

WHAT'S A LOMA?

WILMINGTON'S NEW DESIGN DISTRICT

SoHo, TriBeCa, SoBe, LOMA. LOMA? Using acronyms to identify city neighborhoods is nothing new, but what's a LOMA?

LOMA is the new designation of Wilmington's downtown design district. The acronym is derived from Lower Market Street. LOMA stretches west to east from King Street to Shipley Street and runs south to north from Second to Sixth Streets in downtown Wilmington.

"The LOMA mission is to connect creativity to commerce," says Lee Mikles, president of The Archer Group and one of the district's newest tenants. "It's meant to be a district for like-minded creative professionals to live, work and shop."

Described as the "real new, hot section of town" by Don Robitzer of the Commonwealth Group and "an empty corridor with a lot around it" by LOMA Steering Committee member Chris Winburn, LOMA's location makes it a unique spot in Wilmington. Surrounded by Delaware College of Art and Design, Delaware Technical and Community College, the New Castle County Courthouse, Amtrak and ING DIRECT, LOMA has stable businesses on all fronts, says Winburn.

If Mikles, Winburn and their fellow LOMA Steering Committee members have their way, in a few years, the area will be home to an eclectic mix of design-oriented firms, outdoor cafés, unique clothing and jewelry boutiques, restaurants and most importantly, foot traffic.

The Rise of the Creative Class

Drawing inspiration from other cities in the country,

aspects of LOMA will be similar in nature to the 16:62 design district in Pittsburgh, South Beach in Miami and SoHo in New York City.

"When you see LOMA you immediately draw the connection to SoHo," says Mikles. "We're not trying to say we're SoHo, but every great town with the benefit of unique architecture has the ability to create their own design district. You don't have to be a certain size or have a certain cachet with your city name, but we feel confident that we are able to create something here."

You'll never confuse LOMA with SoBe, but like South Beach in the 1970s, LOMA's revitalization is the result of a vision shared by tenants and developers, says Mikles.

Spearheaded by area tenants, developers, city officials and individuals from the nonprofit sector, the group's aim is to attract interior, graphic and Web designers, ad agencies, architects, photographers, art galleries, cafés and other companies with a creative edge to the district.

"Our target audience for the genesis of the LOMA identity came from the fact that the creative class isn't being served in Delaware," says Winburn.

With plans to create retail opportunities at the street level and office space upstairs, the district's visionaries hope to bring coherency to the creative community. "These companies are strewn here and there," says Winburn. "Our real goal and objective is to be a magnet and bring some coherence through this vision of what the neighborhood will look like."

As a grassroots effort, the LOMA Steering Committee is

CONNECTS CREATIVITY TO COMMERCE

BY KIM KOSTES

seeking independently owned businesses, says Commonwealth Group's Robitzer. "We're not looking for chain markets to come in here and set up shop. It's going to be a consortium of designers and producers – a one-stop shop."

'Funky Space'

Unlike the high-rise buildings that dominate the Wilmington skyline, two to three story buildings built in the mid-nineteenth century line LOMA's streets.

For tenants like The Archer Group, LOMA's unique architecture was a selling point for relocating from Poplar to a newly renovated building on the corner of King and Second Streets. "We wanted to be in what you call 'funky space,'" explains Mikles. "It's really difficult to find a space that's a mix of bricks, steel and concrete – that's just not what's being built today."

And with an eye to the future, developers are also incorporating as many green and eco-friendly components into building

renovations as possible, says Mikles. Many of the district's buildings will be Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certified.

Businesses that set up shop in LOMA must be willing to take risks, says Steering Committee member and Managing Director of the Wilmington Renaissance Corporation Carrie Gray.

"These companies need to break the mold in terms of being open on weekends and staying late at night to create some synergy that does not currently exist."

As a ground-up initiative, LOMA is good for the city, says Gray. "Whenever you have the development community coming together working toward a goal that's in everyone's interest, it's always a good thing."

The support of the business community and an increased level of pedestrian traffic will be crucial to LOMA's success, says Gray. "We need an energy and enthusiasm from the daytime workforce in the city," she says. "We need their support." ■



An artist's rendering of the LOMA vision. Artwork courtesy of Preservation Initiatives