

**NEW! July 2011: Adapting to change**  
**In Staunton, historic buildings house the pedestrian revolution**

by : Erika Howsare

For most of us, the car is essentially our second home. We spend time in it every day. We keep our stuff in it, carry keys to unlock it and log countless hours looking at the world through its windows. But that's only because of where our first home is located in relation to work, shopping and play. For some folks, the car is much less tightly woven into everyday life.

Take, for example, Dave and Debbie Metz. Several years ago, they were living in a house, part of a development near Staunton—what Debbie calls “a regular suburban home.” During a visit to their daughter in Portland, Maine, they noticed a big difference in lifestyle. “For the whole weekend we didn’t get in our car once,” she says. “It was so great to be able to walk. We thought, ‘We could do this right in our hometown.’”

**Gym dandy**

In January 2006, the Metzses moved into a development in downtown Staunton called the Old Y Lofts—a former YMCA building, dating to 1914 and converted, after years of vacancy, to 19 condo units of various sizes. The blocky, brick building features dozens of large windows and neoclassical exterior details, with doorways from the street still marked BOYS ENTRANCE and MENS ENTRANCE. The Metzses’ two-bedroom, third-floor unit comprises about 1,300 square feet, a definite downsize from their former house.

From here, they’ve got a great view of Staunton’s rooftops and a one-block stroll to the city’s lively downtown. The couple could hardly be more enthusiastic about the change. “I get up every morning and say ‘I love living here,’” says Dave.

“The smaller space freed us up to do the things we want to do,” Debbie says, “which didn’t include [taking care of] the yard and extra rooms.” Both work downtown—he as a Realtor, she at the Woodrow Wilson Presidential Library and Museum—and routinely go four or five days without driving a car.

“Living in a suburb is isolating,” Debbie continues. “Here, you can be around people anytime you want.” Her husband agrees: “The city is trying to encourage the upper floors of downtown to be used as residential [space]. It creates a critical mass; you really have a community of people who live here.” The Metzses, now lacking outdoor space of their own, think of the city as their yard, seeking out coffeeshops and restaurants with outdoor seating.

Inside, they enjoy hints of the building’s former life that comfortably coexist with modern amenities. A curved black granite bartop demarcates the kitchen within their condo’s open floor plan; across from it, big windows, trimmed with walnut, punctuate the exposed brick wall. Large metal beams overhead and original wooden floors underfoot—this part of the building was once a racquetball court—are both part of the YMCA’s historic character. But the Metzses’ art collection and family photos make the space feel like home.

“We liked the industrial elements,” says Debbie, “and the layout appealed to us. No two units are alike.” Richmond-based developer Miller & Associates, along with local architects Frazier Associates, completed the project in 2005, and all 19 condos are currently



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occupied (a number of those being their owners' second homes). Throughout, the historic patina is in evidence, from a swimming pool-cum-wine cellar to an original stairway with railings burnished by generations of hands.

The Metzses see themselves as part of a demographic trend, with baby boomers set to turn 65 and looking for low-maintenance, walkable living. "It's just very freeing," says Dave. "I never liked mowing the lawn anyway."

## Right side of the tracks

Newer to Staunton's downtown scene is Wes Adams, who moved into a loft near the Amtrak station seven months ago. Also designed by Frazier Associates, Adams' apartment is on the fourth floor of a former grain warehouse called the Hoy Brothers Feed Mill. Adams moved from Atlanta, where, like the Metzses, he'd lived in a house in the suburbs.

Now, his Thursday evenings are flavored by live bands playing in the parking lot below his windows (part of Staunton's Shakin' at the Station concert series) and on Saturday mornings, he can walk downstairs and directly into the farmer's market. His commute has shrunk from an hour and 15 minutes each way to 10 minutes, and for exercise he can run through the city to Gypsy Hill Park and back, a three-mile circuit.

"I'm not putting too many miles on the car," he says. "It's my first experience with in-town living." Last year, having taken a job with Augusta Health, he was staying in a hotel when he spotted a sign in the window of the Hoy Brothers building. It was the first apartment he'd looked at, but he didn't need to see any others.

The early-20th-century brick building is tall and narrow, with the top two floors converted to lofts, and commercial space on the bottom two. Adams' one-bedroom loft clearly reveals its past, with exposed post-and-beam construction and original brick walls painted taupe. But, even while a sliding door in the bedroom reminds one that gangways once carried grain up into the space from railroad cars below, a walk-through closet and a modern kitchen plant the space firmly in the present.

"They've done a wonderful job," Adams says. Filled with his handsome classic furniture, the loft shows off its details: dark metal brackets under the wide L-shaped kitchen bar, high ceilings with exposed ductwork, and black baseboards that conceal new wiring. A gas fireplace sits at an angle in the living room corner.

"I hear the trains every now and then, but you get used to it," Adams says. "It's actually very quiet most of the time. I've not been distracted by city noise." He seems more than pleased with his new hometown: "I don't know what other town in America I could live in and have this."

## Glass castle

A 10-minute walk from Adams' apartment, another redevelopment project is underway on a much larger scale. The



**Top to bottom: The Metzses downsized from four bedrooms to two; Their second bedroom boasts a view over downtown Staunton (with a windowbox herb garden in the foreground); From behind the kitchen's curved bar, the condo's living and dining areas are within easy conversing distance, and industrial elements like metal beams and exposed brick complement the newer materials like granite countertops.**



**Top: Adams finds the condo surprisingly quiet despite close proximity to downtown amenities.**

**Bottom: An old sliding door in the bedroom once admitted grain unloaded from nearby rail cars.**

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Villages at Staunton is an 80-acre campus on which historic 19th-century buildings are being reimagined alongside a host of proposed new structures. Completed, the Villages—which shares developer Miller & Associates with the Old Y Lofts—would include condominiums, standalone houses, commercial space, artists’ lofts, and a hotel and spa.

The ultimate realization of this vision might be years away, but in the meantime, Phil and Cheri Moran are already two and a half years into their tenure in the Villages’ premier condo building, The Bindery. Its name refers to a period in the 1838 building’s history when inmates in the state prison here learned the trade of binding books. Before this campus housed a prison, it was a mental hospital originally called the Western Lunatic Asylum (and designed by Jefferson protegee Thomas R. Blackburn).

The Morans have fielded plenty of skeptical reactions to their new home’s history. “The one thing we usually get is, ‘Are there any ghosts?’” Cheri says. “If there are, they’re friendly...We look at it as a historic building. [Its past] doesn’t bother us at all.”

From their longtime home, a 1902 Victorian house near the American Shakespeare Center, the Morans gave up half their square footage to move into this two-bedroom condo. “We were young when we bought the house,” Cheri says. “It took us 30 years to restore it.” Though she loved the house and her garden outside, she and Phil decided, when both were around 60, that they could stay independent much longer in a first-floor condo than in a house with dozens of steps.

“We are part of downtown,” says Phil. “We wouldn’t want to be out of walking distance.” Tuesday night jazz at the Stonewall Jackson Hotel and the Saturday farmer’s market are highlights of the Morans’ week, and the Villages keeps such events accessible by foot with its just-outside-downtown location.

The Morans chose their condo in part because of their extensive collection of glassware, most of it locally made. The terrazzo floors on the Bindery’s first story look good with all the colorful vases and wine glasses. What’s more, extra-thick walls on this floor make for deep window wells, providing space for shelves to display more pieces.

Common areas flow around large central pillars, but the condo still feels more like a series of cozy nooks than, say, Wes Adams’ airy space. A curved stairwell off the kitchen is no longer functional, but it provides gallery space on the outside and storage for Phil’s specialized cooking tools within. The Morans have customized their place by commissioning built-in cabinetry from local artisan Paul Borzelleca—including a Murphy bed in the second bedroom—and colorful glass light fixtures to complement their collection.

Selling 10 rooms’ worth of Victorian furniture and starting over with a more modern, informal look was, Cheri says, “like being newlyweds, but with money.” The cheery space feels rightly sized for two, but recently accommodated a gathering of 58 people.

The Morans are thrilled that they’ve found a way to change their lifestyle while staying just as connected to the city they love. “We have friends trying to find their retirement place,” Cheri says. “We found ours 30 years ago.”



**Top to bottom: Phil, an avid cook, stores his pots and pans in the old staircase; like many other original elements, the metal door was preserved as part of the developer’s strategy to claim historic tax credits; Much of the Morans’ extensive glass collection is displayed in their condo’s deep window wells; The Bindery is one facet of an ambitious redevelopment project on the grounds of a onetime mental hospital.**