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Lofty lifestyles

The Lofts on Church offers downtown living with a blend of modern and historical flavors.

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The crisp smell of new paint lingers in the air.

The stained wood floors, white tin ceilings and bright stainless steel refrigerators reflect the modern and the historical newness of the Lofts on Church.

The downtown Roanoke building, with dual addresses at 15 and 17 W. Church Ave., known as the former Ewald Clark location and built in 1908, now houses eight loft-style apartments on two upper floors.

In the last decade, it has been home to a camera shop, a pool hall and a third floor duckpin bowling alley.

Four of the new apartments already are leased, leaving four available for people desiring a downtown lifestyle in an open-air space sprinkled with touches of the old and the new.

Co-owners Bob Fetzer and Mike Dittrich opened several of the apartments Monday for public tours.

The loft project is one of several new living quarters that has been created in downtown Roanoke in the last few years.

Some of the most recent to come on board are the Campbell Garage Lofts, a group of condos at 319 Campbell Ave., across from the Roanoke City Jail, that opened in June.

Dittrich and Fetzer created apartments rather than condos because of the financial incentives for the approximately \$1.5 million renovation project.

They were eligible for both state and federal tax credits by creating the apartments, which range in size from 700 to 1,060 square feet.

There's also a strong market for apartment living in downtown, said Fetzer, president of Building Specialists, a local general contractor that works in construction and renovation. Eight Jefferson Place is one of the few apartment buildings located in downtown Roanoke, he said.

The walls inside each Church Avenue loft are open at the top, with each spreading out into several rooms, including a master bedroom and a living room with a connecting kitchen.

Features include black, concrete kitchen countertops, old brick on some walls and sliding doors to separate several rooms.

Rents range from \$950 to \$1,350 a month.

"We were skeptical if we could attract tenants" with the high rents, Fetzer said. "To have four leased is a great indication" that people can afford the apartments.

Those who have leased the apartments, so far, are in their 20s and 30s. And most of the tenants work downtown, including Amanda McCreary, an architectural designer for Building Specialists. She and her husband, Ben, live in one of the lofts.

The Church Avenue project has not come without its challenges.

Fetzer and Dittrich purchased the building in 2005 from Frank Ewald and his brother, Gordon, for about \$300,000. Their initial goal was to complete renovations and have the apartments ready for lease by the end of 2005.

But it took about five months to get state historical approval to make certain renovations and changes to the building.

With these delays and others, the lofts also missed a chance to debut in Roanoke's annual Downtown Living Tour in October.

And take the surprise discovery of a solid granite piece as large as a school bus found while digging a shaft for the elevator, and Dittrich and Fetzer are glad to have the project on its way to completion.

It likely has been worth the time and the additional work. Fetzer saw the economic benefits of making living possible in downtown Roanoke during a trip to Asheville, N.C., where there are at least 2,000 condos and apartments in the city's downtown.

"The more people we can put here ... it will be a very positive thing," Fetzer said.

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