

NATIONAL PERSPECTIVES

A 'Cooler' Edge to Tucson

By FRED A. BERNSTEIN

FOR two years, Rob Paulus has labored to turn an old cold-storage building in Tucson into 51 apartments called the Ice House Lofts. With occupancy scheduled for March, city officials are already crediting the project with sparking a residential building boom in the downtown area.

But Mr. Paulus and his partners are also attracting attention for a smaller project in the shadow of the Ice House.

"We figured we could get some energy going in the neighborhood," said Mr. Paulus, an architect and jazz musician, explaining why he built the five small houses, with four more under construction, in a gritty industrial enclave. Besides, he was removing tons of material from the Ice House (with its 14-inch-thick walls) that he hoped to recycle.

Mr. Paulus used the wood from the Ice House for a fence around the new community, which is called the Barrio Metalico. The name refers to the corrugated metal that he used to cover the five free-standing units and the cylindrical rainwater collectors in the buildings' yards. (The rainwater is for irrigating gardens.)

"We wanted to do something cool and edgy — to attract early adopters," said Mr. Paulus, who designed the buildings. Each unit contains a double-height space, with one bedroom downstairs and another overlooking the living room. The upstairs bedroom has a corner window, which benefits from Tucson's low-rise buildings. "You get up 8 or 10 feet, in Tucson, and you have a view of mountains in the distance," Mr. Paulus said.

The first buyer in the Barrio was Dave Olsen, 30, the publisher of Downtown Tucsonan, a monthly publication. He said he was attracted by the Barrio's energy efficiency and what he calls its water-harvesting system. "My cistern is full," said Mr. Olsen, who had considered filling it with punch on New Year's Eve. (A foam disk floats on top, he said, to help keep mosquitoes from breeding and the water from evaporating.)

He said he likes the neighborhood, which is sandwiched between a highway and railroad tracks. "I like waking up and seeing the trains pass by," he said. As for the suburbs, where he grew up, he said, "Been there; done that."

He bought his unit in July 2003 for a preconstruction price of \$185,000 and moved in a year later. His neighbors, who also moved in that summer, paid \$249,000, according to Randi Dorman, a former New Yorker who is in charge of marketing the units and is married to



UNUSUAL DESIGNS

Each of the corrugated metal units at Barrio Metalico includes a carport. An adobe wall from a 1920's tenement at the condo site (below left) was preserved and used as fencing.

Mr. Paulus. The four units under construction will have prices ranging up to \$299,000.

The architecture clearly adds to the appeal.

"The industrial modern look of the buildings is very cool, especially against the blue sky that we have here almost every day," said Donovan Durband, executive director of the Tucson Downtown Alliance. "There's nothing else like it in the city."

The corrugated metal he chose for the Barrio, Mr. Paulus said, "goes up quickly, and should last 100 years." By contrast, stucco, which is commonly used in Tucson, is difficult to install and needs painting.

Buyers were offered two layouts. "I chose the upstairs from one and the downstairs from another," Mr. Olsen said.

"They're definitely pioneers," said Karen Thoreson, Tucson's assistant city manager, of Mr. Paulus and his partners. As recently as two years ago, she said, it wasn't clear that anyone would want to live in what she called "one of the city's tougher neighborhoods." And the city wasn't sure it wanted anyone to live there. Its zoning plan called for industrial development in the neighborhood, according to Ms. Thoreson. People in her office were afraid that conflicts

would arise between residents and manufacturers, if both were allowed on the same blocks.

But Mr. Paulus and his partners, she said, "showed us that people who live in these lofts" — by which she meant both the Ice House and the Barrio Metalico — "are not trying to recreate suburbia. She added, "They actually relish the mixed use."

When Mr. Paulus and his partner began planning the Ice House, Ms. Thoreson and other city officials helped them through the zoning and permitting process. True residential reuses of industrial buildings are rare in Tucson, a sprawling city of 500,000. In Arizona, signs advertising lofts usually refer to loftlike units in new buildings.

Mr. Paulus had worked in Los Angeles be-

fore opening his architecture firm in Tucson. Phil Lipman, a real estate investor from Boston, and Warren Michaels, a developer from Chicago, are partners with Mr. Paulus and Ms. Dorman.

In May 2002, Mr. Michaels discovered the deserted cold storage building, with ceilings as high as 40 feet. "Warren called Rob, Rob called Phil, and they all looked at the building," Ms. Dorman recalled. Two weeks later, the partners owned it. While Mr. Paulus drew up the plans, Ms. Dorman came up with ads for the Ice House Lofts. "Living in Tucson just got cooler," they proclaimed.

Mr. Paulus worked to emphasize the building's industrial past. A sign that reads "1923 Arizona Ice and Cold Storage Co." remains. Rusty old pipes from the building now form a fence around the outdoor swimming pool.

The building was so well insulated, Mr. Paulus says, that it was still only 40 degrees months after the cooling equipment was turned off. In the end, he said, it would have been cheaper to build from scratch, but the architecture never would have been as edgy.

But the neighborhood was the real question mark. "It's mom-and-pop factories, plumbing supply businesses, and people working on their cars," Mr. Paulus said.

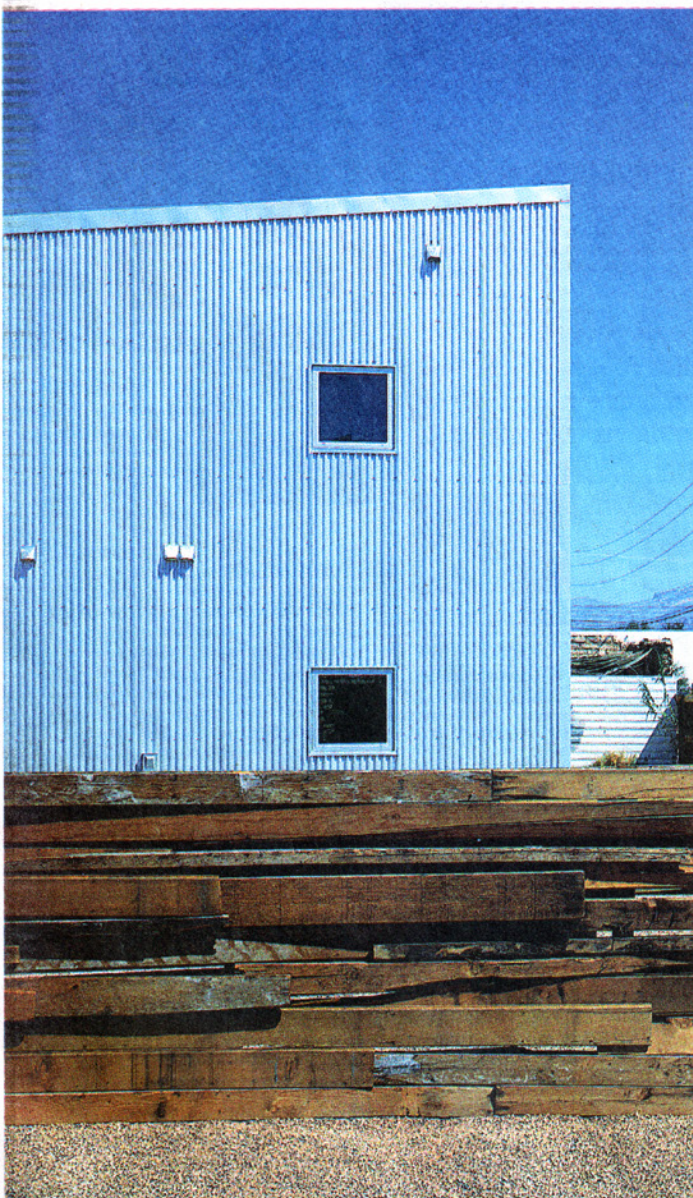
When they spotted the Barrio Metalico site, which is about an acre, they figured that attracting residents to the neighborhood would help Ice House sales.

It appears to have worked. At the Ice House, 47 of the 51 units have been sold, at up to \$375,000 for a 2,000-square-foot loft, Ms. Dorman said. Mr. Paulus and Ms. Dorman plan to live in the Ice House with their baby daughter, Skye. And why not?

Already, the area is improving. "They've spurred a neighborhood clean-up, and reinvestment by existing owners," said Ms. Thoreson, who has been in the city government for 13 years. "It's made the whole area safer."

Right now, she said, plans are moving forward for about 1,000 residential units in and around downtown.

"Every one of those 1,000 units," she said, "has happened in the last two years. And that's a lot, when you consider that developing in an urban core is not an easy thing to do."



Photographs by Bradley Wheeler

INDUSTRIAL HOMES

The developers of Barrio Metalico were not trying to create a new suburbia, but rather blend the houses in with their industrial neighborhood. Among the materials used in the complex were corrugated metal and wood left over from a loft renovation project by the same developers.