

Downtown Wichita offers a compelling mix of old—such as a weathered concrete sign by the train tracks at the disused Union Station on Douglas Avenue (below)—and new, like the outdoor wall mural in progress by artist Seth Depiesse on Main Street (opposite). ▶



Building Community

With a clean-lined new loft building designed by El Dorado Inc., a fleet of hip galleries, and a burgeoning creative class, Wichita is anything but plains.



Story by Georgina Gustin
Photos by Jake Stangel

Project: The Finn Lofts
Architect: El Dorado Inc.
Location: Wichita, Kansas

Dwell



When six enterprising Wichitans banded together in 2008 to turn an old downtown broom factory into sleek new lofts, they gave themselves a guiding mantra: Don't scare away the artists.

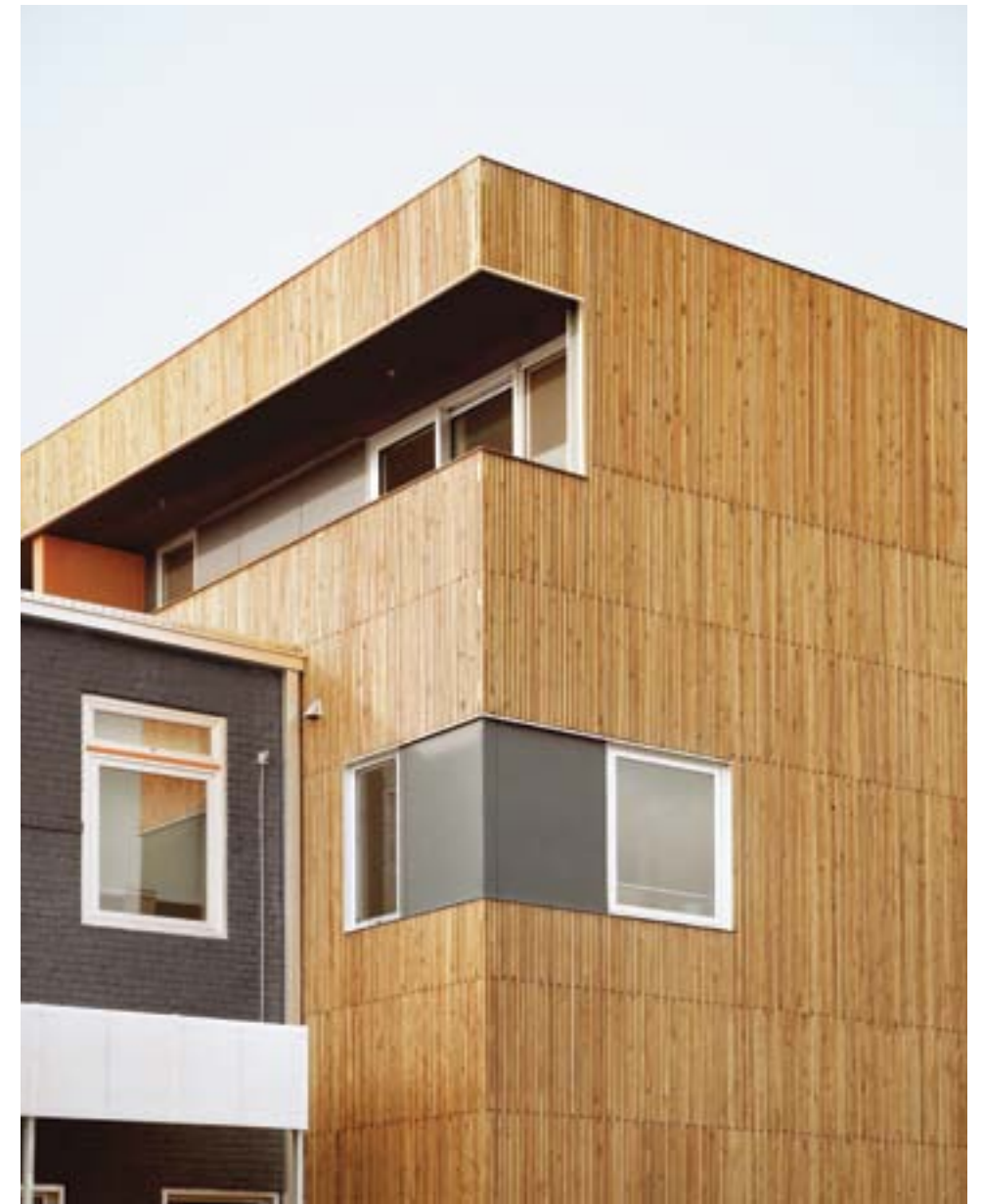
The Commerce Arts District, located near the railroad tracks in downtown Wichita, is the heart of the city's emerging art scene. In recent years, galleries and studios have sprung up alongside gritty manufacturing shops that produce everything from cabinets to urinal cakes. So when the investors began having grand residential visions for the boxy factory, they knew they had to strike the right chord—or risk pushing away the gentrification-averse creative types who give the neighborhood its life.

The investors and architects met with the neighborhood's artist pioneers to get their thoughts about what kind of development would best suit the community and persuade them they had no desire to be a character-crushing Bigfoot. "We paid close attention to not creating something that would have the arts community saying 'We're out of here,'" explains Douglas Stockman of the Kansas City architecture firm El Dorado Inc. "The project definitely cleaned things up, but we were careful to keep a certain rawness. We didn't want to fix everything."

They probably couldn't have even if they had tried. The building, built to make brooms in the 1920s but most recently used as an appliance warehouse, had plenty of rough edges: ▶

Finn Lofts by the Numbers

- Address:** 430 South Commerce Street, Wichita, Kansas
- Lofts:** 25
- Mixed-use commercial space:** 7,680 square feet
- Loft size:** 560 to 1,300 square feet
- Rent:** \$750 to \$1,600
- First tenant:** July 2010
- Construction:** 13 months
- Total construction budget:** \$2.9 million
- Original square footage:** 22,500
- Renovated square footage:** 30,000



A patio protected by a steel-and-cedar-slat trellis accommodates a meeting between (opposite, left to right) contractor Mark Farha, building owners and developers Brock Oaks and David Farha, and owner and contractor Ted Farha. Two views of the Finn Lofts' southwest corner (this page) include a cut-out rain screen (top) and a wider look at the screened patio (bottom).

DWELLINGS

The floors were battered; there were no operating windows and no heating or air conditioning; a long-ago fire had damaged parts of the building; and what appeared to be a giant box from the outside wasn't particularly square inside, nor accommodating to the linear demands of modern design.

"It looks like a block, but it's actually more of a trapezoid," Stockman jokes. "When we first got the drawings, we thought: There's not a right angle in this place."

To transform the raw 22,500-square-foot space—previously known simply as the Finn after its former owner—into the livable, sun-filled Finn Lofts, the architects designed a new building inside the shell of an old one. They also added a third floor, which created space for eight two-story penthouse apartments, each with vertiginous light wells that let the sun in. "We used a kind of carving and adding approach," Stockman explains. Altogether, the building now houses 25 studio, one-bedroom, and two-bedroom apartments, each one configured slightly differently to fit within the building like jigsaw pieces.

By adding the top floor, covering the exterior in cedar strips, and installing custom windows that muffle the sounds of the nearby railroad tracks, the architects transformed the hulking industrial building into a mult textured, multidimensional structure—something gallery hoppers along South Commerce Street can admire from the curb. With its high wooden ceilings, original floors, and scuffed, exposed brick—in some places still marked with graffiti—the building is a compelling mix of polish and rusticity, with a frontier-meets-urban feel. Stockman clad some of the hallways with old lumber salvaged from the center of the building, some of it blackened by fire and roof tar. "It was really important to us to focus on the common spaces," says Stockman. "People are going to inhabit their own spaces in their own way, so why not make the common spaces more interesting? For us, it was about creating a complete experience."

The tenants are also the beneficiaries of some unexpected, but very Wichita, pleasures. Train cars frequently lumber along the tracks behind the building, bearing all kinds of loads, including the occasional fuselage ▶



Melissa and Keith Bishop, Loft B (above)

"We went from 3,000 square feet to 720," says Melissa Bishop, sitting on her leather couch. "Crazy, huh?"

That's what their friends in Hutchinson, Kansas, thought, too, when the Bishops decamped from their McMansion (Melissa's expression), sold most of their possessions on Craigslist, and shockingly for steak country, became vegetarians. "I think they thought we were having a mid-life crisis."

But really, they just wanted to simplify, ride their bikes everywhere, and start anew. "We downsized our lives," Melissa says. "We streamlined."

Childhood sweethearts—"We used to touch feet under our desks in grade school," Keith remembers—they've found that living in a smaller space has added a new dimension to their relationship. "In our house there were rooms we didn't use. We didn't even open the doors," Keith says. "We've gone from never seeing each other to seeing each other all the time."

Jamil Malone, Loft J (opposite below)

"I hated Wichita. It was a Podunk cow-town and there was nothing for me to do here," says Jamil Malone, a native who left for college thinking he'd never return. "But then I came back and fell in love with the place."

Malone calls himself one of the city's "little cheerleaders." "My friends visit from all over—Austin, New York, San Francisco—and they all say 'Why didn't you tell us about this place?' No one expects it to be this fun."

A social creature who seems to know everyone, Malone has hosted several "alcohol-themed" parties and manages to wedge as many as 20 people into his studio. The gatherings are like gallery openings, with the walls of Malone's apartment displaying a roving selection of locally produced art. "I love that I have everything I need in 583 square feet," Malone says. "I love the exposed brick and the old wood. The only thing I miss is a garden, but granted, I don't want a lawn to mow."



Robert Vanselow, Loft R (above)

"I am the most meticulous, picky person. You can tell," says Robert Vanselow, motioning around his living room. "This place is showroom ready."

A transplant from Florida, Vanselow wanted to minimize the stress of moving and starting a new job, so he bought the loft's display furniture outright and came to Wichita with just a few things. The only personal possessions in the apartment for the first nine months were a few appliances and his clothes, which line the closet like fashions in a high-end men's shop.

Born in Panama to a Jamaican mother and a German father, Vanselow now finds himself in the center of the United States, surrounded by open country. The Finn Lofts, with their clean lines—and, in Loft R's case, a balcony with a view of downtown's skyline—suit his urbane sensibility. "This was spot on," he says. "I knew I was going to live here before I got off the plane."

Wichita Rising



Surrounded by cattle-flecked plains smack in the middle of America, Wichita generally has a reputation as a sleepy, middle-of-nowhere kind of place—even though it's Kansas's biggest city (population 382,000).

Its main industry is aircraft manufacturing—Boeing, Learjet, and Cessna all have operations here—while Koch Industries, known for funding right-wing causes, also calls it home. That means there's money—but money tied to conservative priorities. With the exception of the Finn Lofts, and a Moshe Safdie-designed science museum, "there's nothing even remotely progressive" about the city's design scene, says architect Doug Stockman.

But for creative people yearning for low rents and plenty of space, Wichita is a sleeper hit. The hub of

the city's budding art scene is the downtown collaborative Fisch Haus, a madcap studio-gallery-home in a 21,000-square-foot warehouse building, founded by four friends more than two decades ago. These days, with Fisch Haus as the centerpiece, the city holds an open-gallery night once a month. On a recent spring night, hundreds of visitors turned out, popping into over a dozen galleries within a ten-block radius to the soundtrack of a pork-pie-hatted three-piece band.

"There are a lot of people who badmouth this town," says Fisch Haus resident Elizabeth Stevenson, a native of Montreal who moved to Wichita over a decade ago after stumbling onto the city in the course of her worldwide travels. "But then they come here and humble pie is served."



Wichita's local pleasures include (counterclockwise from top) OldTown Theatre Grill, where you can eat dinner while watching a movie; the Fisch Haus collective, home to resident artists Patrick Duegaw and Elizabeth Stevenson; the Donut Whole, serving more than 25 varieties of donuts every day; and the photography-focused Gallery at Dock 410.



of a Boeing 737, manufactured a few miles away. "It's our rolling art show," says Keith Bishop, a Web developer who shares the one-bedroom Loft B with his wife, Melissa.

The crooked old building seems to be adjusting to its new role. "I'll hear creaking every once in a while," says Jamil Malone, of Loft J. "Sometimes a piece of brick falls off the wall. I think it's totally getting used to us, and we're getting used to it." The surrounding community is embracing the change, too, albeit cautiously. "The design is beautiful and it complements the area," says Mitch Willis, artist and proprietor of the Go Away Garage, a gallery and custom motorcycle workshop next door to the Finn. "I guess I would say we're hopeful." ■■■

Architect Douglas Stockman says the building's charcoal-and-orange exterior coloring was "intended to reflect the dynamic character of the neighborhood." Here, it provides a festive backdrop to the residents' semi-annual Finn Lofts community party.

