

City Loft Corp. puts fresh face on Montgomery

Development company adopts progressive, realistic concepts

By MELANIE LEMAY

MONTGOMERY – The Lowder name is synonymous with real estate development, especially in Montgomery, where the company is headquartered.

Nevertheless, Anna Lowder never planned to enter the family business and never thought she'd find herself moving back to her hometown.

After saying goodbye to her close-knit graduating class at Montgomery's Trinity School in the early '90s, she embarked on an academic track that led her from Washington and Lee University on to Boston University and study abroad in London. It was at American

University of London that Anna met Harvi Sahota, a native Brit with a keen interest in design.

With family ties to India and considerable travel experience, Harvi was right at home with London's fast pace and diverse population. He and Anna reveled in the lifestyle there. With land at a premium, Londoners use every square foot of real estate to its maximum, layering small flats with retail stores and restaurants. "Everything was close," Anna says. "You could walk from your home to just about any other place you wanted or needed to go."

At the same time, the European tradition of mixed-use real estate was enjoying a resurgence in the United States, thanks in part to city planners such as Andrés Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, perhaps



best-known for creating Seaside in Florida.

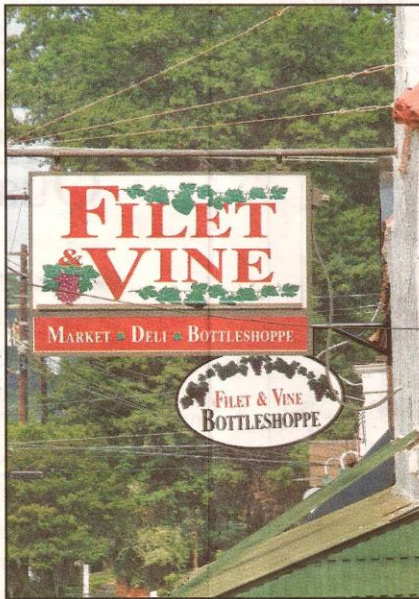
The idea of mixed-use real estate was still new to Montgomery, however, when Harvi began accompanying Anna on trips home to visit her family and friends. Surveying Montgomery for the first time, Harvi was fascinated with the city's patterns of development. He was especially interested in how Montgomery's history had shaped the visual style of the city, its way of life and its potential for growth.

"He was so inspired that he wrote his dissertation on Montgomery," Anna says, bringing out a thick volume of brilliant color photos interspersed with commentary printed on vellum.

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"He wrote the dissertation for the master's degree program at the Royal College of Art in London, and actually put part of the dissertation into this book. Harvi did all the photography, and designed the book as well." She laughs. "You can tell we have a classic overachiever here."

"Before you can envision changes to any community, you must understand why it's become what it is," Harvi says. "What we saw in Montgomery was prevalent in many American cities. Anna and I both understood the reasons for urban flight and the development of zoning laws. But we also saw how American communities were limiting growth and lifestyle choices by enacting some of those



The A & P Lofts are located just beside Filet and Vine, a Cloverdale staple that features a restaurant, a vast selection wine, imported beer, fine meats and many gourmet food items. The Bottleshoppe is next to Filet and Vine.



Gourmet foods and kitchen items on sale at Nancy Paterson's Bistro To Go.

laws and encouraging people to live far away from the heart of our cities."

As they continued to visit Montgomery, Anna and Harvi heard the first rumblings about downtown revitalization. Excited by the possibilities, they began to develop a vision that would incorporate not only their mutual interest in design and project development, but also allow them to share with Anna's hometown the way of life she had come to love in London.

And that is how, when she was not yet 30, Anna Lowder returned to Montgomery to live and work. She and the 32-year-old Harvi started their own company, City Loft Corp., and developed the first set of loft condominiums in an old warehouse on North Court Street.

"We wanted to attract people to the downtown area who could benefit from the convenience of the location, the amenities of the new lofts, and the freedom from yard work and commuting," Anna says.

"Of course, we knew the best way to show we believed in the project was to move into one of the lofts ourselves."

She, Harvi and their Yorkie, Oscar moved into one of the lofts and made the storefront offices below into the headquarters for their business.

"We love living here," Anna says. "We have the high ceilings and original brick walls from the old warehouse, but the modern amenities that are important to people like us." (One of the first items on their amenity list, for example, was wireless connectivity.)

Loft living is unique in many ways, Anna says. "A loft does have a very artistic feel to it, and appeals to creative people. When I walk in at the end of the day and see the sunset streaming through the windows of our loft onto the old brick warehouse walls - I feel very, very lucky to live in such a beautiful place."

While Harvi and Anna have a keen eye for aesthetics, their style is not aggressive or ostentatious. Their sunny offices are filled with colorful exterior renderings of current and future projects. They dress casually, and share their ideas with infectious enthusiasm and energy. The synergy between them is obvious, as is their mutual respect.

"We're totally committed to our projects," Anna says. "It's a good thing we really love our work, because we're either down here doing it or upstairs talking about it."

She waves away the very idea of having children. "Right now, the Cloverdale project and Hampstead are our children," she says. "And Oscar, of course."

It's ironic that Anna Lowder went all the way to London, only to meet the man who would open her eyes to a city she'd seen every day for 18 years. "When Harvi's beside me, I see Montgomery differently," she says. "His fresh perspective and my experience with the city help us develop concepts that are both progressive and realistic. We want to make a real difference here."

Melanie LeMay is a freelance writer based in Montgomery