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Lofty Aspirations

New downtown residential buildings embrace the developing areas so much they offer plenty of balcony views.
by Edwin Slipek Jr.

Early on a recent muggy morning, a smartly dressed real estate agent stands in the small downstairs lobby of the Iron House Place condominiums at 1333 W. Broad St. She checks her watch. At 8:30 sharp a young woman arrives with her parents in tow. The daughter is entering dental school later this summer; the folks want to buy her a place to live.

The sight of brokers and prosperous-looking clients is a new phenomenon along this stretch of Broad near Lombardy — and some other downtown blocks — that not too long ago would have been thought a sketchy choice for 24-hour living. But settlement patterns have gelled as former commercial buildings and in-fill structures now offer hundreds of new housing options in the city's center.

Recently, in addition to granite countertops and popular green features, something else has been introduced to loft living in Richmond: street-front balconies.

The first generation of apartments and condo units in old warehouses were discreetly hidden within the contours of historic outer walls to comply with historic-tax-credit restrictions. But in a sure sign that potential historic properties are getting more difficult to find, new construction is gradually filling former vacant lots and parking lots — or in the case of the Iron House, rising from an already existing building. These places often sport terraces and balconies. These plain-air spaces are gradually softening and humanizing some of our tough old streetscapes. The sight of outdoor furniture, planter boxes and flower pots on these perches announces a further embrace of city living.

Iron House and the Reserve, a recent condo development in Church Hill on North 25th Street, not only are two attractive new in-fill condo projects with balconies that open onto and enliven the street, but also provide excellent lessons in how to introduce bold and contemporary architecture to historic sectors.

The Iron House Place condominium

It's an inelegant provenance for a stylish residential development, but the new condo project near Virginia Commonwealth University's Monroe Park campus takes its name from a gnarly, hardcore free-weight gym that once occupied the one-story building at this address. The gym's façade was painted the pushy shade of yellow usually reserved for traffic signs. When the roof of the building collapsed some years ago, it was time for something else to happen here.

At the hands of the Walter Parks Architect firm and developer Ron Hunt, the first-floor brick façade has been restored. It hides an indoor parking deck and is painted, thankfully, a soothing shade of olive green.

Four residential floors have been added above this existing structure, although the lowest of these floors is all but disguised behind the old building. The design of the new construction fully embraces an industrial aesthetic. Steel



A crisp industrial aesthetic, softened by balconies, defines the new look of the Iron House on West Broad Street. Photo by Scott Elmquist

structural elements are not only evident, but also celebrated, while oversized bricks in earthen shades of red, tan and brown are welcoming elements.

From a distance, the building's deep-set balconies, crisp lines and lack of applied decoration provide a refreshing, subtle and honest performance of light and shadow. The overall effect is not unlike the sight of rectangular shipping containers stacked near a dock, but in a surprisingly attractive way.

Occupants and their guests take stairs or an elevator to the four residential floors. On the third, fourth and fifth levels, you step into a central, light-filled atrium that's been carved out of the center of the structure. It is an effect as welcome as it is unexpected.

The units are boxy and straightforward, but feel right. And of course, the floor-to-ceiling glass doors beckon to explore the balconies and the ever-developing views of Broad and toward West Grace streets.



The Reserve

One of the most pleasant ways to approach Church Hill is up the steep slope of 25th Street, just above Tobacco Row and the CVS drug store. The ascent is accentuated by the progression of human-scaled old buildings — warehouses, shops and houses that lead up to the dramatically looming brick retaining wall that supports the yard of St. John's Episcopal Church. The variety of each building's age, use and style gives this stretch of street a particularly urbane flair.

The newest addition to this procession of modest but fascinating buildings is the Reserve at Franklin and Main streets. A 25-unit development, it combines the reworking of a nondescript old brick commercial building with an addition that delivers considerable pop to the historic Church Hill neighborhood.

Because the new three-story building sits at a transitional point between residential and retail structures and a former industrial neighborhood, the architecture firm of David Johannas Associates (working with Clachan Properties) had a wide menu of possible building materials. And no shy choices were made. Brick, wood and corrugated metal surfaces are combined in a refreshingly contemporary way while respecting the adjacent historic fabric.

On the street level, a slightly projected bay announces the main pedestrian entry. Slightly farther down the hill is a broad garage door that leads to parking. On the upper floors large windows proclaim the loft-like aspirations of the building.

But the glory of this building is its pair of monitors — each with a slightly curved roof that pushes beyond the traditional roofline. These add a delightful and unexpected visual exclamation point. And they play off a long tradition of tower-like projections in Richmond's industrial buildings.

But here at the Reserve, as at the Iron House, the balconies announce the building as clearly residential.

There are a handful of other new in-fill residential buildings in and near downtown, but none better announce the new paradigm of lofts with balconies than these two handsome structures. **S**