



INFILL YOUR BOX

DENSITY, DESIGN, AND DO-IT-YOURSELF
INTERIORS ... JAG DEVELOPMENT AND
ARCHITECT MICHAEL UNDERHILL HAVE
BUILT THE FUTURE OF DESERT URBANISM
AT **WILLETTA 9** IN PHOENIX, AZ



BY DAVID TYDA PHOTOGRAPHY BY CAMERAWERKS



WITHOUT TRYING TO MIMIC HISTORIC STYLES OF ARCHITECTURE, UNDERHILL LOOKED TO ORIGINAL LOFT SPACES IN SOHO, WHERE DWELLINGS WERE CREATED INSIDE INDUSTRIAL SPACES THAT HAD RAW AND STURDY CONSTRUCTION DEVOID OF DECORATION AND TRENDY ACCOUTREMENTS.

Standing in the southernmost building and looking through the middle and street-facing buildings, this view illustrates the Willetta 9 attitude that the suburban mentality of seclusion and anonymity is not for all people.

LOOKING FOR A LAYER OF FAUX STONE, ARCHED ENTRIES, OR some sort of tile roof, three strikingly simple and raw boxes known as Willetta 9—a development of nine loft-style townhouses located in the heart of downtown Phoenix, AZ’s redeveloping central corridor—had neighbors wondering, “When are they going to finish those buildings?” weeks after residents had already moved in.

Developer Allan Gutkin along with his brother and business part-

ner, Benjamin, both of JAG Development, looked at the historic neighborhoods surrounding a traditionally sized lot on Willetta Street and they saw single-family homes and a few low-rise apartments. Architect, Michael Underhill, saw the future of downtown Phoenix and a way to let design, not decoration, define the look. So they hired him to make the most out of their dirt.

His answer was to build multi-family housing on a single-family



**"VIVA LA DIFFERENCE!" MICHAEL UNDERHILL
EXCLAIMS ABOUT THE VARYING INTERIOR
TASTES OF RESIDENTS**

This resident's living room furnishings play off the exposed concrete block walls and wood-beam ceiling with earth-tones and luxurious fabrics, warming up an otherwise industrial-feeling space.

lot while affording every resident the luxuries of a detached home: a footprint on the land, private yard space, and a garage, only now with flexible, sensible, and honest design. His solution took influence from three places: the surrounding historic neighborhoods, the high-quality construction of industrial buildings in New York's SoHo, and the row houses of Eastern Amsterdam.

Underhill had recently returned from the Eastern Harbour District in Amsterdam, where three slim islands connected by a causeway were transformed from a blighted industrial park to the cities' premier cultural destination – now boasting modern housing, restaurants, boutiques, and art galleries. It was here that Underhill saw how row house design could add density to an area without overcrowding. Since the width of Gutkin's Willetta Street lot allowed for three attached homes across, it was deep enough for two more of the same-sized structure, or nine units total.

Most homes in the neighborhood feature front porches; and although not frequently used, this design feature helps impart a sense of community in the neighborhood – the antithesis of most garage-fronted tract homes throughout the desert. Willetta 9's three front units gesture to the street with sliding

glass doors and a yard "fenced" by a series of staggered walls constructed of stacked concrete block.

Then Underhill began to examine the meaning behind new construction in a historic neighborhood. How would row houses respectfully nod to the surrounding homes? Without trying to mimic the older styles, Underhill looked to original loft spaces in SoHo, where dwellings were made in industrial spaces with raw, timeless construction devoid of decoration and stylistic accoutrements. The spaces were extremely accommodating to both the changing needs of residents and the changing styles of architecture. To illustrate how the word 'loft' has influenced Willetta 9's design, Underhill explains, "The term 'loft' has lately been abused by developers. Any stick-built house or building with a few exposed ducts and a high ceiling is labeled as a 'loft' ... at Willetta 9, we adopted some of the best features of real lofts ... That's why we call them 'loft-style townhouses.'"

Solid-filled concrete block walls divide each unit for sound-proofing, and they are left exposed both inside and out. The first level and garage floors are slab-on-grade concrete, but Underhill was able to create a second-level concrete floor as well (which is

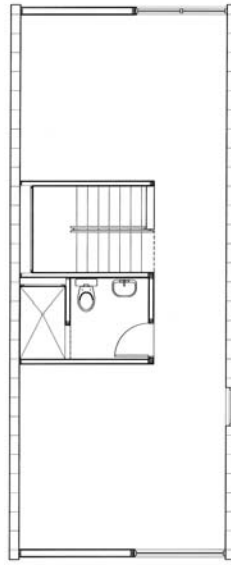
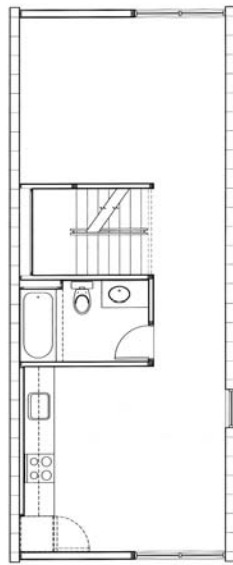
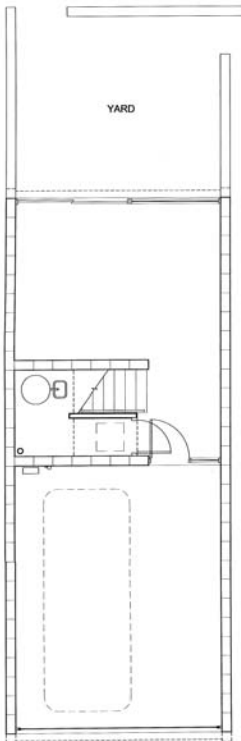
THE PHOENIX SKYLINE CAN BE SEEN IN THE DISTANCE FROM THIS THIRD-LEVEL BEDROOM.



LOFT: A BRIEF HISTORY

Any stick-built house or building with a few exposed ducts and a high ceiling is now labeled as a loft by developers, and I believe this is abuse of the term. My early encounter with lofts was in '60s SoHo, when artists converted obsolete factory buildings into wonderful places to live and work. The large, open spaces with high ceilings had been designed for factory work, and large windows provided good natural light. For artists, this kind of space was ideal and it was affordable. After a series of explorations by illegal pioneers followed by a set of grudging concessions by New York's building department, accommodations in building and housing codes allowed artists to legally inhabit these buildings. Then restaurants and bars and trendy shops followed, and everything became so expensive the artists moved on to rehabilitate other areas. Loft spaces did not have room partitions, allowing inhabitants to create their own arrangement of space. The sturdy factory buildings were built with masonry walls and heavy timber framing, so when artists tore off rotting plaster to expose walls and ceilings, large industrial heating ducts were exposed and artists learned to dust often. —MICHAEL UNDERHILL

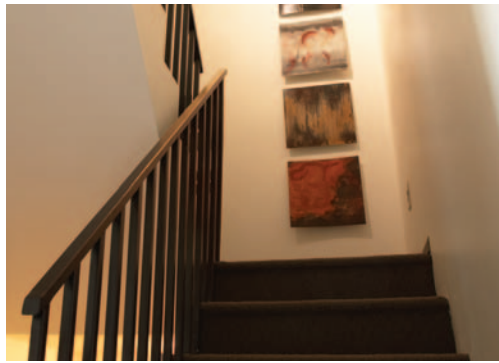
There are no partitions dividing spaces; and except for bathrooms and the laundry closet, there are no doors.





WILLETTA 9: HIP TO BE SQUARE

Clockwise: The six private outdoor spaces are large enough for gardens and barbecues, but small enough for easy maintenance. The front yards with staggered block walls. Metal and concrete were materials of choice. An interior staircase with metal railing.



rarely seen in residential design) through a simple, industrial technique. The ceilings of the first level are made of corrugated steel decking, allowing concrete to be poured as the second level floor without requiring expensive framework. "Structurally, the steel works in tension at the bottom of the slab and the concrete works in compression at the top, making the materials work together in an inherently economical system," he says.

Homeowners enter Willetta 9 through a shared driveway that leads them to a semi-private drive where an aluminum grill garage door keeps their car and other belongings safe. "We opted against a traditional garage door because this style has an industrial feel and it retains the open, community feeling," says Allan Gutkin. "But it's just as secure." Beyond the garage, a 12'X14' flex space has been turned into everything from a home office to a wet bar to a metal-working studio. Sliding glass doors open up to a back courtyard for six homes and a front porch for the other three. Every home also has a stackable washer and dryer tucked discreetly behind a closet door on this level.

The second level contains three spaces—a kitchen, bathroom, and flex space that most residents have used as a living or entertaining room. As Willetta 9 was under construction, residents decided for or against kitchen islands, double-height living rooms (turning the third level into a true loft space), and made other choices according to their lifestyle. "Willetta's only defined characteristic is its flexibility," says Underhill.

Residents who opted for the third level open enjoy a flood of natural light from a pair of north-facing windows that would otherwise be separated by a second- and third-level ceiling/floor. Still, every resident enjoys four large windows – one on either side of the

second and third levels. Each 6'X8' window features sliders on the bottom keeping with the building's industrial and rectilinear design.

Although each home at Willetta 9 is considered a two bedroom/two bath, both Gutkin and Underhill are adamant about detaching labels like this to these homes. "Like true loft spaces, we didn't design each room with a specific purpose," says Underhill. "You might want your bed where the living room is, or put your office upstairs – they're truly custom homes," says Gutkin.

"We hope each home becomes a customized reflection of the individual owners and that they find the architecture to be a useful canvas for creative people," says Underhill.

As to how these developments will be seen in the larger picture of urban renewal, "For the center of the city to rejuvenate itself, it needs small infill projects like this ... and the first homeowners association meeting reminded me of the pioneers I knew years ago in SoHo ... the design ideas for Willetta 9 will only be of interest to the degree that they support the creativity of the these new residents," says Underhill.

This developer/architect team has begun work on a plan that mirrors Willetta 9 two doors down; 11 units on Roosevelt that will take cues from Willetta 9; a 38-unit condo development on Portland Street, integrating a pool, reflection gardens, and community gathering space; and 20 units on Earll and 32nd Street.

Jarson & Jarson Real Estate sold Willetta 9 homes for an average of \$200,000 and now each unit is worth over \$350,000. JAG is planning to keep prices for the new projects in the \$300,000's (an affordable price given the market) and for Underhill, this represents an attempt to keep artists living in the areas they loved in the first place. ■ **More: 602.254.4433; www.jagdevelopment.com**