



PHOTOS BY JOHN WALKER/THE FRESNO BEE

Developer Reza Assemi shows off his newest venture, H Street Lofts, in downtown Fresno. The rentals sit next to another of Assemi's creations, the Vagabond Lofts.

Lofty ambitions

Builder brings more residential units to downtown Fresno.

By Sanford Nax
The Fresno Bee

Reza Assemi's newest apartment complex in downtown Fresno is connected physically to his last project, but they are different in many ways.

"Often, we are fitting into an architectural pattern that has been established. We were asked to do that," said Paul Halajian, a Fresno architect who with colleague Jamie Dronyk was charged with translating Assemi's vision into reality.

Thus, Assemi's new H Street Lofts are greatly different than his

previous project, the Vagabond Lofts — even though they are connected and share the same driveway and development team. Assemi, Pyramid Homes and Granville Homes collaborated on both projects. Assemi's relatives run the two home builders.

Assemi is one of the few developers building housing in the city's core. Vagabond Lofts at Broadway and Amador Street is full, and he is taking applications for H Street Lofts, which should open in about a month.

He also has other projects in the works, including Fulton Plaza at Divisadero and Fulton streets. It will feature 80 apartments and 16,000 square feet of businesses in three stories.

Assemi is an oil painter, and he incorporated more of his artist's

sensibilities into H Street Lofts. The complex is heavy on metal and concrete, and the apartments are all one bedroom with sleeping lofts upstairs. Kitchens and bathrooms are tucked away, sometimes behind stairs.

"Vagabond is more traditional. There is not the full complement of rooms you would find at Vagabond," Halajian said.

"We wanted to make a clear distinction between the public part of the living space and the private part," Dronyk added.

In fact, the apartment complex itself is a canvas. Three colorful murals will distinguish the project, including a dynamic portrait of a woman and a crane that local artist Jason Graham etched onto the concrete exterior. The painting

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Workers Fernando Hernandez, left, and Jovanny Montalvo lay hardwood flooring.

Lofts: Lights, windows are key

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marks the dividing point between H Street Lofts and Vagabond Lofts.

With 26 units snug on three-quarters of an acre, the architects looked for efficient ways to provide light. Skylights, pendant lights and even display boxes are incorporated into the design.

"We had to take advantage of every opportunity for a window or light. We stuck windows in niches. There is one window [in each unit] that is 10 feet high and less than a foot wide," Dronyk said.

All but five apartments have a secure art display box that faces the exterior. They have the dual purpose of lighting up artwork inside and providing extra light out to the street.

The architects even gave a nod to the railroad tracks across the street. Windows are higher because engine sound tends to be directed toward the ground, but they also are staggered and of different sizes to convey a feeling of movement or motion, Dronyk said.

And a center courtyard takes a leading role in the project. All but five lofts look out to the courtyard, and those that don't have front doors opening onto a sidewalk leading to the courtyard.

Halajian said Assemi, a leader in the arts community down-



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town, wants to hold Art Hop events on the courtyard and provide a forum for artists to display their work.

H Street Lofts

- 1-bedroom apartments
- 650-1,000 square feet
- Rents start at \$770
- Granite countertops
- Tankless water heaters
- Details: (559) 233-0288

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The courtyard also is where landscape architect Jennifer Feaster is creating a "Memorial Mound" that is 32 feet in diameter and 18 inches high to commemorate the property's former life as an Army induction center.

The mound will be a "living

sculpture" with California Sycamores and drought tolerant plants, Feaster said.

The sycamores, along with Chinese elm and cork oak, eventually will provide a canopy to help shade the courtyard so it can be enjoyed all year, she said.

Joshua Seymour toured H Street Lofts the other day, coming away impressed. The resident doctor at Community Medical Center lives in the Pearl Building, which was Assemi's first downtown project.

He said he believes downtown is gaining a vibrant atmosphere that will attract more people, including professionals. "I'm less than 5 minutes from work. There is a great arts community. There has been quite a change in the last few years," he said.

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