

Call it 'Mario's Village'

A developer's devotion to his neighborhood is proving profitable not just for him, but for the South End as well

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Even with a heavy spring rain on a May weekend, the SoWa neighborhood art market and walk in Boston's South End drew a steady flow of people milling in and out of galleries and warehouse space along the northeast end of Harrison Avenue.

The art event, which includes an open-air market through the summer and fall, was started four years ago by Mario Nicosia, a longtime South End developer and resident, and head of GTI Properties.

It is the beacon he sends out that there is hip, urban life in what was once thought of as a no-man's land of old factories, low-income housing, and Boston's best-known homeless shelter, the Pine Street Inn.

"The area needs help," Nicosia said in a recent interview. "It can't survive on its own. We make a lot of effort to bring people into the neighborhood. And it helps me in the long run."

Certainly any real estate developer has his self-interest at heart. But in Nicosia's case, what's been good for him has also been very good for parts

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of Boston's South End, which has been gentrifying and remaking itself steadily over the last several decades, with him as one of its pioneers.

Thirty years ago, he was one of the first developers to venture past Huntington Avenue into the South End. He created luxury apartments from distressed properties on St. Botolph Street, now one of the most picturesque in the city. GTI Properties owns 1 million square feet of old mills and other period architecture buildings in the area south of Washington Street in the South End. Marketed that he is, Nicosia branded the area SoWa, and staged neighborhood events to convince outsiders it is safe to come to this once-neglected corner of the city.

Harrison Avenue has been "rumored up" for some years, the push south from the Back Bay side of the South End slow but inevitable. The removal of the old elevated Orange Line along Washington Street opened up the boulevard for redevelopment and drew an influx of moneyed professionals, high-end condos, and hip restaurants.

This end of Harrison Avenue was once better known for cheap rents and loft parties, and commerce of a different kind: drugs. That hasn't gone away entirely — just lessened; drug debris is sometimes still in evidence.

Some of his tenants affectionately refer to the area as "Mario's Village." And Nicosia does impart an intense sense of ownership to the neighborhood, a genuine fondness for these old buildings.

"I've always been close to the area, a local developer," he said. "I never ever thought of buying in the North End or the Back Bay."

He toughed it out through years of slow motion in this particular section, especially when a dip in real estate values in the 1990s made his Harrison Avenue holdings worth less than what he paid for them.

"This stuff takes time; you can't do it in a couple of years," Nicosia said softly. "I'm in it for the long haul."

Indeed, he continues to own



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Rocca's sleek semicircular bar — and large quantity of free parking — have been a new draw to the SoWa neighborhood.

properties at his first South End beachhead, on St. Botolph, and his investment in this neighborhood extended to paying for private security patrols to help deter crime.

Among the newest ventures to take hold in a Nicosia building is

Rocca, a swank bar and kitchen at 500 Harrison that has turned the social spotlight full on the street. Set in a former Victorian-era factory and, like the surrounding buildings, built of bold red brick, Rocca's stunning design includes a sleek semicircular bar with a sculptured light canopy suspended from the second-floor dining area. A secluded patio to the rear retains the reclaimed factory's tall coal-fired chimney, lovingly preserved as an architectural feature.

Rocca is a new venture from the successful partnership of Michela Larson, Gary Sullivan, and Karen Haskell. As the Sapphire

group, the trio operated the lauded restaurant Rialto and the swish bar Noir in Harvard Square's luxury Charles Hotel, and the modernist bistro Blu in The Sports Club/LA, next to the Ritz Carlton in Downtown Crossing.

Larson remembered the group's beginnings in up-and-coming East Cambridge, when it opened her namesake restaurant, Michela's, in 1985 in an old factory neighborhood she feels is comparative to Harrison Avenue.

"I loved that, being in territory that hadn't been developed," she said. "When this came up, I loved the idea of pushing the limits of the South End."

She and her partners had been eyeing the area and talking with Nicosia for a couple of years, feeling out the possibilities before they committed.

"We saw there was not a lot of foot traffic. We wanted to be sure

that people weren't daunted by getting there," Larson said.

So, the restaurant boasts that luxury of all inner-city luxuries: 50 parking spaces in a lot bang next door — free.

"Just knowing you don't have to pay \$16 for parking is reason enough to go," cracked Nicosia.

More are coming. In July, at 560 Harrison, near Boston Sports Club, the Aquitaine Group is expected to open Gaslight Brasseur du Coin, which will include a take-out section called Greenlight. In September, Boston architect Dennis Duffy, who led the build-out of Rocca, is opening a furniture store at 520 Harrison. And GTI is developing more apartments, too.

John Kiger, GTI's leasing director for commercial properties, said his phone has been ringing constantly since January as more businesses seek to move into the area. But GTI, he said, is near full.

For now there is an uneasy coexistence between the new and old on this end of the South End. Just steps away is the Pine Street Inn, which on any given day can shelter dozens or hundreds of homeless.

"There's no question about it, it



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Regular open houses that invite visitors to tour artists' studios promote the area's cultural energy.



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A Sunday open market on Harrison Avenue offers items such as fresh baked goods, plants, artwork, and textiles.

ain't pretty," said Kiger. "Like any urban area you have to watch out. It's not Wellesley. We're in the business of turning the lights on. You create a reason for people to take care here, like the galleries or the restaurants. Then you have people walking around. For lack of a more interesting metaphor, when you turn the lights on, the roaches scatter."

But maybe some of those people are homeless because of the kind of gentrification that has swept through urban neighborhoods such as the South End, suggested Lyndia Downie, the Pine Street Inn's executive director. And, she said, the new neighbors better get used to the Pine Street Inn's clientele, because the venerable

shelter is not going anywhere.

"I agree it's not perfect," said Downie. "I agree it presents issues sometimes. But our approach is, let's have a dialogue and talk about what we can and can't do. Let's be creative. As long as people understand there are limits. Once our guests leave the property, we don't have any legal leverage with what they do."

For now the neighborhood retains the diversity that used to be found throughout the South End, a mix of edgy and funky that gives urban areas a particular allure.

"It's a real city," said Larson, the restaurateur. "It's an area that's still very mixed. That's part of its charm, if it can be done harmoniously."