

real estate

Some lofty ideas in Houston

Sometimes it helps to leave home to gain perspective on the housing scene. For me, that opportunity came last week at a real estate editors' conference in Houston, the largest city in Texas with no — yep, no — zoning.

Not surprisingly, Houston has become legendary as the land of sprawl and highway traffic congestion. But perhaps equally surprising, at least to some of us Nor'easterners, is the energy being spent on revitalizing Houston's once-moribund downtown, now relieved of Enron's notorious "crooked E" sculpture.

There's a lot of buzz around hot, smart-growth initiatives being talked about in many cities and suburban areas nationwide, including New York: preserving and reusing historic buildings; creating walkable communities; designing mixed-use commercial and residential buildings; finding ways to build affordable housing amid soaring land prices.

And guess what? In Houston, there's *no zoning* to get in the way.

One of the more unusual Houston projects, I found, was the modestly priced "loft town house" concept created by Larry S. Davis, a local architect-turned-developer. As we sat down for an old-fashioned Texas barbecue, Davis recalled touring a historic brick building in San Francisco that was converted to artist lofts 14 years ago.

Davis loved the high ceilings, the large windows, the expansive, comfortable living spaces. But he couldn't swallow the idea of "building something new to



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look old . . . I'd rather create something of our time."

That "something" turned out to be modern loft town houses framed with galvanized metal in bright primary colors — red, yellow, blue. The "tin skins" reflect the Houston heat better than brick, so interiors are 10 degrees cooler than traditional brick buildings, Davis said. And the lessened fire hazard lowers home insurance costs.

Inside, there are nine available floor plans of about 1,800 to 2,000 square feet. Each unit has windows on at least three sides. ("I'm kind of a stickler for light," Davis said.) The price: \$170,000 to \$200,000.

Since the mid-1990s, Davis, now owner of Urban Lofts Townhomes, has built 400 units in Houston and about 100 in Dallas. He plans to build another 450 tin town houses in Atlanta, Las Vegas and Phoenix in the next two years. Davis says he always goes into "transitional neighborhoods — the ones, frankly, a lot of people consider throwaway neighborhoods."

And who's buying in these neighborhoods? Young professionals, empty-nesters, singles — many of them single women. "It's the kids — and their parents — who grew up in suburbia. They're the first ones who want to move into town," Davis said with a laugh.

If such loft town homes were built in Nassau or Suffolk Coun-



Houston architect Larry S. Davis put a modern spin on the loft concept by designing town house units that have open floor plans and lots of windows. The exteriors, which have "tin skins" in bright primary colors, are more energy efficient than their brick counterparts.

PHOTOS BY HICKEY ROBERTSON

ties, would they work? I asked Jim Morgo, president of the Long Island Housing Partnership. "It's a contemporary look, but I could see many downtowns in both counties where this could be very appropriate," he said. "It could make them a vibrant area, revitalizing downtowns with singles and empty-nesters."

Davis acknowledges that his town home has "more of an urban feel to it."

But, he adds, "I try to make people think about my work. They may not like it, but they'll have an opinion. And maybe it'll open up other ideas."

