

Salem casts a spell on house hunters: Buyers find prices, urban feel enchanting

By **Paul Restuccia**

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One-time Manhattanite Dave Ring finds a some of the Big Apple's ambience in his new neighborhood: Downtown Salem.

"Salem is a six-by-six block version of New York," said Ring, a 37-year-old who recently bought a \$365,000 two-bedroom condo in the downtown. "It has enough variety to make it appealing, but it's city living that's easier and more manageable."

Ring and his wife's loft-style unit features an open living/dining space, 14-foot beamed ceilings and a granite-and-stainless-steel kitchen.

"It was centrally located, brand-new construction that looked cool - and the price was right," said Ring, who commutes by train to his Cambridge job while his wife drives to her position in Beverly.

The Rings are among dozens of Downtown Salem buyers attracted in recent years by relatively affordable prices, a growing number of shops and restaurants and easy access to Boston. (There's both commuter-rail service and a ferry that runs every two hours to the New England Aquarium.)

Newcomers include not just young professionals like the Rings, but also empty nesters like 58-year-old Shelley Plakans.

She and her husband recently downsized from a big Marblehead house to a \$700,000 upscale Downtown Salem condo that features Jenn-Air appliances, oak floors and Salem Harbor views.

"We wanted easy, concierge-type living that has all the amenities of a hotel, but that was close to our children and our friends," Plakans said.

To meet such newcomers' demands, developers have built a half-dozen condo complexes in the past few years - with a half-dozen more on the way.

For instance, Somerville's RCG Properties recently combined a one-time laundry building with new construction to create the 54-unit Derby Lofts.

The firm is also converting two other downtown buildings into 15 condos, and just announced plans to turn the former Salem Evening News complex into 25 to 35 additional units.

"We're very committed to Salem and see this area really becoming a destination place," RCG chief Matt Picarcic said. "Our projects are attracting both professionals and empty-nesters from all over the Boston area."

Other planned developments include a project to convert a former tannery into 160 condos, as well as plans to carve 10 units out of a former furniture store, according to Salem City Planner Lynn Duncan.

New Boston Ventures even intends to convert the 19th century Old Salem Jail into a high-end, 29-unit condo development.

Julianna Tache of Tache Real Estate, which works with RCG and several other builders, said rehabs are popular because Salem, "wants to keep its historical integrity while broadening its development."

But some projects involve entirely new construction.

For example, Marblehead-based Rockett Management & Development plans to soon break ground on a 16- to 20-unit Phase II of its Salem Waterfront Hotel & Suites project. Rockett has already sold 14 of Phase's 16 units for \$700,000 to \$839,000 apiece.

"We're attracting empty-nesters from all over the North Shore who are looking for a small-city alternative for downsizing," developer Michael Rockett said.



Dave and Linda Ring recently bought a \$365,000 condo in Downtown Salem. They like the area's modest prices, urban atmosphere and good location. (Staff photo by Renee Dekona)

Located 16 miles north of Boston, Salem is a city rich in architecture and history.

Founded in 1623 as a fishing settlement originally called "Naumkeag" locals renamed the town Salem in 1629.

The Salem name comes from "shalom" - the Hebrew word for "peace."

But peace was short-lived in Salem.

The infamous Salem Witch Trials of 1692 led to the hangings of 19 villagers accused of witchcraft.

Still, Salem became one of America's wealthiest cities by the 18th century, thanks to ship trade with the West Indies, China, Africa and Russia.

Successful local merchants built homes that today offer some of the nation's finest examples of Federalist architecture.

Houses that 18th century architect Samuel McIntire designed in and around Chestnut Street cost more than \$1 million apiece today. Some of the city's gracious Mansards, Greek Revival and Italianate-style homes fetch nearly as much.

But Salem's housing stock also includes condos in the \$300,000 range carved out of modest 18th and 19th century houses that once housed fishermen and factory workers.

Donna Lee Caramello, a Coldwell Banker broker who's lived in Downtown Salem since 1984, calls the neighborhood "a diamond in the rough (that's) being polished. For a long time, the witch stuff overshadowed the architecture and maritime history here. Now, there's more of a balance."

"Get Moving" profiles a different Greater Boston neighborhood on the first Friday of each month. Check out our next profile on Friday, Sept. 7.