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It Takes a "Village"

By Nicole Rosenleaf Ritter

Unique residential development in Bozeman offers loft-style living just steps from the action of downtown.

To take the Main Street exit off I-90 into Bozeman is to see change in action. On the left lies the hospital, and acres of land that may soon be released for new residential and medical facilities, not to mention the giant new Bozeman Public Library. On the right are new office buildings in various stages of completion. Straight ahead is downtown Bozeman itself—arguably Montana’s most vibrant Main Street—with a full slate of street festivals and a near-full business occupancy rate.

Directly across from the new library winds a road that used to head into an old rail yard. Roomy sidewalks flank the street, with graceful footbridges, distinctive lamp posts, and a clock tower marking the entrance to The Village Downtown, an ambitious residential development offering town homes, single family houses, and now lofts.

Designed by Bozeman architect Thomas Bitnar, The Village Downtown has been planned with an eye to the principles of “New Urbanism,” a movement that promotes walkable, mixed-use neighborhoods bringing together residential communities with shops, restaurants, outdoor recreation, and educational facilities.

While the development as a whole has been unusual in its proximity to downtown rather than the 19th Street artery, the Village Lofts mark a real departure in the city’s real estate offerings.

In a part of the world where wide-open spaces and acreage are oftentimes presented as the highest value, the one-, two-, and three-bedroom lofts might seem like an unlikely sell. But the urban feel of the Village Lofts has proven attractive to those looking for the convenience of “city life” married with the beauty of

Bozeman’s ever-present great outdoors. It’s a combination that developer Bill Muhlenfeld says is hard to beat.

“The location is prime,” he enthuses. “We are bringing upwards of 500 residents (in the whole Village Downtown) who can live downtown, work downtown, shop downtown, and we think that’s very positive.”

THE ATTRACTIONS OF “LOFT LIVING”

The buildings themselves are perhaps the most unique facet of the Village Lofts in a community more known for horizontal growth. At five floors—four extra-roomy stories plus a penthouse level—the buildings are as close to high-rise towers as Bozeman is likely to get, since even those required the developers to seek a variance from the city.

The loft buildings have been designed to offer a mix of privacy safeguards—reserved parking, state-of-the-art sound insulation, unique door codes—and social opportunities. A private, European-style courtyard opens to the sky, and the prominent, glassed-in staircases have doors that open to the outdoors to provide natural climate control in the summer and beautiful views all year round.



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Lark Smotherman



Lark Smotherman



“The yards can be opened and closed to create a kind of micro-climate inside,” Bitnar says. “The wind in Montana is mostly west-east, so you can have natural ventilation for summer days and close it up during the winter to make a sort of interior buffer against Mother Nature.”

Within the courtyard is a secure lobby with a fireplace and cozy couches. A central fountain with bench seating allows owners to mingle while they open mail or enjoy a newspaper and morning coffee.

“We’re creating spaces to try to encourage social activities,” explains Tony Renslow, the Village Downtown’s project manager. “Loft living isn’t meant to be just within the loft. We’re creating what we hope will be a very social atmosphere.

OPEN AND INVITING

Starting at around 950 square feet for a one-bedroom, the lofts might sound cramped on paper. Inside, however, high ceilings in conjunction with a wise use of expansive windows make the space seem far bigger—not at all confining.



Lark Smotherman

“The units are not necessarily large—lofts typically aren’t—but the higher ceilings make the whole space feel more open,” Renslow points out.

The open, bright feel extends throughout the space, with strategically placed transoms adding visual interest, additional light penetration, and natural ventilation from the outside on the courtyard walls. The floors—available with either custom-stained concrete or Kahr’s wood flooring—reflect light and intensify the clean lines.



Glennis Indreland

THE LITTLE THINGS

Doors are objects of interest rather than mere portals: Barn-style doors leading into the master suite from the living area stretch from the floor almost all the way to the ceiling—some 12 and a half feet in that area—are one upgrade possibility. Even the standard master suite doors—eight-foot, solid fir pocket doors—create only the briefest feeling of separation. Exposed brick is another upgrade finish option for some walls in the kitchen and living area.

The kitchen and living room meld seamlessly into one another, creating a generous living space. Granite slab counter tops, Merillat solid wood cabinets, and stainless steel appliances—and wine fridge—make an instant impression in the kitchen area. The center kitchen island invites intimate gatherings.

All of the units come standard with a gas fireplace with stainless steel surround in the living room, a perfect second focal point for the room—if there is a need to look away from the purple mountains majesty.

In most units, French doors with expansive, double-glazed windows lead onto a balcony or patio which varies in size depending on the floor and the view. Mountain view balconies—facing north toward the Bridgers—curve gently, while city view terraces sport angles befitting the more urban vista.

Architect Bitnar explains that the two distinctive façades front and back—created largely by the balconies—are crucial for maintaining the flow of the buildings within the building site.

“All of the balconies work together,” he notes, clarifying that the straight balcony echoes the geometric lines of the quite formal landscaping on the city view side, while the curved lines on the mountain side blend more gently into the wetland area that is being preserved below.

The near floor-to-ceiling windows repeat in the master suite, which is also home to his-and-hers closets that lead into a stylish bathroom adorned with 6-inch and 12-inch Magica Perla tiles, granite vanities, and brushed nickel fixtures. Owners can choose between shower and bath or just shower, and possible upgrades include a master bath steam unit. Although often forgotten in home design, bathrooms matter to Bitnar, one of his highest priorities for the units after the natural ventilation.

“Bathrooms were very important to us, especially in the master suite,” he says. “We developed a real symmetry in the bathrooms, following a hospitality design. We checked into Four Seasons hotels, for example, for one inspiration on how bathrooms could be enduring.”

“Everyone loves the bathrooms,” Bitnar adds proudly.

With somewhat limited floor space—by suburban standards—every square-inch counts. The design leaves little room for waste, with pocket and bi-fold doors hiding private spaces and the laundry area. A nook that might have gone unused in another living area has been transformed into a well-lighted desk to allow for use of the unit’s wireless Internet access.

In the end, it’s small touches such as these that make the Village Lofts unusual: simultaneously a world away from the standard Montana log cabin chic and very much at home in a rapidly changing part of the Big Sky.

Just the Facts

Each four-story loft building contains 10 units per floor, plus three penthouses. (At present, two of the four planned buildings are under construction, with one slated for completion and move-in near press time and the other in fall 2007.) Running under the twin buildings is a single underground parking garage with storage space for owners. All units receive at least one parking spot. There are secure elevators running on each side of the building from both the ground level and the underground parking garage.

In addition to taking care of all building common-area maintenance, landscaping, and neighborhood upkeep, the Village Downtown also handles garbage removal (from trash chutes, two on each floor) and

offers security through automatic garage doors, unique front door codes, an intercom system, and sprinklers. Fees for those services are paid in a monthly assessment.

The first loft building, located at 140 Village Crossing Way, is almost completely sold out, while some space remains in 150 Village Crossing Way. Prices for a one-bedroom unit start around \$320,000, with two-bedrooms beginning at \$389,000 and three-bedrooms up from \$539,000. Available penthouses are on the market at \$1.1 million. All prices are, of course, subject to change.

The Village Downtown as a whole is being developed by the four partners in the Village Investment Group: Ileana Indreland, Michael Delaney, Anthea George, and Bill Muhlenfeld. Thomas Bitnar of Bitnar Architects is the architect, and Langlas & Associates, Inc. is the general contractor.



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