Smarty Pants

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This month sees the second set of Smart Lofts opening in Tucson, and its owners have plans to take the concept even further. By Gillian Drummond. Photos by Jocelyn Warner-Brokamp.

Inside one of the latest Smart Lofts. The dining room table features a metal base made by local artist Mark Wallis. Photo by Jocelyn Warner-Brokamp

When the second set of Smart Lofts opens this month in Tucson, it will bring an enviro-friendly, sleek and, yes, smart concept to the city’s midtown district.

The six-unit development – each 1080 sq feet with two bedrooms and two bathrooms – occupies a formerly vacant storage lot at Fort Lowell and Presidio Road in Tucson. As with the first Smart Loft units at Mountain and Glenn, building materials are durable, appliances are energy-efficient and, inside out, it couldn't be greener (see below, So What's Smart about Smart Lofts?). Both developments were designed with the help of Tucson architect Bob Vint, an expert in infill and historic development.
“Our approach is to not waste and to reuse,” says Deborah Chah, co-owner of Smart Lofts with Krista Miller. The floor plan is designed with minimal hallway space and plenty of storage. Closet space is double what residents of this size of apartment would usually get, says Deborah.

As important as being environmentally friendly is being community friendly, say Deborah and Krista. They believe neighborhood associations appreciate the fact Smart Lofts keeps its building standards high, and works with neighbors and community groups on its plans.

In the case of the new Presidio units, Krista corralled residents of the Cabrini neighborhood, whose interest in neighborhood meetings was waning partly because they were divided over plans for a nearby cell phone tower. She helped win a grant for the neighborhood, organize a community event, and is still on the board of the neighborhood association. Her work is not over. “It’s had a sad effect on the neighborhood association,” says Krista of the cell phone tower debacle.
Heat-resistant terracotta colored metal graces the roofs at the latest Smart Lofts development at Presidio and Fort Lowell Roads. Photo by Jocelyn Warner-Brokamp

Smart Lofts, though, has residents’ full support, in particular the backing of its 90-year-old next door neighbor. “She’s lived here almost 40 years. We shared with her our thoughts and intentions. We’ve become friends,” says Deborah. The woman told them of any suspicious activity on their lot, brought them food, and gave them her overwhelming backing. “Just because we have entitlements and a right to build whatever, we feel it would be remiss not to include her,” says Deborah.

Deborah and Krista met through a mutual acquaintance, and through Deborah knowing Krista’s father, Tucson builder John Wesley Miller. Deborah is a property developer, Krista worked with her father on the ‘green’ building community Armory Park Del Sol in downtown Tucson. The women clicked, and so did their dogs. It was on dog walks that they got chatting about their desire to develop and flip properties, but in an environmentally-friendly way. Krista says she wanted to leave a green and modern imprint on whatever they touched, remodeling homes so that they were more energy-efficient.
No space is wasted at Smart Lofts. Photo by Jocelyn Warner-Brokamp

The goal of the first Smart Lofts development – built on infill land owned by Deborah – was to build to sell. But building happened “in the worst of times”, says Deborah. Because of the downturn in the property market, they decided to lease the units. That’s the strategy at the Presidio site too, where units will rent for $1200 a month. The Presidio units are almost 500 square feet smaller and one-story, as opposed to the two-story units at Mountain and Glenn. Eventually, though, the Presidio properties will add a little floor space for residents with a mezzanine level in the living room, which can be used for a library or office.

The feel? Industrial, modern and, despite the grey walls and bare aesthetic, cozy. The women's love for sleek surfaces, white and retro green, and metal are obvious throughout.

Lessees will receive an hour-long orientation, a binder with information, and energy efficiency tips. Krista and Deborah are so determined to carry on their earth-friendly living credo that they will replace all the light bulbs themselves. “That way we know they’re using the correct [compact fluorescent]
bulbs,” says Krista.

The Smart Lofts model is already approved by the City of Tucson, which means it is ready to be spun off into another development. Krista and Deborah say they are getting interest from individuals who want to use the concept in building their own private residence – which is another way the women hope to build their brand.

There will be more developments like the Presidio one too. They plan to begin construction on a third set of Smart Lofts dwellings this year at Stone Avenue and Alturas Street.

Much has changed since they were wrapping up construction of the first Smart Lofts. Their lender pulled the plug at the last minute on that first development. Now, says Deborah, lenders are asking to be on board.

Smart Lofts feature Integra block construction. Photo by Jocelyn Warner-Brokamp

So what’s smart about Smart Lofts?

- Energy-saving **Integra block construction**. The Integra wall system uses H-shaped blocks, polyurethane foam, and vertical steel reinforcing rods. The materials and the tensioning of the rods mean less heat travels, so insulation is better, says **Bob Vint**, architect for both Smart Lofts projects.
- ‘Green’ metal on the roofs:
it’s pre-finished, guaranteed for 20 years and is expected to last for 50, says Bob. The terracotta colored coating is heat-resistant.

- **Compact floor plan** with no wasted space. Hallways are eliminated by instead creating alcoves off the living room. The space saved on the hallways is used in the other rooms.
- Each building has a 3KwH photovoltaic system that could bring residents up to **$30 a month in savings** on their electric bill. The two solar hot water systems per building may account for up to 80% of a homeowner’s electric bill, depending on usage.
- The project is an **infill development** on a previously vacant storage lot.
- **Solar panels** are planned for the carport roofs to generate electricity. Shade covers for parking will shade the west side of the buildings and **cut down on heat generation**. “Big open spaces give a heat island effect,” says Bob.
- Approximately **90% of the original plant material located on the site is preserved**. Additional landscaping is native to the Sonoran Desert and therefore requires minimal water.
- **Local suppliers and materials** are used as much as possible.
- **Energy-efficient** appliances, low-flow plumbing and dual pane windows.

* Find out more about Smart Lofts at smart-lofts.com

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