

Lofty Ideals

THE LIVE/WORK CONCEPT HAS GONE THE WAY OF Y2K, BUT A FEW LUCKY SOMA RESIDENTS STILL ENJOY A DUAL EXISTENCE. BY RACHEL SWABY

At the start," says David Baker of David Baker + Partners Architects, "live/work lofts were the building type people loved to hate." Residents feared that San Francisco's Victorian charm would be ruined by boxy, industrial, possibly high-rise developments. Nevertheless, in 1988, Holliday Development—inspired by the loft trend in Manhattan—converted the Heublein Building at 601 Fourth Street into 88 live/work lofts, creating San Francisco's first commercial-turned-residential development. Within one day, all the lofts inside the historic building—formerly home to a wine distributor—were reserved.

But Holliday's most recognizable development, for which Baker served as architect, is the Clocktower building. Situated within just feet of the Bay Bridge at Second and Bryant streets, the structure previously housed the Schmidt Lithography Company, the largest designer of fruit-box labels on the West Coast. The company closed in the late '70s, and the Clocktower sat abandoned until its 1991 live/work conversion.

"The first time I came in here, I had a flashlight," explains Rick Holliday, the proud father of the building deemed "of the highest importance in maintaining the character of the South End Historic District" by the Landmark Preservation Advisory Board. "The windows were all boarded up, but I thought, This could be great." Holliday's hunch was a good one: Even in San Francisco's soft 1992 real-estate



HIGH LIFE: THE CLOCKTOWER BUILDING AT SECOND AND BRYANT IS ONE OF THE FEW LIVE/WORK SUCCESS STORIES.



“THE FIRST TIME I CAME IN HERE, I thought, This could be great.”

—Rick Holliday of Holliday Development, which converted the Clocktower into lofts

market, the Clocktower lofts were unveiled and sold within the year.

Live/work residences were initially envisioned as affordable, dual-purpose spaces to help artists stay in the city. In 1989 the city relaxed zoning rules and development fees to give developers an incentive to build live/work lofts in unused, formerly industrial spaces. For instance, developers paid a much lower schools fee for live/work lofts and bypassed large permit and planning fees as well. They were also allowed to include fewer parking places and green areas than normal residential projects required.

But two things happened: The dot-com boom brought hordes of young technophiles to the city, and they took up residence in SoMa, working out of their lofts. They were followed by single professionals and couples who liked the modern aesthetic of the lofts but commuted to their jobs elsewhere. Artists soon found themselves unable to afford the trendy lofts—and the city went into the red with the loss of so many of the usual developers' fees.

In San Francisco, it seems any new real estate is bound to sooner or later be swallowed up by demand, and to create conflict among neighbors. "High-end owners can be crabby," says Baker. "Some people complained about those who were living in the lofts; others about those who were just working in them."

"It's one of those good ideas that people got angry about," Baker concludes. By the late '90s, opponents of the 1989 loft ordinance gathered steam, and by 1999, mayoral hopeful Clint Reilly called the ordinance a scam. In 2002 it was repealed, and now it's no longer legal to convert historic commercial buildings into live/work environments.

Out of about 4,000 units initially developed as live/work, Baker estimates that only 30 percent truly fulfill that definition now. Even in the Clocktower, which he cites as one of live/work's success stories, about a third of residents simply live there, a third just work there, and a third do both. "Live/work has become the equivalent of saying 'baby killer,'" says Baker, "but it is one of the quirky things, the unusual things that makes living in this city so interesting." x