converted the Sonoma Boys and Girls Club into 18 lofts that cost \$285,000 to \$349,000. The development, Sonoma Lofts, is surrounded by single family houses.

-- A BART transit village is the setting for Iron Horse Lofts in Walnut Creek. Developed by loft guru Rick Holliday, the project includes 54 new units with prices starting in the neighborhood of \$375,000.

Small business activities have been growing in Sonoma County over the last few years, said David Goodison, Sonoma city planner. Live/work housing looms as a logical housing option for some of them.

"We're not in the same situation as SoMa," Goodison said, referring to San Francisco's South of Market neighborhood and its large work-at-home population.

"But we definitely have people out here who have an interest in something other than a typical single family dwelling or a typical condo or rental."

The Boys and Girls Club sat vacant for several years after the children moved to a new facility. "No one wanted it," said Gail Andersen Stark, a Lofts Unlimited principal.

The Sonoma development features the industrial look of lofts elsewhere. There are high ceilings and huge windows along with recycled hardwood floors and faux barn doors that help retain the character of the block building.

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But the granite countertops and other modern features in the kitchens and bathrooms are mainstays of new upscale housing.

"This is for normal people with a slight wild streak," said Ray Kaliski, Stark's partner. For 10 years, their firm had served as the sales and marketing arm for loft developers, including Holliday Development in Emeryville.

The partners decided to try their hand at development at about the same time they stumbled onto the vacant Sonoma property.

Rick Holliday also was looking to try something new. In 1988, gambling that the Bay Area was ready for East Coast-style lofts, he converted an old building in a rough-and-tumble SoMa neighborhood into chic lofts for young professionals.

Since then he has transformed warehouses and derelict commercial spaces into nearly 500 lofts in San Francisco and Emeryville.

"I've been fascinated by the thought, 'Can you create a project that is hip, urban and interesting and bring it to a suburban market?' " said Holliday.

"Because if you do it well, it opens up a whole opportunity to do it in other areas," he said of the Iron Horse Lofts, named after a trail that runs between Concord and San Ramon and follows an old railroad line.

They are the first live/work lofts outside the San Francisco-Oakland-Emeryville corridor. Developers and city officials alike said they expect them to find a receptive audience.

Until now, Holliday's lofts have been rehabs, with individual units generally consisting of a single large, open space. But the nitty-gritty look won't be present in the project nearing completion in Walnut Creek near the Pleasant Hill BART station.

The development - eight buildings spread over two acres - is a hybrid of townhouse construction and loft design that provides separate sleeping and work areas on three floors.

"Understand our location," said marketing director Gina Johnson. "We are in Walnut Creek in a different market, and we don't want to be too far out there. We don't want to turn people off."

Buyers also can choose between the industrial-strength kitchens designed with lots of stainless steel or granite. These and other features allow the firm to market both to young professionals and first-time buyers and to older couples trading down from large suburban homes.

When all is said and done, will live/work lofts catch on in neighborhoods ruled by tract homes and orderly lawns? The marketplace and city officials will dictate the answer.

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"I think its going to depend on how the first examples work out," Sonoma's Goodison said. ""The conditions of approval call for live/work, and they will be looked at very closely as to how they are really used."


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