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## Chic spaces and sushi

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### High-end condo developments in South Boston bring newcomers, new cuisine

By Chris Reidy, Globe Staff | February 29, 2004

When Carlisle renter Courtney DeVries decided she wanted to live closer to her office in Inman Square, she went house-hunting in Cambridge, Charlestown, Chelsea, Somerville, and the South End before buying a \$335,000 condo in a converted rectory on the outskirts of South Boston.

A marketing manager at a software company, she felt her dollars didn't go far enough elsewhere. Still, she never planned on living in South Boston, a neighborhood with a reputation, deserved or not, for being unwelcoming to outsiders.

"It was like a foreign land to me," she said. Yet 10 months after moving in, she added, "I couldn't be happier."

DeVries, 44, loves her new condo with its bow windows, hardwood floors, and gas fireplace. And she loves living near the Broadway MBTA stop. Across the street is the Teriyaki House, a new restaurant that sells sushi only a few steps away from a defunct tavern once linked to fugitive mob boss James "Whitey" Bulger.

DeVries's new neighborhood is undergoing even bigger changes, mostly in the guise of high-end housing.

Nearby is a just-converted industrial building called Court Square Press, where residents have begun to fill the 130 condo units. A few blocks away is an ambitious mixed-use project known as Channel Center; its first residents are getting ready to move into refurbished lofts ranging in price from \$375,000 to \$770,000.

Meanwhile, the June opening of the Boston Convention & Exhibition Center is expected to speed up the transformation of a part of South Boston that marketers like to call the Seaport District, which will eventually include a vast array of retail establishments, among other things.

But if more is yet to come, a lot has already happened in other parts of South Boston.

Projects of 10 to 20 condo units abound in many industrial areas. Some were built from scratch; others are renovations of underutilized commercial buildings, said Michael F. Foley, regional vice president of Jack Conway Realtor.

Parts of South Boston have long served as parking lots for industry. Tourist trolleys, cranes, dump trucks -- after a hard day's work, they spend the night in South Boston. Now, some of these lots have been turned into the neighborhood's newest addresses. More new condos, meanwhile, are cropping up along Dorchester Street, the dividing line between South Boston's east side and west side, which is also sometimes called the Lower End. Boosted by such activity, annual condo sales in South Boston went from 257 units in 1999 to 468 units in 2003, a survey by Otis & Ahearn found.

More condo sales could mean more homeownership in an area where folks often rented out two levels of their three-deckers.

"Pre-1997-98, the neighborhood was 67 percent renters," said Maryann McLeod Crush, president of MCM Properties Inc.

Many recent condo purchases have been made by young professionals with no previous ties to the neighborhood, realtors said. Many newcomers find South Boston, compared with other city neighborhoods, to be an oasis of affordability. Roughly \$300,000 to \$400,000 is the sweet spot for folks making a first condo purchase. And it's increasingly difficult for developers to stay within that price range when building units in the

Back Bay and the South End, said Otis & Ahearn's president, Kevin J. Ahearn.

Condo-hunters who start out in the South End sometimes wind up in South Boston, said broker Patrick Lynch of Gibson domain|domain. Colleague John Ranco recently showed a not-quite-finished building on South Boston's A Street. On land once partly occupied by an auto-repair shop rises a 12-unit condo complex inspired by a San Francisco design. Standing in a duplex with a \$509,000 asking price, he said, "This unit would cost \$110,000 to \$125,000 more in the South End."

Not everyone thinks South Boston is affordable. Some longtime residents lament that it's become too expensive for their grown children to return to the streets where they grew up, said Sister Maryadele Robinson, director of the Catholic Charities Shaughnessy Family Center at Laboure.

Laboure sits near land where 19th-century factories employed immigrant workers from Ireland and Lithuania who lived in boardinghouses nearby, said Boston College historian Thomas H. O'Connor, author of "South Boston: My Home Town."

By the mid-20th century, the Lower End's main thoroughfare of West Broadway had evolved into a shopping district. It had a theater, two five-and-dime stores, and Blinstrub's Village, a nightclub that featured such headliners as Ray Charles and Robert Goulet. A young Wayne Newton, crooning "Danke Schoen," was a local favorite.

"He was the son every Irish mother wished she had," O'Connor said. "He could sing, and he played just about every instrument."

One pivotal event in neighborhood history was the opening of the West Broadway public housing development after World War II. With South Boston's earlier public housing projects, many people whose homes were torn down during construction were invited to live in the project when it was completed; that was not the case with West Broadway, where outsiders displaced locals, O'Connor said. Many early residents were Puerto Ricans and blacks, and ethnic and racial tensions followed.

Like much of the neighborhood, a piece of the West Broadway project is undergoing a makeover. By mid-2005, plans call for 244 vacant units to be replaced by 133 larger units, some of them town houses, according to the Boston Housing Authority.

One former project resident is Hong Kong immigrant Jennifer Lai, who has spent many years working in restaurants. When it was time to go out on her own, she scouted sites in Harvard and Davis squares before deciding on South Boston. Her Teriyaki House opened just after Thanksgiving. It could be a smart business move. With new condos filling up with young professionals, sushi could become a hot item -- at least from a sales perspective.

But Lai had another reason for her choice of location: She likes walking to work from the home she bought in the mid-1990s.

Surveying a recent takeout lunch crowd, Lai said, "South Boston is changing."

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