

REAL ESTATE; Residential enclave springs to life; Projects, prices luring buyers to South Boston's 'lower end'

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The next up-and-coming place to live in Boston is in a gritty, mostly industrial area around lower Broadway in South Boston that will be home to some 500 new residents within the next year.

Two conversion projects totaling 173 units are already under way and a high-design loft building is set to break ground next month in a district located near the Broadway Red Line T Station and bounded by West Fourth Street, Dorchester Avenue and the Gillette complex along West Second and A streets.

The district has long housed uses like auto repair shops, a scrap metal dealer, a statuary company and a taxi garage, but there are a few nearby landmarks like Amrheins restaurant and Mal's Diner in an area Southie natives call the "lower end."

And it is on Southie's west side, traditionally the ugly stepsister of the neighborhood's east side, but an area that's starting to see more buyers lured by the emerging Seaport district and housing prices local Realtors say are often 10 percent less than comparable homes on the east side. This new district around lower Broadway is on the industrial fringe of the residential west side.

"We really believe that this is the next area to come to life," says Mary Kelleher of Gibson domain/domain, which will soon be opening an office nearby on West Broadway. Gibson is the listing agency for the conversion of the former St. Peter & St. Paul Church and rectory into 43 condominiums and a nearby project of 12 high- design lofts called Eighty A Street.

"We're seeing a lot of buyer interest from the South End," Kelleher says. "The church project has original woodwork you'd see in a Back Bay building without Back Bay prices and it promises significant appreciation."

The church rectory, a combination of buildings from 1858 and 1910, is being called Number 55 West Broadway. It retains the architectural character of the mid-19th century building's wainscoting, door and ceiling moldings and entryway stained window.

Five out of the eight units in the arch-fronted building are already under agreement (there reportedly was a bidding war on the penthouse), with sizes ranging from 737 square feet to 2,108 square feet and prices ranging from \$439,000 to \$729,000.

The adjacent Quincy granite church built in 1848 will be renovated into 34 condominiums, 20 percent of them affordable. Units will range from one bedroom to three bedrooms and average 750 feet on four middle levels cut into the church, featuring exposed Gothic columns in lower units. Penthouses will range from 1,300 square feet to 2,600 square feet and feature dramatic arches and ceiling trusses with decks cut into the roof of the church and the dome turned into a penthouse atrium.

"I think this whole area is going to change," says R. Wendell Philips, the architect for the project who is working with developer Jim McFarland of Boston Built. "We're already looking at a property behind the church to do more housing."

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Down A Street, Turnstone Property is about to begin construction on Eighty A Street, 12 high-end two-bedroom lofts on the corner of Athens Street. Designed by Keith G. Moskow Architect, Inc., it is based on LeCorbusier's Citrohan House arrangement, in which a double-height living-room area is bisected by kitchen and dining areas below and bedrooms above.

"We didn't want a building where you drove into a garage and went up to your unit. So we made the project stacked townhouses with entryways and mailboxes on A and Athens streets so people will activate the street," says Robert Linn, design architect for Keith G. Moskow.

Set to break ground late next month, project units, which will have garages under each unit, will range from 1,051 square feet to 1,339 square feet and priced from \$389,000 to \$459,000. It will be a green building, with an exterior of concrete plank, tinted concrete block and canopies with a dark wood underside.

The interior features ultra-tall windows, sculptural staircases, Baltic birch cabinets and doors and strip bamboo floors on the upper level.

"We believe there's a market for buyers looking for really good design," says project developer Bob Thomas of Turnstone Property. "Ours is a boutique project with the additional attraction of being Energy Star rated."

Eighty A Street is adjacent to the developing residential area along A Street in the Fort Point neighborhood, where the recently completed loft residences at Fort Point Place have been built and a second project, called the Midway, is set to transform a row of warehouse buildings into a mixed-use district with some 140 lofts. And as part of its agreement with the city, Midway developer Beacon Capital Partners plans to build 130 condominiums on West Second Street.

"I like the area because of the industrial setting, the Broadway T stop (with its immediate access to the city and to Cambridge), and it's at the outer border of the Seaport District," Thomas adds.

But whether buyers see thge area as part of the expanding Fort Point or the west side of Southie, it is an area at the nexus of a lot of new residential development.

"The buyers see this as a connection between the Back Bay, the South End and the Seaport District," Kelleher says.

At the other end of the district, the Broadway and Fourth Street bridges lead to the South End, where renovated warehouses and new construction are adding hundreds of loft units in developments like The Harrison and Wilkes Passage.

"We're seeing a lot of people who've also looked at the South End lofts," says Dom Lange, sales manager from Pappas Properties, which is developing a 131-unit Court Square Press building on Dorchester Avenue, between the Broadway and West Fourth Street bridges.

A 1906 Georgian-revival style industrial building originally housed the MacAllen Manufacturing Co. that produced electrical supplies for railroads. But for most of its life it housed the Court Square Press. It was slated to become office space until owner James Pappas (Pappas Properties Inc.) switched to residential in 2000. The project will feature 131 loft-style condominiums with 11-foot ceilings, wood timbers and floor-to-ceiling glass. State-of-the-art cook's kitchens in every unit feature stainless-steel appliances, granite countertops and custom-milled wood cabinetry.

Eight months ago the press building was slated to be converted to offices, but is now attracting a lot of residential interest, with 74 units under reservation and purchase and sales agreements about to be offered. The average unit is a 710-square-foot one-bedroom loft and unit prices range from \$350,000 to \$550,000. The premieir unit, a 3,000-square-foot corner penthouse with downtown and Back Bay views, is going for \$1.4 million.

Pappas Properties is looking to attract a chef-owned restaurant into the complex, which will feature a central glass atrium and an interior landscaped courtyard surrounded by glass walls.

A second phase of the project, to be built on an empty lot on the 4th Street Bridge side, will contain a two-level parking garage with an as yet undetermined number of condominiums above.

"It's a little bit of a rough corner now, but we don't try to hide the industrial aspects," says Lange, who is buying a unit in the complex. "The train tracks aren't going anywhere but there will be two new Big Dig parks at the head of the Fort Point channel.

"A lot of the old garages will have to be torn down to make this a more attractive area and it will need more green space. But it has character."

The surrounding business and property owners are watching the new development carefully. Already, a former pub at the corner of West Fourth and A streets has been bought by local developer Gregg Donovan who once planned offices but is now looking to do a five-story condominium building.

"I think it's great," says Nate Elliott, who, with his 82-year-old father Ted, runs Albany Auto Radiator and Welding at 148 Dorchester Ave. Elliott says his property is not on the market but he and his father are "entertaining offers" and are looking to get around \$3 million for their property. "The land is becoming too valuable for industrial use anymore. We'll just relocate."

Raymond Zanelli, owner of New England Statuary on 10 West Fifth, has his 11,000 square-foot property on the market, has been there since 1960 and is looking to retire.

"I think this property is very valuable because it has nice views of downtown," Zanelli says.

Daniel Flynn, the broker handling the New England Statuary sale, has been coming to the area all his life - his father, a Southie native, worked at nearby Gillette for 42 years - and he has seen a big change from its blue-collar past.

"This is one of the hottest locations right now," Flynn says. "The projects under way are redefining the neighborhood. And you're going to see a huge turnover of industrial properties in the area. There are good opportunities for small investors to do more high-quality 12 to 18 unit townhouses or lofts."

Flynn says the Archdiocese-owned Notre Dame Education Center - formerly Cardinal Cushing High School - which across Broadway from the former St. Peter & St. Paul church has been "in play" for awhile and would make a great residential project.

But not everyone is planning to sell. John Dakowicz, owner of JJD Auto Body & Repair - at 43 A street since 1989 - wants to renovate his garage to serve new residents coming into the area.

"I've established myself doing repairs for higher-end vehicles like Land Rovers," Dakowicz says. "With new residents we're going to see better cars and I'll be looking to getting some of their business."

Another area auto business owner who wishes to remain anonymous, isn't planning on moving either, citing the T station as convenient for his employees.

"I don't understand the attraction of this area as a place to live," he says. "It's not like the Back Bay or the South End. There's barrooms and projects and truck traffic all day. And there's not much to look at. We're an eyesore ourselves."

Bob Thomas bought the site of Eighty A Street from another retiring business and property owner, the Cassino brothers garage.

"When I found out the property was for sale, it didn't occur to me that this was a hot area but it did make sense," Thomas says. "It all goes back to the Broadway T station - that's the reason why we're all here. Now it's suddenly sprouting, suddenly happening."

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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