

# Visions of a new downtown

## Artist-turned-developer brings passion, vision downtown

By Joshua Tehee  
Get Out! staff writer

**R**eza Assemi stands in the doorway of the old Army Induction Center and looks out across H Street, hand shading his eyes from the receding sun.

In this silent moment, he can't be seeing much — a dirt field, weeds starting to peek up, green through the gray-brown ground twinkling with shattered glass. A long stretch of railroad tracks.

But Assemi's vision is powerful and full of hope.

"Imagine if someone did green space out there," says Assemi, the 29-year-old artist-turned-developer and driving force behind the Vagabond Lofts, a 38-unit apartment project whose residents will someday share this same view.

Assemi envisions a new downtown, one with San Francisco-style buildings, a combination of housing, art studios, galleries and commercial space.

He hopes the lofts — and this neighborhood — will become the heart of that new downtown.

This afternoon he serves as a tour guide to a group of entrepreneurial students from California State University, Fresno. It's ArtHop night and they're interested in the Induction Center building — known as H Street Studios — which Assemi renovated to serve as inexpensive work space for half a dozen or so local artists.

But it's the Vagabond Lofts that's really on their minds.



Photos: Ryan Weber

Reza Assemi talks to CSU, Fresno, students about the development of his downtown art gallery projects.

Assemi acknowledges the skeptics who wonder about his choice for location.

The estimated \$5-million loft project will stand at Broadway and Amador on a 1-acre parcel that used to be the abandoned Vagabond Hotel.

It's an industrial neighborhood, near the railroad.

"Who's going to want to live next to an autobody shop? Who's going to want to live across from the train tracks?" Assemi asks the students.

"Well, I did."

### The pearl of downtown

Assemi left Fresno at 17. He

moved steadily from city to city for most of the next nine years. He lived in Los Angeles, worked as a runner on the West Coast Stock exchange in San Francisco, visited Europe.

Sometimes, he lived in his truck.

When he did make it back to Fresno on occasion it was only to take classes at Fresno State, where he first studied art and eventually graduated with a degree in philosophy.

But "it was just for school, and then I would bolt again," Assemi says.

The Pearl Building changed all that.

In 2002, Assemi came home looking for a place where he and others like him could live, work and publicly show their art. He searched for eight months to find just the right building for what would be his first downtown project.

A 60-plus-year-old building on Fulton Street, which once served as the local Red Cross, was perfect. With the help of his father and uncle, he gutted and renovated the building into four 850-square-foot studio apartments. He immediately moved in and named the building after the Pearl District in Portland, Ore., Please see **ASSEMI**, Page 8



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**Reza Assemi in his Tower District Studio is an artist-turned-developer**

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## Assemi: Envisioning a new downtown

Continued from Page 6 where he'd seen similar projects done.

It was a change for downtown.

"It gave me a little taste of what it would be like to have a community of artists, and people in general, living downtown," says John Baker, owner of Kern Street Coffee, where Assemi and the rest of the Pearl residents would ride their bikes most mornings.

It was just four people, Baker says. Slow change, yes, but progress. And now, the Vagabond Lofts will put another 38 people downtown.

It's what the area needs.

Assemi is right on with his vision for downtown and Baker is proud of him for having the passion to see it through and the demeanor to get others — the "powers that be" — on board.

"He's so sincere, I think you can't help but believe in his vision," Baker says.

### Rise of the creative class

The Pearl was an extension of a bigger goal for Assemi — to create a vibrant, culturally explosive downtown.

So last year, Assemi sat on the steering committee of Creative Fresno. Based on Richard Florida's book, "The Creative Class," and Creative City movements in places like Cincinnati, Ohio, and Tampa, Fla., Creative Fresno sees the city growing into a center of innovation, a destination for young artists, designers, and other idea people.

"There's a false notion out there that if you are young, creative and entrepreneurial, that Fresno is not the best place for you," says Fresno councilmember Henry Perea, on the Creative Fresno Web site.

Perea has worked with Assemi, both with Creative Fresno, and on several city projects, including the Vagabond, and counts Assemi as a friend.

It didn't take long for him to

understand Assemi's vision, he says.

He remembers visiting the H Street Studios before its renovation, when it was just an old shell, dilapidated to the point he didn't think it could be saved.

He listened to Assemi's plans for the building, but "I just couldn't see it," he says.

When he visited again several months later, he saw a building transformed. With little output, Assemi had created inexpensive, workable studio space.

As a city leader, Perea says Assemi is ideal to work with because he's willing to take those risks. There can be no revitalization without a desire from the private sector, he says, and Assemi is willing to put in, and possibly lose, the money to see his vision through.

"It's his kind of leadership that this city needs," Perea says.

Already, the city has several other projects in the works with Assemi.

"As long as he's willing to partner with the city, so will we."

### That ol' entrepreneurial spirit

This is nothing new. It's often artists who are the first to come in and affect change in urban downtown areas, says Craig Scharton, the instructor for the class visiting the H Street Studios.

But, "Reza's a good one to talk to because he's young, for one, and because he's also an entrepreneur," Scharton says.

And it's easy to see his inspiration at work.

Wheels turn in the students' heads as they listen to him talk. When he tells them the Vagabond Lofts will only have one parking space for each resident, some are shocked. But like everything else, it's not what you see, Assemi says, it's how you see it.

"It's just rearranging your mindset."

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