

Artist lofts lead downtown renaissance

By Ryan Lillis
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Jose Di Gregorio camped out all night to be a part of Sacramento's new Bohemian hub.

He's an artist with two young daughters, and was looking for a safe environment for his family and a place where he could nurture his painting. That quest led him to a century-old warehouse on R Street and an 18-hour wait on the sidewalk in October, hoping to grab an apartment in the Warehouse Artist Lofts.

"Once word got out, artists were anxious for a place we could enjoy together," he said.

As downtown embarks on a new era, K Street gets a lot of the attention and so does the downtown arena. But walking through the corridors of the new Warehouse Artist Lofts, it becomes clear right away that R Street is this city's next urban destination.

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Warehouse Artist Lofts on R Street in Sacramento, Calif., on Friday, February 20, 2015. | Manny Crisostomo mcrisostomo@sacbee.com

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It's where artists will paint and musicians will play, where the funky concept of combining a bar and a barbershop is getting national attention months before it opens. Before the Kings even play a minute in their downtown arena, people like Di Gregorio will have made this the hub of the region's creative class.

The developer behind the Warehouse Artist Lofts is Ali Youssefi. He's just turned 32 and is a Sacramento native. Like a lot of other people his age, he moved to the Bay Area as a young man, only to return to Sacramento, drawn by its potential. Now he's a minority owner of the Kings and is changing the face of his hometown.

He seemed like a proud parent as he walked through the lofts on Friday. CFY Development – the firm started by Youssefi's father, Cyrus – jumped into the R Street project three years ago. The city's art scene is spread out, and Youssefi had been looking for a place to create a central hub for artists. The project cost \$41.5 million, a large part of it from affordable housing subsidies. It's the first time that kind of financing has been used here to build large housing for artists in the central city.

"We need more art, and we need more artists," Youssefi said.

They broke ground on the lofts in February 2013. Tenants started moving in last month. And as of last week, 106 of the 116 units were leased.

"Think of this as the place where 150 of some of Sacramento's most creative people are about to live," Youssefi said.

There will be poets and sculptors, writers and filmmakers. Many of the tenants have young children; the rooftop patio, with views of the downtown skyline, will have a children's play area and a community garden.



“There are so many different people from so many trades here,” said Shayon Konjkav, a pianist. “And we’re all in it together.”

One side of the project converted the 101-year-old Lawrence Warehouse into 49 living spaces. Many of the lofts still have remnants of the old warehouse, like concrete columns and large wood-framed windows.

A public market will open this spring on the ground floor. It will have an eclectic mix of vendors, including a sushi shop, a juice bar, a vintage clothing stand, a vinyl record store and a shoemaker. All of the operators are local.

CFY built another 67 lofts in a new building connected to the warehouse, replacing what had been a big hole in the ground at the corner of 12th and R streets. Bottle & Barlow, the barbershop and bar that made Details magazine’s list of “The Most Anticipated Bar Openings of 2015,” will fill the ground floor and should be open in May.

Before he finished his plans for this transformative project, Youssefi sought the advice of local artists. That’s how a planned fitness room became a well-lit dance studio with a spring-loaded floor. There’s a musical “jam room” and industrial sinks that can handle paint getting dumped down the drains.

There’s an impromptu concert in the common room almost every night. Art is everywhere – in murals that dominate the courtyard, in the lighting fixtures and in the hallways. Every piece of work is by someone from Sacramento.

Stepping off the elevator on the second floor, you walk into a floor-to-ceiling painting by Di Gregorio. It’s a peaceful and mesmerizing celestial landscape. He hopes to create another work of art near an entrance to the building.

“This is a catalyst,” he said, looking at the building after finishing a midday jog. “But it’s the place where I also feel at home.”

Call The Bee’s Ryan Lillis, (916) 321-1085. Read his City Beat blog at sacbee.com/citybeat.