



Fire Clay Lofts

DENVER, COLORADO

Urban Ventures, LLC

■ Perhaps still inspired by the extinguished flame of its forebear, Fire Clay Lofts was built on the site of the old Fire Clay Brick Company as an innovative response to rising demand for more affordable workforce housing. In the late 1990s, Urban Ventures, LLC, looked to Upper Larimer, a neighborhood of vacant and deteriorating industrial buildings, to deliver this new mixed-use, mixed-income community that continues to help build vibrancy in Denver's urban core.

The four-acre infill location in lower downtown Denver is now part of what has become the River North Arts District. Historically an industrial area, in the past decade the neighborhood has attracted artists and creative individuals who have moved in with their galleries and studios, resulting in increased mixed-income residential development.

Urban Ventures demolished several structures to allow new construction and remediated the brown-field site while preserving an 1890s brick warehouse that was converted into residential lofts. Fire Clay is 166 eclectic units—one- and two-bedroom lofts, live/work units, and townhouses—in 14 separate structures connected by open space, courtyards, and walkways, developed at a density of over 40 units per acre. It is a trendsetter, attracting other mixed-use developments to the area, which in turn has spurred the development of several hundred more residences in the neighborhood.

The project was developed in four phases over ten

years, including a two-year remediation period. The variety of units has attracted individuals with classic workforce income levels, including essential service personnel and cultural creative types, some of whom use first-floor commercial space for galleries, hair salons, graphic design and Pilates studios, and other spaces for working artists. The developer agreed to provide 20 percent of the units to households earning less than 80 percent of area median income, which are preserved through five- to 15-year deed restrictions. Many of the unrestricted units were also sold to workforce households earning 60 to 120 percent of AMI.

Low acquisition costs and public funding to help with the environmental cleanup were needed to make the workforce units financially feasible. The city provided a \$319,000 loan for site remediation, which was forgiven upon sale of the last restricted unit. The city and county of Denver strongly supported the project in the critical rezoning stage of the development as part of a larger effort to expand mixed-use and residential development in the city's disinvested industrial area.

Although this project was underway before the LEED certification program had begun, it was ahead of its time in using sensible environmentally sustainable practices, including higher-density development, double-pane low-emittance windows, Energy Star appliances, Aquatherm heating and cooling systems, and more. Bus routes to the area provide access to mass transit and jobs in central Denver, and now a new train station is located three blocks away.

Fire Clay's character burns bright, providing a replicable example to urban areas looking to transform underused industrial land into affordable, mixed-use communities that add to the vitality and diversity of city life.

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