

Real Estate

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Lynn, Lynn, city of vim

Shedding old image, downtown begins to rebound as lofts draw new residents, businesses

By Ron DePasquale, Globe Correspondent

The first time Steve Feldmann and his wife Marie walked around downtown Lynn, it was a dreary March day and they were alone on the sidewalks.

“Everything looked old and beaten and all the buildings downtown were boarded up,” he said, describing Lynn in 2003. “Nobody was on the streets walking around. But Marie got this look on her face, she started to smile and said, ‘The bones are here. Look at these buildings, they’re so incredible.’”

Lynn had rezoned its downtown so that the historic redbrick buildings that had made it an industrial center could be converted into loft condos.

Feldmann and his wife, who wanted to live in a loft but couldn’t afford downtown Boston, sold their Jamaica Plain condo and became pioneers at another urban front, buying a loft in Lynn for only \$200,000.

They moved into the Boston Machine Lofts, a stately building that was the first to be converted. Convinced that Lynn’s downtown resurrection was real, Feldmann quit his job as a Web developer and two years ago opened the Gulu-Gulu Cafe, named for a cafe in Prague where he and his wife met. The European-style cafe sells wine and craft beers at night, hosts live music, and has abstract art hanging on the walls.

The cafe -- right across the square from Feldmann’s loft -- is a cornerstone of the new downtown scene, which has seen an influx of about 250 homeowners during the past year-and-a-half, many of whom make the 20-minute commuter rail trip to Boston, said Jim Cowdell, executive director of Lynn’s Economic Development and Industrial Corp.



Condominiums at Ladder 3 Lofts, a former firehouse, are among a spate of redevelopment projects that has spurred hopes of a real estate-led revival for downtown Lynn. (Josh Reynolds For The Boston Globe Photo)

Despite that impressive opening wave, Feldmann said he expected the downtown to be even busier than it is now.

“I thought if somebody takes a chance and stakes a claim downtown, others would follow, and it didn’t happen as quickly as I thought it would,” he said. “Other restaurants are doing well, the arts scene has really flourished, the lofts are still selling, you’re seeing more people on the streets, but it’s nowhere near where it’s going to go. The South End [in Boston] in the early ‘90s was not too impressive, and it’s the same here -- it hasn’t reached a critical mass yet.”

Feldmann, who grew up in Central Massachusetts, said that many of the young couples who migrated from Boston are originally from Rhode Island, New York, or elsewhere, and had no image of Lynn as impoverished and crime-ridden.

“Growing up, Lynn meant nothing to me,” he said. “The extra baggage didn’t affect me at all. But my brother-in-law, who grew up in Swampscott, has a different perception, and he’s been quite impressed that it’s packed with all these young professionals and artists.”

The general slowdown in the real estate market that began last year hasn’t helped. Two developers with several condo developments between them -- RCG of Somerville and the Mayo

Group of Boston -- each said units are taking longer to sell than expected because of the market downturn.

The Mayo Group's 7 Central Square, which opened last June, has sold 16 of its 22 units. Ed O'Donnell, vice president of development, said that hasn't discouraged the company from proceeding with another development nearby, 24 Mt. Vernon St., where it added two floors to an old three-story warehouse to create 31 units. MV24, which will have an art gallery, is slated to open in the fall. Prices for two-bedroom lofts will start at \$299,000.

"We've only begun to scratch the surface in downtown Lynn," O'Donnell said. "We're in Lynn for the long haul."

RCG converted an old fire station into Ladder 3 Lofts at 88 Franklin St. While it took more than a year to move all 15 Ladder 3 units, a buyer is already reselling a condo for more than the original sale price.

And at the Boston Machine Lofts, which RCG also developed, owners "have seen their values rise and hold, even as the market slowed," said Matt Picarsic, an RCG principal.

In a way, the downtown scene is Version 2.0 of the new Lynn. Another entrepreneur who has eagerly awaited Lynn's comeback is Lowell Gray, whose success with the Internet service provider Shore.Net in the 1990s fueled hope that Lynn could host a thriving cyber district -- hope that fizzled with the dot-com bust.

Gray kept his Oxford Street building but sold the company to its current tenant, Primus Telecommunications Group, and redeveloped a nearby building into three upper-level condos and an upscale German restaurant, which recently closed.

A new restaurant, called the Downtown Bistro, will open in its place soon, operated by John Moore, who owns the Navy Yard Bistro in Charlestown. Although Gray closed his restaurant, he's "still a big Lynn booster" and pointed to the undeveloped waterfront as something that will drive the downtown's resurgence in the future.

"Over the next couple years, that's going to be huge," he said.

As for the three-story Primus building that he still owns, Gray described it as underutilized, with extra space that could be filled by small Web service companies. It's as wired as anything "in the heart of Silicon Valley," he said.

A new retail center called Union Place will open soon at the former Old Standard of Lynn Plumbing Supply House. Developed by Lenny D'Orlando of Wakefield, the seven storefronts will include a Bread and Butter convenience store, a Subway, Chinese and Dominican restaurants, a laundromat, and a women's spa.

Another new downtown entrepreneur is Thuydiem Le, 34, who runs the Vietnamese restaurant Pho Lynn on Munroe Street with her parents and lives on the second floor with her husband and two small children. The family left Melrose for the two-story, century-old building, and plans on sending the kids to Lynn public schools.

"At night we're really busy, but it's really quiet outside," she said. "I like it."

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