

# Tucson Citizen

## Tour shows downtown home trend

TEYA VITU

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Look one way in the Mercado District of Menlo Park and you see colorful Mexican colonial homes with purposely rusted wrought iron balconies and stone frames for windows and doors. Turn around and there's a set of homes reflecting the style in Barrio Historico, where it's sometimes impossible to tell from the street where one home stops and another one starts, or which door goes to which home. Go around the corner and you find a tall, brick warehouse loft with a 12-foot ceiling downstairs and 16-foot ceiling upstairs.

They are all part of the Mercado District of Menlo Park, the most expansive development to date for Rio Nuevo's downtown revitalization. The feel is 19th century, the construction is 21st century. The public can see this in-the-works neighborhood Nov. 3 during the annual Tucson Innovative Home Tour.

"You will see the rebirth of the downtown Tucson neighborhood," said Justin Dixon, managing partner at Rio Development, the master developer of the 14-acre site on West Congress Street, west of the Santa Cruz River. "Tucson's identity is being re-established in its architectural heritage."

Five local builders have banded together to bring their own style of masonry construction - with a historic leaning - to the 99-home development. Here, wood frames and generic are resolutely out. "All the building stuff is inspired by what we find in downtown Tucson. It's pretty eclectic," said Tom Wuelpern, whose Street Scene Development is building 50 homes, the most at Mercado District.

So far, 16 homes have been built by the five builders. Three are inhabited. Prices range from \$300,000 to \$700,000. Most should be built in the next two to three years, Dixon said. Josh Conzemius, a real estate agent at The Hoffman Group, bought one of Wuelpern's Spanish colonial homes and plans to move there in August or September.

"The whole plan is just spectacular," Conzemius said. "The museums, the light rail. If you look at just the homes themselves, they're stunning. There's nothing like it anywhere." The real estate-mortgage crisis has not put a crimp in this multideveloper project. Nearly all the homes have buyers before the masonry blocks go down.

"Of what we're doing, there's no subprime action down here," Wuelpern said.

What's there is a near fairy tale land of color, creative design from house to house, bending streets. The pedestrian-oriented neighborhood has garages hidden away and street parking set off of the seven intimate plazas that serve as the focal points of housing clusters.

Homes here have high ceilings, some have outdoor second living rooms and ceilings made of recycled barn beams and barn sidings. Small, enclosed courtyards are a standard feature for most homes. There's a mix of flat roofs, pitched roofs and corrugated metal roofs.

Dante Archangeli, owner of Tucson Artisan Builders, leans toward 24-inch-thick outer walls and large south-facing windows with wide overhangs to allow plenty of light while blocking out the direct summer sun. Designs for his 17 Mercado District homes were inspired by the Barrio Historico neighborhood south of the Tucson Convention Center.

"We decided what was important to the streetscape was a variety of ever-changing design," Archangeli said. "We looked at the existing homes of Barrio Historico and did a composite photo and looked at how the buildings worked together. Tom (Wuelpern) took hundreds of pictures in central Mexico. We really studied that." "One of the things we said was, we are building a future historic district; that it be authentic," Justin Dixon said. "Everything is representing what it is."