



# Loftopia

Once coveted for their history and proximity to city life, dream lofts are now being created from scratch.



### Story by David Hay

On a cul-de-sac not far from the Las Vegas Strip, in a neighborhood that's home to Wayne Newton, Stone Canyon is a wildly-successful community of 23 "loft homes." From the outside, these stuccoed, box-like, mini-fortresses are quite unlike the adapted warehouses that have spawned a revolution of loft conversions in cities around the world. But inside they are lofts gone wild: wide, unstructured spaces with ceilings up to 22 feet high and huge windows that open into courtyards. The brainchild of a company called Blue Heron, Stone Canyon proved such a success that three similar developments followed and late last year, Marquis, with 14 larger versions—some over 10,000 square feet and costing up to \$5 million—were ready for sale. Tyler Jones, one of Blue Heron's principals, attributes their success to "the type of casual living that lofts promote."

How 'casual' depends upon the buyer. "Most of our homes include separated areas, like bedrooms," says Jones, "but they've been designed to be flexible. Any or all of the interior walls can be removed as the homeowner desires." So, the possibility is there. In the middle of the Mojave Desert: a spacious, city-ready loft.

Stone Canyon, it turns out, is hardly the most novel of the loft designs coming into their own. Expansive interiors with double-high ceilings continue to denote 'adventure' and 'freedom' in the American real estate vernacular. For builders and architects these spaces are even more favored: lofts are unusually adaptable in the design phase, and in most cases, they remain one of the cheapest types of housing to construct.

The desire for free-flowing interiors goes back more than 80 years when Modernist architects argued that families didn't want the separation, or isolation, of traditional housing plans. They responded with open floor layouts that broke down the barriers between inside and outside and emphasized affordable building materials, yet they failed to speak to housing in our aging cities.

It was left to the very antithesis of these design pioneers—the

PREVIOUS PAGE: A computer-generated image of the futuristic lobby of Ben Van Berkel's Five Franklin Place. The building's planned rooftop takes a cue from the ships that traverse the nearby Hudson River. A CGI rendering of Five Franklin Place's ethereal "Sky Penthouse" living room.

Five Franklin Place images provided c/o Five Franklin Place



## It was left to the *Hair*-generation of bohemians living in New York to discover how such expansiveness could be had.

*Hair*-generation of bohemians living in New York—to discover how such expansiveness could be had. By turning the abandoned industrial spaces of SoHo into live/work areas, the loft as we know it was born. These new homes were a mirror of those living in them: adventurous, even subversive.

Lynnette Widder, an associate professor at RISD and a partner in New York-based firm, aardvarchitecture, recalls: “Back in first grade, around 1969, I went to a New York loft for a sleepover. It was a long, long space unlike the pre-war apartments that all my other friends lived in. The kids didn’t have bedrooms, just sculptural loft beds with integrated closets, built and painted by their father. We all slept out in the middle of the room, on the floor. It was pretty wild.”

These lofts were among the least expensive places available in Manhattan. And the grungy, limitless spaces were perfect for artists. Such Minimalists as Richard Serra and Dan Flavin

depended on the loft’s raw, dilapidated look for both inspiration and context. It’s no coincidence that perhaps the most effective gallery space for Minimalism today, Dia:Beacon (just up the Hudson from Manhattan) was once a Nabisco box-printing facility.

This gritty history of conversion has since been replicated from Portland, OR to Providence, RI. Architects are building “lofts” from the ground-up in places with little industrial space adaptable for housing. These new lofts, designed on a much broader canvas, take on many forms.

➦ More designs for salivating: a stream-lined kitchen, master bath, living room, and master bedroom in the proposed “trophy lofts” of Five Franklin Place. ➦ A computer-generated image of the loft’s entryway, perfect for those who wouldn’t mind living in a contemporary art museum.

Five Franklin Place images provided © Five Franklin Place





## NYLO's guests embrace the bare-bones aesthetic of their lodgings, such as poured concrete floors and exposed brick.

### “Ground-up” Lofts

Building in downtown San Diego, architect Lloyd Russell insists on keeping many qualities of the archetypal loft. “I like anything that exposes the structure of the building,” he says, “including columns, joists, trusses, concrete, or masonry walls.” Russell partnered with Ted Smith on the Merrimac and the Essex, two award-winning loft complexes in that city’s Little Italy, but one of his latest “ground-up” loft projects can be found in the Hillcrest section.

In order to keep the 25 Hillcrest lofts affordable Russell prefers to build what he calls a “no infrastructure” building, which means no elevators, lobbies, hallways, or structured parking (when possible). Aside from the obvious efficiencies, there

are other benefits: without hallways, all units have cross-ventilation, and without having to offset the costs of structured parking, Russell isn’t forced to max out the building envelope, which results in ceilings as high as 14 feet. Additionally, circulation outside the building increases tenant interactivity, contributing to better security and a sense of community.

“I put high value on the drama of the space, as does our target market: young professionals aware of architecture.” And as it turns out, “the ones that rent the quickest are those with

☞ Clockwise: a suite at the NYLO Hotel in Plano, TX; the bars of Plano at Legacy; NYLO Dallas/Las Colinas; and NYLO Providence/Warwick (RI). ☞ An exterior and interior look at Lloyd Russell’s R3 Triangle Building in San Diego’s Little Italy.

NYLO hotel images courtesy of NYLO Hotels LLC; R3 Triangle Building photographs by Dave Harrison





Opposite page top: American Woodmark Corp.; bottom: RM Design Studio. This page top: RM Design Studio; bottom left to right: RM Design Studio; photo by Jim Scolari; RM Design Studio

## These stuccoed mini-fortresses have little in common with the warehouses that spawned countless loft conversions in cities.

the smallest square footage.” Some come with rents as low as \$1,000 a month. Adds the architect, “I design Minimalism that’s affordable.”

In San Francisco, Stanley Saitowitz of Natoma Architects has taken the loft in a different direction. “Lofts are typically tall in height,” he observes. “I like to create the same quality, but horizontally.”

By opting for a loft over a conventional apartment, Saitowitz argues he can build better quality spaces more inexpensively, and that resonates with upscale San Franciscans.

Nowhere is this more evident than in his elegant SoMa complex, 1234 Howard Street. Dividing the lot into three rectangles, he built on the outer two, leaving the center empty to form a

courtyard. Each outer block is divided by a light well and the remaining space creates extraordinary light. Other benefits of construction cost savings include black bamboo floors and black stained wood cabinetry. “The materials are very important because in such a blank space they provide the texture,” he says.

Perhaps the *coup de grâce* for Saitowitz is the chance to use as few materials as possible, such as the anodized aluminum

☑ The Marquis and Stone Canyon offer quiet and picturesque courtyards, both communal and private. ☑ A model unit at Stone Canyon provides residents with their own personal courtyard that flows into a kitchen/dining space.



1234 Howard Street Photography by Rien van Rijnthoven except three small images second row this page by Dwight Eschliman. Following page photography by Rien van Rijnthoven.



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exterior. “Maintenance-free, I use it everywhere so it adds great simplicity to the building.”

### Lofts to Let

For NYLO, the Atlanta-based boutique hotelier that recently opened three loft hotels, it seems the advantages of space and economy might prove critical. “We are bringing the loft lifestyle to hotels in markets where it’s still fairly new,” says John Russell, NYLO’s CEO, referring to their hotels in Plano, TX, Providence, RI, and Las Colinas, on the outskirts of Dallas. If the economy behaves, franchised versions might soon spring up in Broomfield, CO, Kansas City, MO and even the loft’s

birthplace, downtown Manhattan.

Not only are NYLO’s guests embracing the bare-bones aesthetic of their overnight lodgings, the sense of space, and engaging industrial details have proven a welcome change from most chain hotels. Furthermore, according to Russell, NYLO’s loft hotels are less expensive to clean and maintain as well.

☞ A street view of 1234 Howard showcases the building’s transparent grid structure. ☞ Natoma Architects designed “bridges.” Residents move freely across the central court; from the library, the bedroom, or the living room. ☞ NEXT PAGE: Rows of windows line both the central court and the Howard Street façade.

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### Trophy Lofts

Still, not everyone's exploiting the 'lower costs' to create lofts. Projects like Five Franklin Place, a complex of townhomes, apartments, and lofts (currently under more legal clouds than actual construction) in Manhattan's Tribeca neighborhood, are heading in the opposite direction.

According to Leo Tsimmer, one of the project's developers, their lofts were designed to emphasize 'grandeur,' as well they might, with 20-foot ceilings. Some are even meant to feature floating bedroom mezzanines that partially break up the spaces.

Designed by Ben van Berkel and his Rotterdam-based UN Studio, these "trophy lofts," which have exteriors ringed with ribbons of steel, were conceived with a 'wow' in mind. Just before the economic downturn, dizzyingly high price tags were bandied about: \$4.85 million, anyone? But now, as with many other construction projects, whether or not they ever see the light of lower Manhattan remains to be seen.

If any type of city dwelling is destined to be an exception to the anemic housing market, the 'trophy loft' may be it. The loft's lower costs and adventurous-looking raw space should keep it popular. It's no coincidence that Modernism's emphasis on cheap building materials and open space came about during the Great Depression. Hard times bode well for housing that promotes more relaxed and unconfined living.

Indeed, the biggest threat to the loft's future is the very attribute that makes it attractive: adaptability. Even as designers increasingly come up with new uses for the loft, they still leave much of the interior design to the buyer, most often a single person or a couple. But when this situation changes—particularly when children arrive—the loft, too, may be in for a shock.

"Casual living has to be balanced with the demands of privacy and modesty," maintains Widder, whose firm has specialized in loft conversions for over a decade in Manhattan. "At least one-third of the lawyers and bankers who bought lofts ten years ago have changed them into classic pre-war apartments," she says. "If they start having children, this is easier to do than finding somewhere else to live."

But even this loft aficionado believes there is little stopping what she refers to as "the simple rebellion against the 'put-your-functions-in-a-box' mentality of the apartment. In the aftermath of Victorian privacy (the corridor plan) and Functionalist extremism, right now the loft remains the ideal antidote to cookie-cutter housing."

EXIT

