

Residents get cozy with live-work units

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Gail Nagel always liked to walk to work, but it was a trek from her former home in Alta Vista to her office in the Pettigru district.

She would do it occasionally, but wearing heels was out of the question.

When Nagel recently decided to leave her counseling group and open a solo practice, she wanted to eliminate her daily car trip. The answer was a "live-work" condo — a single building with a home upstairs and an office downstairs.

Developers and architects say the combination of living and working space appeals to people who are tired of commuting and professionals who work on their own and don't want to buy or rent two separate spaces. Architects can put the two under one roof while sectioning off the workspace, providing separation in a way an extra bedroom-turned-office can't.



Gail Nagel loves the convenience of her live-work unit, which provides her an office below her living space and is an easy walk to downtown shops and restaurants.

Owen Riley Jr./Staff

Some architects say the design isn't really new — it's a throwback to the days when attorneys lived behind their shingle and grocers lived upstairs. But with communication technology that allows more people to work from home, the airport or almost anywhere, the live-work setup is now a modern option for different kinds of professionals, said Nat Irvin, professor of future studies at Wake Forest University.

That was part of the reason developer Ross Jones decided to incorporate 10 live-work units into Simpsonville's Cotton Mill Place, an old mill being converted into a mixed-use project. A sprinkling of live-work units also are in the Poinsett Corners mixed-use development in downtown Greenville.

"As we become a more information-based society, people are going to want to have the opportunity to work and live in one location," Jones said. "From an economic standpoint, they only have one mortgage. They don't have to go out and have an office outside, which drives up overhead."

It's also a way for people to avoid being stuck in their cars, he said.

"I think there are a lot of individuals in any demographic group that want to get out in the suburbs, (but) they want to be able to walk to work, they want to be able to walk to entertainment, and they don't want to have to get in the car," Jones said.

Mixing condos, shops and offices within a single development project encourages walking, said architect Scott Johnston, who designed the project and Nagel's building on Washington Street. Live-work units further that idea by eliminating the commute to work.

"Both are good answers to help create more urban density and less dependence on the automobile," Johnston said. "Live-work is just a lifestyle decision some people make."

Nagel, for one, is thrilled to take her car out of the garage only three or four times a week for a post office run or grocery shopping. She walks to restaurants downtown and to church.

Poinsett Corners will have only six live-work units out of 81 total residential condominiums. Developers are using the units as a test case to see how well they sell in Greenville, said Charles Reyner, a partner with Windsor-Aughtry Development.

"We picked it up from Charlotte," Reyner said. "It was a suggestion from our architect, it was something that was doing well up there. We wanted to test the waters with it, so it's just a small portion of our project."

All six units sold before construction started, Reyner said.

But there may be a downside to the live-work concept, Irvin said. Living just over the office can also mean you never get away from work.

"If you can manage to leave your office, close your door and be done with it, then you're fine," he said.

Nagel knew living above her office could bring the temptation to creep downstairs and work in her pajamas and slippers. That's why she said "absolutely not" when her architect suggested a stairway linking her home to her office. Instead, she must leave the office altogether and enter another door to her home.

She moved in just a week ago, but so far she hasn't been tempted to pull a late night. And when she's home, she feels like she's home.

"Once you come up here, to me it has a feeling of freedom and comfort," she said.

Nagel said she wouldn't have moved from the historic, 4,000-square-foot Judson Cottage she used to call home when her children were young. But now that they are on their own, she and her husband realized they didn't need such a big space.

"We started to realize that we lived in a very small section, but we were taking care of the whole space," Nagel said.

The Cotton Mill Place units, at 1,700 square feet, are listed at \$250,000, Jones said. They are scheduled for completion early next year.

That price turns out to be more of a bargain than it first seems when you consider money saved on commuting, said architect Thomas Dolan, who designs and promotes live-work units in Oakland, Calif.

Some studies show that owning a car can cost as much as \$9,000 a year, Dolan said. A live-work unit could eliminate the need for multiple family cars, he said.

"If you live in a place where, let's say you're a couple or a family, and one of you can walk to work, and therefore you only need one car instead of two cars ... you've just saved yourself \$9,000 a year," Dolan said. "That's smart growth, that's affordable."