

Loft living on the 'best street' in Edmonton

Downtowners like the friendly vibe on 104th Street

BY JODIE MCKAGUE, FREELANCE OCTOBER 30, 2010 5:08 AM



The residents of Warwick's building on 104th Street do a Christmas loft crawl every year.

Photograph by: John Lucas, The Journal, Freelance

Half the fun of visiting Barry Kaiser in his fourth-floor loft is saying goodbye. That's because he'll let you use his own in-suite elevator to get back to the lobby. It's just one of the perks of living in the Phillips Lofts -- a converted warehouse located downtown on the historic Fourth Street Promenade.

Even after eight years of living in the modern 1,100-square-foot, open-concept bachelor pad, Kaiser is happy he had the foresight to make a home on what some are calling the best street in the city.

An investment counsellor with HSBC, Kaiser travelled the world before moving back home to Edmonton in 2002.

"I've lived in lots of different places -- Boston, Guatemala, Bermuda -- and I always lived in the older, historic sides of town. So when I saw this, I instantly fell in love with it," says Kaiser of his place, decorated with stainless steel accents and burnt-pumpkin walls.

He points out unique architectural details such as the huge fir timbers and exposed brick walls made from bricks produced locally in Riverdale back in the early 1900s.

And he's not the only one who fell in love. Shauna Warwick did, too. First with Kaiser, then with the

idea of trading in her spacious home in St. Albert for a chance to be part of the residential boom taking over the area of downtown once famous for derelict buildings and a seedy hotel.

"I knew more people in this building than I did in my neighbourhood in St. Albert," says Warwick, 34.

It wasn't until 2008, after six years of hanging out at Kaiser's place and watching the 104th Street vision unfold, that she decided to purchase her own loft two floors down.

"I just found a different type of connection here that I was really attracted to."

Today, the urban couple operate a bit like Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo -- alternating between the two units and enjoying their time apart when necessary.

They are also active members of the 104th Street community. Kaiser is the president of the condo association and Warwick is the vice-president, organizing social gatherings and helping with community cleanup efforts.

"I know most of the people in the building. We hang out regularly. We do a ladies' night and impromptu patio wine nights," says Warwick, a huge fan of the building's coveted communal rooftop patio.

"We also do a Christmas loft crawl every year. We start in the lobby and decorate the tree and then we spend half an hour in each suite. Everybody brings their own wine glass and we have a nice social evening."

Not that they have to stay in the building to have a good time.

Over the past few years, the section of 104th Street between Jasper and 102nd avenues has come to life, first with the addition of the Century condo tower, followed by the opening of the city's tallest residential project -- the 35-storey Icon Tower and the Icon II scheduled for completion by the end of this year.

Each building has brought hundreds of new residents to the street and a smorgasbord of specialty shops and restaurants, including newbies Credo Coffee, Lit Italian Wine Bar, and the Coup Garment Boutique.

Ed Fong was one of the pioneers responsible for attracting business

to the area long before the arrival of Sobeys Urban Fresh Market and block mates like C'est Sera and 29 Armstrong.

When he opened deVine Wines and Spirits on the ground floor of the Birks Building six years ago, Fong says there was still very little foot traffic and perceived concerns about safety in the area.

That's not the case today.

Visit the street on Saturdays from May until October, and 104th Street is closed to vehicle traffic for the city market, Edmonton's original farmers market. In the evenings, you'll see well-dressed 20-somethings sharing wine outdoors on the sidewalk patios alongside sophisticated empty nesters and the downtown after-work crowd.

"There is definitely a more mature mindset and attitude on this street," says Fong, one of the organizing members of this summer's Al Fresco event -- an outdoor "picnic cabaret" that drew thousands of Edmontonians for a day of communal festivities

"If you want to go party hard, go to Jasper Ave., or Whyte. If you want a mellow place where you can chill out and have a glass of wine, enjoy a nice meal, you come to 104th Street. You can actually sit in a restaurant and have a conversation with friends."

Fong chairs the 104th Street Action Committee, started last year by a collective of stakeholders to create a vision for future developments in the area and to market the street to the rest of the city.

"From Century Park, you are on 104th Street in less than 19 minutes on the LRT. We'd like to see more Edmontonians out exploring the area and attract more small, independent businesses and unique restaurants that are not chains."

A specialty cheese shop, a butcher specializing in charcuterie. Think the Italian Centre but compartmentalized into several different stores."

A new committee chaired by Michael Phair is working to create a park space on an empty patch of land behind Sobeys, and continued collaboration with the Edmonton Police Service and Downtown Business Association to keep the area safe and clean.

And unless you are a developer wanting to build outside the historical guidelines, don't expect too much NIMBYism from those already on the street.

"It's good to dream and dream big," says Fong. "We are trying to create an environment where people can celebrate life living in community."

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