



# THE HIGH LIFE

**Boston is in the grip of high-standard home improvement, with loft conversions top of the list. From the aesthetic to the practical, Cheryl Fenton takes a rooftop tour of Boston's loftiest prospects.**



**W**hat do you do with 1,500 square feet of open living space in the middle of a city like Boston?

"Whatever I want!" says Kay McGowan. She is just one of the city's many residents who have passed on the hassles and cookie-cutter floor plans of traditional single-family homes and condos. Instead, a loft space is where she hangs her hats... on a funky beam that jets out from a bare brick wall next to an exposed vault from the '20s. Call it industrial charm.

Armed with screens, furniture and fabric panels from the imported furniture store she manages, Cambridge-based Mohr & McPherson, McGowan turned a huge open space within an 1850s South Boston liquor distillery into a well-designed, four-room home. And if she doesn't like the setup, well, she just changes it.

"For me, the brilliance of loft living is this wonderful aesthetic expression," she explains. "There's freedom of expression to do what you want with the space."

"Lofts are fun because people get bored with layouts," agrees Sebastian Diessel of Maxwell Associates. "If you have a house with defined rooms, you're very limited with what you can do. With lofts, you can change the layout of your place as often as you like." Diessel and his wife created [LoftsBoston.com](http://LoftsBoston.com), an online marketing tool for brokers and developers to showcase a virtual odyssey of Boston-area lofts. The upswing in the value of loft sales the site markets is staggering, almost doubling each consecutive year over the past three years, from \$19 million to \$72 million in sales.

The appeal of urban living with high ceilings and versatile open design isn't the only thing attracting buyers. Throw in details like industrial windows hung on weights, exposed brick walls, old freight elevator shafts with original steel doors and cool addresses like "The Chocolate Factory," or McGowan's "The Distillery"—and you've got yourself a conversation piece.

"I've found that the word 'loft' in advertising is guaranteed to make the phone ring or emails come in," says Louise L. Olson, vice president and

senior associate at Coldwell Banker Realty in Cambridge. "I can definitely say that the loft market has increased dramatically in the last five to 10 years." Olson has sold lofts in Boston's North End and Seaport areas, as well as outlying neighborhoods in Chelsea, Cambridge, Somerville, Charlestown and Medford.

"Most developers these days are trying to build lofts whenever possible because of the demand and cachet," she says. "In Boston, certainly, there have been many existing buildings that have made great loft conversions, as well as in Cambridge and Somerville, where available developable space is very limited."

Diessel speaks of this phenomenon as a "second wave" of loft development, especially in Boston's popular up-and-coming Leather District, where he stands in his loft office, gazing up at the 12-foot ceilings with exposed beams.

"In the mid-'90s there was a first wave, which is the heart of the true loft conversions," he explains. "That wave's end coincided with the beginning of the dot-com boom. A lot of these buildings represented a great alternative for commercial leases because they are live/work lofts, so you could pay a lower residential lease and fill it with programmers for your dot-com."

Then came the bust—dot-coms perished and loft living was reborn as building owners tried to fill the empty space by turning again to residential conversions.

But the cliché of loft living (funky, starving artists who need a large, cost-effective place to serve as studio and home) is almost gone. Due to increasing popularity and prices, loft living now lends itself to the more pliable wallets of empty-nesters and young professionals who work in the city. And with these higher prices sometimes come higher expectations and more discerning tastes.

"In the first wave, the loft conversions were a lot more raw with basic cabinetry, often one bathroom, one bedroom area," says Diessel. "Today you still have people who want a loft, but they want two bathrooms, two bedrooms and an upscale kitchen. Some of today's lofts are verging on luxury condos."

Before signing up for life in a former police station, cold fur storage facility or sausage plant, potential loft-dwellers should do their homework and consider their lifestyles. Although the privacy issue that goes hand-in-hand with open spaces is easily remedied, there are other considerations.

"Especially in a brick and beam conversion with wood floors, there might be a noise issue," warns Diessel. "If you are at all sound sensitive, you might want to look at a loft with concrete between the floors. But it's condo living regardless. You have to live with each other. It's all about entertaining these days," says Diessel. "It's about unifying your play time with your living space. People work hard during the day, so they want to come home and enjoy their inner space; that becomes their playground."

